FRONTIERS SAGA PART 2: ROGUE CASTES EPISODE 7

NHO TAKES NO RISK RYK BROWN

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER ONE CHAPTER TWO CHAPTER THREE CHAPTER FOUR CHAPTER FIVE CHAPTER SIX CHAPTER SEVEN CHAPTER EIGHT CHAPTER NINE CHAPTER TEN CHAPTER ELEVEN



WHO TAKES NO RISK Ryk brown

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CHAPTER ONE

The resort on the southern shore of the Leason Inland Sea, in Morsay Proper, had always been his favorite place to vacation. The tall, blue-green pines and the bubbling, emerald water, warmed by the thousands of natural hotspring vents which lined the bottom of the massive, yet shallow, body of water, was nothing short of magical. From the first moment he had laid eyes on this valley, when he was a boy, through his trips with friends throughout secondary school and college, and even now, it still captivated him to no end.

Sunrise was the best. The cool morning air, rolling in from the west opening of the valley, mixed with the rising fog from the sea, swirling about in little dances of shimmering mist. Although he had never been an early riser, when in Morsay Proper, he didn't even need to set an alarm.

Pain...excruciating; overwhelming; suffocating.

His eyes tried to open but were immediately filled with dust and debris, causing even more pain. The room shook; muffled explosions in the distance. Energy weapons fire. Urgent screams of men fighting for their lives.

He tried to breathe but found himself unable. Squeezing all around him, he couldn't even move.

Something shifted beneath him, and there was a thunderous sound, after which he found himself falling. He landed a second later on his back, with more pain shooting through his body as more dirt, debris, and small rocks rained down upon him. Now able to move, he instinctively scrambled for safety, anywhere... Anywhere but here. More explosions, more energy weapons fire, more screams...and someone calling...someone calling *his* name.

"Birk!"

It was Cuddy, and he was yelling out to him...from above!

"I'm here!" Birk replied in a complete panic. He looked in the direction Cuddy's voice had come from but could see nothing. Dirt and rocks continued to spill from the center of the fallen-through ceiling. Dust swirled about him, repeatedly illuminated by the red, orange, and blue energy bolts spilling through from the corridor outside the chamber's open doorway and through the gaping hole above him.

"*Down the hole!*" someone yelled.

"*Quickly!*" another man agreed. Birk recognized Michael's voice as he heard the first thud of someone landing on the pile of dirt and rocks in his chamber.

"Birk!" Cuddy called out as he scrambled to his feet.

"Over here!"

More thuds as others dropped down through the gaping hole.

The dust was beginning to clear a bit, and Birk could barely make out Cuddy as he scrambled down off the debris pile toward him.

"Are you alright?" Cuddy cried out as he reached Birk cowering against the wall for safety.

"I think so," Birk replied, uncertain. "I'm not sure."

"Can you walk?"

"Yes, I think ... "

"Fuck walking!" the next man to drop down yelled. "Can you run?"

Two more men dropped down, the first one Michael and the second... He would never know, since the second man's head was gone, burned completely away by energy weapons fire.

Michael Willard picked up the dead man's weapon without a single moment of hesitation or remorse. His comrade was dead, and there was nothing he could do about that. Michael scrambled down off the dirt pile as energy bolts slammed into the debris around him from above, the enemy having moved into the room above and discovered that their prey had escaped through the hole in the floor.

"What the hell's going on?" Birk exclaimed.

"Move your asses!" Michael ordered, tossing the dead man's weapon to Birk.

The weapon landed in Birk's lap, startling him further. "What the hell..."

"Come on!" Cuddy insisted, pulling on his friend's collar to help him up.

Birk grabbed the weapon that had been tossed in his lap as more enemy energy weapons fire slammed into the debris pile not two meters from them. The shots of redorange plasma rained down, walking toward them as the enemy above circled the hole in the floor to get better angles on the men below.

Birk looked up as he rose, catching a glimpse of their attackers: serious looking men in black and crimson body armor. They moved in pairs with precision, their weapons fire closing in on Birk, Cuddy, and Michael with amazing quickness. As Birk got to his feet, a small metallic object landed on the debris pile, bouncing toward them.

"Grenade!" one of their comrades warned as he dove toward the bouncing metallic device.

Michael grabbed Birk, shoving him toward Cuddy and the exit, as his comrade grabbed the grenade on its third bounce and tried to toss it back up through the gaping hole in the ceiling. As he did so, two red-orange bolts of plasma slammed into his torso, interrupting his throw. The grenade went off in his hand, blowing it apart and taking what was left of the man's head and torso with it.

The portion of the blast not absorbed by his doomed comrade knocked Michael through the exit, falling into the back of Birk as he and Cuddy tried to make their retreat. All of them fell to the floor of the dust-filled tunnel, stunned by the concussion.

Birk found himself in extreme pain once again: his back, his right leg, his knee, his arm, and his head. He felt wet practically everywhere. He was sure he was bleeding profusely and was about to die.

"Come on!" Cuddy pleaded.

"I can't..." Birk insisted. "I'm done! Leave me! Save yourself!"

"Get your ass up!" Michael insisted as he scrambled to his feet and grabbed Birk by the arm.

"I can't! I'm bleeding out!"

"That's not your blood!" Michael told him. "It's McCabe's! Now, move your ass!"

Several more thuds were heard behind them as Zen-Anor troops dropped into the chamber they had just escaped from. Michael spun around and opened fire as several energy bolts slammed into the walls on either side of him, blowing them apart and sending rocks and dust everywhere. The three of them charged down the corridor, half running and half stumbling, blindly trying to make their escape. The sound of weapons fire was coming from all directions, as were the shouts of their comrades who were also trying to escape.

"Which way do we go?" Cuddy demanded, already confused.

"Left!" Michael ordered without hesitation.

"But there's weapons fire coming from the left!" Birk argued.

"It's coming from everywhere!" Michael replied, unleashing a heavy barrage of blue energy bolts into the dust-filled corridor behind him. "We've got no choice! We've gotta make a run for the east exit, two levels up."

"I can't see shit!" Cuddy exclaimed, looking down the left corridor as two red energy bolts streaked over their heads. "How do we know who's who?"

"If it isn't shooting blue, light it up!" Michael barked, pushing them forward as energy bolts peppered the wall behind the spot where he had just been standing.

Cuddy took a deep breath and began running down the left corridor, his weapon half raised. Dust swirled about, making it nearly impossible to see. The dust in front of him suddenly lit up a bright red-orange, and both he and Birk raised their weapons and opened fire as Michael had instructed. They continued to fire as they charged forward. Michael followed them, firing behind them as they charged toward either safety or their imminent doom.

"While we applaud your intent, Captain, allying our worlds with the Karuzari, and standing against the Dusahn, will surely bring their wrath down upon us all, just as it did to Ybara and Burgess," Minister Sebaron stated.

* * *

"As our ally, we would defend your worlds," Nathan promised.

"Just as Earth defended the worlds of the Pentaurus cluster when the Dusahn invaded?" the minister challenged.

"The failure of my homeworld to honor their allegiances is precisely why the Aurora and I are here, now," Nathan replied. "We honor our commitments to our allies. I believe that my actions over the last nine years substantiate that."

"And you believe that you can adequately defend the Rogen system, should the Dusahn return?"

"Yes, I do, especially with the help of the Gunyoki, once they are equipped with jump drives and more powerful plasma weapons."

"Captain Scott," the minister from Neramese began, "you were barely able to defend us from a single Dusahn warship...from my understanding, an antiquated one at that."

"With time, we can improve our defense capabilities. We can build surface-based jump missile launchers on both Rakuen and Neramese. With jump drives, the Gunyoki can patrol far beyond the boundaries of the Rogen system, providing advanced detection of their approach. But, more importantly," Nathan added, "with the help of your Gunyoki fighters, we can keep the Dusahn busy protecting their systems in the Pentaurus cluster, thus preventing further attacks."

"And what is stopping them from simply launching a jump-enabled, kinetic kill vehicle?" Mister Sebaron asked, one eyebrow raised. "Like the ones recently used by your homeworld against assets light years away, deep inside Jung territory."

Nathan maintained his composure, despite the fact that he was taken aback by the minister's knowledge of events in the Sol sector. Until that moment, Nathan had assumed Rakuen had little to no intelligence assets beyond their own system. After all, they had only been exposed to the jump drive a little over five years ago and still had no jumpcapable ships of their own.

General Telles cast a sidelong glance at Nathan, noting that the young captain's expression had remained remarkably unchanged.

"Nothing," Nathan admitted after only the slightest of pauses.

"We have no evidence the Dusahn have created such weapons," General Telles interjected in his usual calm demeanor. "However, it would be best to assume that they *do* possess such capabilities."

"Which is precisely *why* we *should not* sign the alliance charter before us," Minister Sebaron demanded. "Doing so will, without a doubt, make us enemies of the Dusahn. We cannot afford to take that risk. Not now, and perhaps, not ever!"

"You cannot afford to *not* take that risk," Nathan replied calmly.

Both ministers, as well as their aides, looked at Nathan.

"The captain is correct," General Telles stated. "The Rogen system became enemies of the Dusahn Empire the moment your forces fired on theirs."

"But we were defending ourselves," Minister Cornell argued.

"*Why* you fired upon them does not matter to the Dusahn," General Telles replied. "The fact that you did not bow down to them in fear and respect is reason enough to destroy you, in their minds."

"That's absurd!" Minister Sebaron argued.

"Dusahn logic differs from our own," the general explained. "Much like the Jung, the Dusahn feel it is their *right* to impose order of their own design upon others. They do not recognize your right to reject their rule. The scales they think in are too vast to allow for moralities and ethics. They see the management of interstellar empires as a numbers game, as an accountant for a large corporation would."

"When the cost of controlling a conquered world becomes more expensive than simply wiping the surface clean and starting over, that is precisely what they do," Nathan added. "However, the Dusahn suffer from a lack of forces. They do not have enough ships to spread beyond the Pentaurus cluster. The only reason they sent a ship here was because they believed you would be unable to offer any resistance. Had they suspected that they might lose one of their battleships in the process, they would have been less likely to attack. Just like the schoolyard bully only picks on the weak, the Dusahn, despite their swagger and bravado, have no choice but to choose their battles with caution. By forming an alliance with us, you will be *showing* the Dusahn that the Rogen system is *not* to be taken lightly. You will be sending them a clear message: that should they attack, they will suffer losses, perhaps even losses they cannot afford."

"But we would be bluffing," Minister Sebaron surmised, leaning back in his chair with a pleased look on his face.

"For now, yes," Nathan admitted. "But the Dusahn do not know that. They have already tested the waters and nearly lost a battleship in the process."

"And if they send two battleships?" Minister Sebaron challenged. "Or three? What then, Captain? Can the Aurora defeat *three* Dusahn battleships?"

"Yes," Nathan replied confidently and without hesitation.

Minister Sebaron laughed. "I think you overestimate your ship's firepower, Captain Scott."

"I assure you, he does not," General Telles insisted.

"And if the Aurora is elsewhere, perhaps *harassing* a Dusahn asset in the Pentaurus cluster, at the moment they attack *our* world?" Minister Sebaron waited a moment for Nathan's response but continued before one was offered. "I am sorry, Captain, but until such time as you can assure us of adequate protection, we cannot ally our worlds with the Karuzari."

"What would it take to satisfy that requirement?" Nathan asked.

"Another warship," Minister Sebaron replied. "One equal to, or of greater firepower than, the Aurora."

"I see," Nathan replied. "And what of those Gunyoki who have already committed themselves to our cause?"

"Their ships are their own to sacrifice if they so choose," Minister Sebaron noted. "As are their lives."

"You are not concerned that the Dusahn will associate them with your worlds?" Nathan wondered.

"We will denounce them as non-citizens of Rakuen, subject to the same rules and restrictions imposed on all foreign guests."

Nathan looked at Minister Cornell.

"The Gunyoki are of Rakuen," Minister Cornell announced. "Neramese has no military forces of its own."

"And if the charter includes a guarantee that such a ship will remain within a single-jump range of the Rogen system at all times, will *that* satisfy your needs?" Nathan wondered.

"Such a ship would need to remain *within* Rogen space at all times," Minister Sebaron insisted.

"Such a requirement would be too restrictive," General Telles argued.

"We have a fleet to protect, as well," Nathan added.

"Cannot your fleet remain within a single-jump range of this system?" Minister Sebaron wondered. "Would not that provide adequate protection for your forces, just as you proposed it would for our worlds?"

"The Aurora must retain the ability to move freely between the Rogen system *and* the Karuzari fleet, as needed," Nathan insisted. "In addition, she must be able to leave the entire sector, *without* prior approval of all allied worlds, in order to conduct military operations against the Dusahn."

"Leaving both the allied worlds *and* the Karuzari fleet equally unprotected," General Telles added for clarity.

"We might be willing to agree to those terms, provided that, should *another* warship of equal or greater firepower be obtained, at least *one* of them will remain within the Rogen system as a deterrent against attack," Minister Sebaron countered.

"Again, we cannot have our hands tied in such a way," Nathan insisted. "We *must* retain the ability to attack our enemy when an opportunity presents itself."

Minister Sebaron leaned back in his chair, looking up at the clock on the wall. "The hour is late, gentlemen. We will adjourn for the evening and consider your proposal."

"As you wish," Nathan agreed. "If you'll excuse us."

"You do not wish to stay for dinner?" Minister Cornell wondered. "The best chefs Neramese has to offer are preparing a feast for us as we speak."

"My duties do not permit such luxuries," Nathan replied sternly. "However, if you would like to send our portions to the Karuzari fleet, in order to ease their rationing requirements, I'm sure they would be most appreciative." Nathan looked to Minister Sebaron. "I will await your response, Minister," he said with a nod, before turning and exiting the room.

Nathan moved expeditiously from the meeting chamber with General Telles following close behind. Neither man spoke as they made their way out of the building, well aware the Rakuens had audio and video monitoring devices everywhere. Not a word was exchanged between them until they boarded the Ranni shuttle waiting for them in the courtyard outside.

"Sebaron is an arrogant bastard," Nathan stated, breaking the silence as he took the pilot's seat in the shuttle's cockpit and activated the door-close mechanism.

"His arrogance is irrelevant," General Telles insisted, taking the copilot's seat. "Only his motivations matter."

"His motivations are to impede the formation of this alliance," Nathan insisted.

"You state the obvious. The question is, why? You and I both know that Rakuen *and* Neramese will be safer as members of our alliance."

Nathan looked thoughtfully at General Telles for a moment, his brain analyzing all possible motivations and outcomes. As he continued powering up the shuttle's systems in preparation for takeoff, a realization hit him. "He doesn't want Neramese on equal footing," he declared, looking at the general again.

"Neramese has been restricted from possessing its own defenses since Rakuen defeated them in the Water Wars. This alliance would put defenses on the surface of Neramese."

"Which they could turn against Rakuen," Nathan surmised.

"As could Rakuen, against Neramese," the general added.

"Which explains why Cornell was siding with Sebaron."

"The problem could easily be solved," General Telles suggested. "Simply have a two-man, fail-safe system on each world."

"One from Rakuen and one from Neramese?"

"Precisely."

"What a great job *that* would be," Nathan commented as he activated the auto-launch sequence, and the shuttle began to lift off the ground. "Living among your enemy, checking to make sure they don't attack your world."

"Perhaps a central command could be created," General Telles suggested as the shuttle climbed skyward. "On a space station, perhaps? One manned by equal numbers from either world."

Nathan grinned. "Are you thinking what I'm thinking?"

The slightest smile came across the general's face. "The leaders of Rakuen will not like it."

"No, they won't," Nathan laughed as he activated the auto-jump sequencer. "But the Nerameseans will *love* it, and that might be all we need."

* * *

Tensen Dalott guided his crawler along the interior of the Teyentah's starboard flight deck, headed toward his next work assignment. After nearly two weeks of working paint crew, his good fortune and his skills with a crawler had landed him a spot on the team installing the emergency doors on the battleship's flight decks.

The Teyentah's flight decks were large, square tunnels located on either side of her forward section. The tunnels allowed ships to fly in from either end, landing and rolling through one of the massive doors which led to the inner airlocks, or taking an elevator down to the hangar deck below. Every such door had an emergency door that would close within seconds of a sudden depressurization of the space on the other side. It was the responsibility of his team to install those large doors. Installation required the plasma welding of door fittings, a task that was far too dangerous for someone in a pressure suit. Luckily, the plasma welding systems on the crawlers were fully automated and required no real ability from the operator, other than to enter a pattern and push a button.

While it was a step closer to working *inside* the Teyentah, it was still *outside*. Details of the battleship's interior layout and specifications were still classified. Even the teams who worked inside only knew the areas in which they were assigned. Few knew the entire layout of the ship, other than the master designers. Tensen's only hope was to eventually get inside and try to learn his way around the massive warship. In time, he might learn enough to come up with some sort of plan.

Unfortunately, at this point, it seemed that nothing short of a full-on assault would be required, and even then, the odds were not in his favor. Although shipyard security seemed to focus on those going to and from the shipyard, Dusahn warships were always nearby. While they were not necessarily guarding the shipyard and were sometimes there for maintenance of their own, they were *there* and could repel any attack within moments.

To make matters worse, time was running out. It had been three weeks since his arrival on Takara, and crawling around the outside of the Teyentah in a pressurized, yellow, metal coffin with spidery arms and legs was as close as he had gotten. In a few more months, the ship would be completed. In a few weeks, her primary officers and department heads were due to arrive and begin their inspections. Soon after, her crew would arrive to prepare for space trials. Once the Teyentah was fully crewed, getting inside, let alone *stealing* her, would be impossible.

It was at that moment Tensen admitted he may, indeed, be forced to change his plans from theft to sabotage.

* * *

It had been nearly three weeks since Terig Espan had sent the covert message to the Karuzari, using the order placed from the company on Haven. In fact, the molo twine he ordered had already arrived from more than seven light years away, yet he had still not received any reply. For all he knew, his message had never reached the Karuzari. For all *he* knew, the message had been intercepted by the Dusahn, and his arrest was imminent.

Every waking moment was a nightmare for Terig. He could not sleep, he could not eat, even his work suffered. Luckily, he had been able to convince his coworkers that he was suffering from the psychological aftereffects from his ordeal on the Mystic Empress. But his wife had also noticed the change in his behavior and had expressed her concerns more than once. He had convinced *her* that he had a lot of stress at work, and he just needed to get more sleep. To that end, she had secured medications for Terig, which had helped.

But what Terig really needed was an answer from the intended recipient. At least then, he would know his message had gotten through and that the Dusahn were not aware of his treachery.

Or would he? If Suvan Navarro was a Dusahn spy, meant to expose Lord Mahtize's disloyalty, or worse yet, to lure the Karuzari into a trap, surely he would be exposed, as well. One thing was certain. Terig was not cut out for this line of work. He had even considered confessing his crimes to the Dusahn and offering to help them by sending false messages to the Karuzari. Surely, a few hundred Ghatazhak and a handful of ships could not stand against the entire Dusahn fleet. He needed to be on the winning side to be safe, or at least as safe as he could hope to be. Not just for himself, but for his wife, as well.

But which side would be triumphant? The Dusahn had might on their side, while the Karuzari had right. From an ethical standpoint, the choice was easy. The Dusahn were unwelcome invaders. They had killed hundreds of thousands in mere hours. They had glassed two worlds, simply to ensure that no one dared stand against them. By those measures, the choice was simple, indeed.

Yet, the Dusahn had brought order. Even more important, they had somewhat leveled the playing field on Takara. Although the noble houses still retained their power and wealth, their dealings were now monitored and controlled by one central leadership. And that leadership had a single goal: to build a massive empire...and not just by conquest alone. The Dusahn had already reached out to worlds outside of the Pentaurus cluster, inviting open trade with offers far more lucrative than ones the nobles of Takara had provided those same worlds. In just under two weeks, the Dusahn had changed the economies of nearly a dozen worlds, most of them for the better. Even Terig had seen the effects of Dusahn occupation. In the markets, where he and his wife shopped, the prices had already dropped, and the availability and assortment of products had increased. Interstellar transport of goods had been taken over and regulated by the Dusahn, reducing the cost of shipping across the board.

Yet, no sane person could deny that the Dusahn were ruthless conquerors who held little regard for human life. But, much like Caius Ta'Akar, such ruthlessness seemed necessary in the realm of interstellar empires. Casimir Ta'Akar had tried to bring freedom and fairness back to Takaran society, and had been assassinated for his efforts. The Dusahn's assertions that such empires required ruthless and determined leadership made sense, as long as one could ignore the atrocities required to accomplish those goals. That, too, had been something Caius had preached... that great leaders bore the burden of knowing great evils were necessary on the stage of interstellar empires.

The more Terig thought about it, the more confused he became. Instead, he tried to focus on the one thing that preoccupied his every thought: the safety of his wife and himself. He had not the luxury of thinking on an interstellar scale, as much as he might wish to do so. He was just a man...one man in the midst of a rapidly changing empire.

* * *

"I still don't know how you got Yokimah to fund all this," Minora said as she led Deliza on her tour through the Ranni shuttle plant on Rakuen.

"Captain Scott can be quite convincing," Deliza replied with a wry smile. "How soon can we start production of the Gunyoki jump drives?"

"Our engineers are still working out the bugs in the design. The Gunyoki's irregular body requires a bubble field, rather than a contoured one. That, combined with the stealth requirement, forced some redesign of the emitters."

"Is Doctor Sorenson aware of this?" Deliza wondered.

"She has been consulting with our engineers on a daily basis," Minora assured Deliza. "She's a remarkable woman." "Yes, she is," Deliza agreed as she followed the plant manager through the main assembly floor. "Will we still be able to produce shuttles?"

"We already have enough parts in inventory to build at least one hundred shuttles. Since the Gunyokis can't fly in the atmosphere and will be retrofitted at the race platform, all we will be doing is producing the components. Our plan is to continue using the assembly area to build shuttles using the inventory on hand until that inventory runs out. But, at some point, we're going to have to *stop* making Gunyoki jump drives and *start* making shuttle parts again, or we'll fall behind in order fulfillment. And if this plant stops making money, your rebellion will run out of operational funds."

"The Glendanon is using the Ghatazhak's fabricators to produce more fabricators. Hopefully, they'll be in service before we run out of shuttle components."

"Where are you planning on putting them?" Minora wondered.

"We haven't figured that out yet," Deliza admitted. She stopped, looking out across the plant floor as her employees worked on the line of shuttles under construction. "How long until we start producing Gunyoki jump drives?"

"A week," Minora replied. "Sooner, if they solve the emitter problem ahead of schedule."

"There's a schedule?" Deliza replied, surprised.

"Yes. The schedule is 'get it done now'," Minora replied with a smile.

* * *

Miri entered her father's office, her finger to her lips so the president would not speak. Without a word, she placed a small sound-suppression field generator on his desk and activated it, waiting for the green light atop the device to illuminate. "I take it you have word from Captain Hunt," the president surmised.

"He has made contact with several people who once served under Nathan. Those people are contacting others. He expects to have replacements for the members of his crew he cannot trust by the end of the week. That means his first shipment could be ready for handoff within ten days."

"How will he coordinate with Nathan's people?" the president wondered.

"We have received word through back channels that Nathan is in the process of creating a *new* alliance with two industrialized worlds in the Rogen system."

"The *Rogen* system?" The president wondered.

"A few hundred light years from the Pentaurus cluster," Miri explained. "In the middle of the Rogen *sector*, as I understand it."

"That's a long way from the Dusahn."

"Not far enough, apparently. They already had to defend the system against a Dusahn attack...during a *race*, no less. Long story," she added, noticing her father's puzzled look. "The good news is, he at least has a safe point through which to channel communications."

"Does Captain Hunt know about this?"

"He does. He is establishing a comm-relay point, using one of the jump shuttle services out of Mu Herculis. Their messages get routed through their ops center in the Alpha Centauri system and, in turn, get forwarded to the one here."

"Is it secure?"

"The messages are encrypted using standard public algorithms, just like anyone else would use, so they don't look suspicious. They wouldn't be difficult to crack, if intercepted, but considering the thousands of similar messages coming through our communications systems each day, the odds of that happening are pretty slim. I think it's safe enough. Besides, even when decrypted, it's still not in plain text. You really have to read between the lines and understand the key words for it to make sense."

"I'll take your word for it," the president agreed.

"Captain Hunt believes he can get in five, maybe six, runs before being discovered."

"Maybe he shouldn't push his luck," the president suggested. "Maybe keep it to three or four."

"That may be possible now, depending on this new alliance that's in the works. We'll have to wait and see, I suppose."

* * *

Commander Macklay entered Admiral Galiardi's office unannounced. "Give us the room," he instructed the members of the admiral's staff present. When they all cast a puzzled look at him, he followed with a stern, "Now."

The admiral leaned back in his chair as his staff rose from their seats to depart in a hurry. It was not like the commander to behave in such a way, and despite the fact that he had overstepped his authority in clearing the room without the admiral's consent, he knew the commander was likely to have a very good reason for doing so.

Once the door was closed, the commander spoke. "My apologies, Admiral, but I am quite sure you need to see this," he added, placing the data chip in his hand into the reader of the viewing console on the wall of the admiral's office. He touched a button, and the windows of the office turned opaque as a sound-suppression field activated, as well, making the room completely secure. "Tech managed to retrieve data from one of the marine's damaged tactical helmet cameras," the commander explained as he queued up the battle footage. "You're not going to believe this."

Admiral Galiardi watched the familiar images of Ghatazhak soldiers moving expertly from point to point, bolts from marine energy weapons slamming into the ground around them as they returned fire with uncanny precision. "You're right, this *is* unbelievable," the admiral agreed, his voice dripping with sarcasm. "The way those Ghatazhak shoot, it's hard to believe we didn't lose more men." The admiral's voice changed from sarcasm to annoyance. "I've seen enough footage of Ghatazhak holding off our marines, Commander."

"Look...in the background. The two men running from right to left, in front of the line of gunships." The commander backed the footage up a bit and then ran it again.

The admiral squinted, studying the footage as the two shadowy figures ran from right to left, ducking under the nose of the Cobra gunships just before disappearing off the other side of the frame. "Who are they?" the admiral wondered, leaning forward with curiosity. "They're not Ghatazhak, that's for sure."

"No, they're not," the commander agreed. "You can tell by the way they're running. The Ghatazhak always use uneven strides and cut from side to side in random patterns to make it more difficult to target them."

"That, and they're not wearing Ghatazhak armor," the admiral added, still sounding annoyed.

"The fact that they are *not* Ghatazhak is what got our intel people curious, since every combatant they've seen thus far, in what little footage they've recovered, has *been* Ghatazhak." "You broke up my meeting because you found two combatants who were *not* Ghatazhak?"

"They started combing through bits and pieces of data from other battle cameras, just little flashes of data here and there, concentrating on the cameras from the two soldiers who were standing to the left of the one who the first footage was from," Commander Macklay continued, undaunted. "They found another shot of the two men just before they climbed into a gunship." The commander paused the footage at the moment he had just described, pressed several buttons to zoom in and then to clean up the image. The image processors made several rendering passes in only a few seconds, each pass bringing their faces more into focus. "Facial recognition algorithms identified the larger guy on the right as one of ours, Commander Vladimir Kamenetskiy, the Aurora's chief engineer."

Admiral Galiardi squinted more, trying to see the man's face more clearly. He was now becoming more interested. "And the other guy? Is he also from the Aurora's crew?"

Commander Macklay smiled. "He was."

"What do you mean?"

"We couldn't ID him at first, since the image just wasn't good enough. Then they tied in the data stream from the marine's tactical helmet's sensor system. It was able to create a three-dimensional map of the subject's face and head, which the computer was able to paint using details from the video images," the commander explained further, "and...voilà!"

Admiral Galiardi's mouth dropped open, and his eyes widened in disbelief. "That's impossible."

"That's what I said, at first," the commander agreed. "And at second, and third... But, it makes sense. I mean, Cameron Taylor was a by-the-book officer. There's only one person who could convince her to go rogue, and *that*'s him," he declared pointing at the screen.

"Nathan goddamned Scott," Galiardi declared in a half gasp. He looked at the commander, disbelief still apparent on the admiral's face. "How the *hell* did he escape from the *Jung homeworld*?"

"And get buried on Earth, in front of thousands," the commander added. "I have no idea. But, apparently, he's leading the Ghatazhak attack on Kohara."

"He's *part* of the attack," the admiral agreed. "But we don't know he's *leading* it...not from this footage, at least."

"Think about it, sir," the commander insisted. "Miri Scott-Thornton receives a covert message; she then meets with Melei Chen, who is then reactivated and made the chief medical officer of the Aurora; and soon after, the Aurora goes rogue. Then, Nathan Scott and his old friend Vladimir Kamenetskiy are part of a Ghatazhak party stealing Cobra gunships on Kohara."

"You think President Scott knew about this?"

"The raid on Kohara? Possibly. No way of knowing at this point, but there's another twist that I think is linked. Doctor Sorenson's escape. The footage is limited, since one of the people who helped her escape took out the drone before it got close enough to get a clear shot. But the footage *does* show a man and a woman. The man is the same size, build, and hair color as Nathan Scott, and the girl matches the basic description of Jessica Nash, who resigned just after Nathan's surrender, to train with the Ghatazhak in the Pentaurus sector. I'm betting that Nash and the Ghatazhak somehow rescued Nathan Scott, and he's been in hiding in the Pentaurus sector ever since. Deliza Ta'Akar comes to Earth to make a diplomatic plea for help *directly* to President Scott. Then, Doctor Sorenson and her family are whisked away in a jump sub—one of two that were created and used to insert covert operatives *on* Nor-Patri, and should still be in her oceans. Then, the *next* day, Nathan Scott, Vladimir Kamenetskiy, and the Ghatazhak are stealing Cobras from Kohara, most likely with the help of Jessica's brother, Robert, Gil Roselle, and his XO. It's hard to believe the president *didn't* know about it beforehand. But even if he *didn't*, surely he *must* have known that his son was still alive."

Admiral Galiardi just sat there, thinking.

"Admiral, that *alone* is a violation of the people's trust. If the Jung ever found out..."

The Admiral silenced the commander with nothing more than a look. After a moment, the admiral spoke. "This presents us with an opportunity...one we must consider carefully *before* taking action."

"Of course."

The admiral looked at the commander again. "How many people know about this? That Nathan Scott is alive?"

"Myself, Lieutenant Commander Hurriri, and Lieutenant Commander Detzem," Commander Macklay replied. "I have already reminded them of how sensitive this information is. I expect they both understand the potential consequences of a leak."

"Level four surveillance on both of them," the admiral insisted. "When they take a dump, I want to hear the toilet flush."

"Yes, sir," the commander replied smartly.

"And, Commander..."

"Yes, Admiral?"

"Give them both a pat on the back from me, will you?"

"Yes, sir," the commander assured him as he saluted and then turned to exit. Admiral Galiardi returned the salute and then leaned back in his chair as a healthy grin began to form. Things were looking up.

* * *

Robert Nash tapped the last few commands into his Cobra gunship's flight console. "Got an intercept plot for me, Sash?"

"Coming up now," his copilot replied as he uploaded the plot.

"Okay, people, you ready to ruffle some feathers? Checkin time. One, ready."

"Two, ready," Gil Roselle acknowledged.

"*Three, ready,*" Aiden followed.

"Four, ready," Charnelle added.

"Twenty seconds to intercept jump," Lieutenant Kraska announced from the copilot's seat. "Uploading attack series to the pack."

"Striker Leader to all Strikers. Attack series uploading now. Manual execution, just like we practiced."

Sasha Kraska glanced at his captain. "You sure you want to let them go manual, sir?"

"They've got to get experience sooner or later," Robert replied. "Better they get it on a cargo intercept than a warship."

"An *escorted* cargo ship," Sasha reminded him. "Five seconds."

"Here we go, gang," Aiden announced over his comm-set from the pilot's seat of Striker Three.

"Jumping," Kenji announced as their windows turned opaque, causing their view of the two Cobra gunships ahead of them to disappear. A moment later, the windows cleared, revealing the gunships in front of them again as they opened fire on the eight Dusahn octo-fighters that were escorting the cargo ship they were after. The first gunship made short work of the two octo-fighters that were trailing the cargo ship, then rolled down and to port before jumping away. Striker Two opened up on the two octo-fighters to starboard of the cargo ship, destroying both of them before also disappearing in a blue-white flash of light.

Aiden adjusted his course slightly to port, locking onto the first octo-fighter to port of the cargo ship, launching a volley of plasma torpedoes a split second later. The first fighter exploded, breaking into several pieces before secondary explosions obliterated it further. He immediately targeted the other octo-fighter in the pair and fired, but the target rolled and dove, flipping over and opening up on Aiden's gunship, lighting up his forward shields.

"Target is slipping under us," Kenji warned. "Ledge, swing down and nab him,"

"Tracking," the young gunner replied. "Firing."

"No joy," Kenji reported. "Two more sliding over in front of us from the cargo ship's starboard side. Time to jump."

"*I can get him*," Ledge promised.

"Not our problem," Aiden told him, agreeing with his copilot. "Jumping out."

Their windows turned opaque again. When they cleared a split second later, the cargo ship and remaining octofighters that had been directly in front of them were gone, already a few light seconds behind them. Aiden immediately brought the ship into a tight, ninety-degree turn to port, pitching his gunship's nose up five degrees at the same time, just as planned. Another touch of the jump button, and the next pre-programmed jump in the attack sequence that had been uploaded fired, causing them to jump to their next waypoint. Another turn to port and a quick pitch change to bring his gunship's nose back downward, and he jumped again.

"Second attack jump in five," Aiden warned his crew. "Don't miss this time."

"You missed first, Captain," Ledge reminded him.

"I was just trying to cut you in on the action, Ledge," Aiden insisted, a wry smile on his face as he turned to look at Kenji in the copilot's seat. Aiden touched the jump button again, instantly transitioning his ship ahead a few light seconds. The windows cleared, and the cargo ship appeared in front of him, broadside, as the last octo-fighter exploded while trying to evade fire from Striker One, which had just jumped in behind him.

"*No targets remaining,*" Sergeant Dagata reported from the sensor station.

"Condition two, everyone. Keep your weapons hot, but don't fire without orders," Kenji reminded their gunners.

"Cargo vessel, Mandallon, this is Captain Robert Nash of the Karuzari. How do you copy?" Robert called over comms.

"This is Captain Taff of the Mandallon. We are an unarmed cargo vessel. What do you require of us?"

Robert looked at his copilot as he replied to the captain of the cargo ship before them. "Mandallon, turn to heading two five seven by four seven and execute a two-light-year jump. Fail to comply, and we will disable your ship and board you. Do you understand?"

"Relax, Captain, you'll get no resistance from us. I swear. Just promise you won't release us back to the Dusahn."

"He's changing course," Sasha reported.

"Damn, that was easy," Gil commented over comms.

"I guess Captain Taff doesn't like working for the Dusahn," Robert said.

"He's spooling up his jump drive," Sasha reported.

"Turning to the rendezvous heading," Robert announced.

"Loading the jump to the rendezvous point."

"Stay here with the kids, and keep anyone who shows up after we leave busy for a few minutes, Gil."

"You got it," Gil replied. "Strikers Three and Four, disperse to ambush positions."

"Three, moving off," Aiden replied.

"Four, moving off," Charnelle added.

"Target has jumped," Sasha reported.

"Following," Robert replied, tapping the jump button. Their windows turned opaque, clearing a moment later to reveal the Seiiki moving in next to the newly arrived cargo ship.

Josh twisted his control stick, causing the Seiiki to yaw to starboard, swinging the ship around to face its aft end toward the nearby cargo vessel.

"*Easy, Josh,*" Loki complained over comms. "*The door's wide open back here, you know.*"

"Stop being such a baby," Josh insisted from the Seiiki's cockpit.

"Why are you always teasing him?" Neli asked from the copilot's seat.

"It's what we do," Josh replied, smiling.

Loki stood just inside the open cargo bay, staring at the massive cargo ship just outside as the Seiiki drifted closer a little more quickly than he liked. "A little fast, maybe?" he suggested over his pressure helmet comms.

"*I'm on the numbers,*" Josh insisted.

"Are you ready, Mister Sheehan?" Corporal Eliason asked Loki. "No," Loki replied, turning to look at the Ghatazhak soldier standing next to him in his black combat pressure suit.

Corporal Eliason smiled. "*It's easy,*" he promised. "*You just walk right off the end of the ramp and float on over.*"

"And if we miss?" Loki asked.

"I'm sure Mister Hayes has us on the correct trajectory and closure rate."

"How do you know?" Loki demanded.

Corporal Eliason pointed at his faceplate. "Tactical sensor suite, remember?" The corporal turned to look at the other three Ghatazhak on his team and then tapped the commcontrol on the side of his helmet. "Mandallon, this is Corporal Eliason of the Ghatazhak. Open the outer door on your starboard boarding airlock."

"This is Captain Taff of the Mandallon. Are we being boarded?"

"Affirmative," Corporal Eliason replied. "We are taking control of your vessel. I would strongly advise that you do not resist. Anyone bearing a weapon will be met with immediate and deadly force. Do you understand?"

"We understand," the captain of the cargo ship replied. "Please, do not fire on us. We are civilians, and we have no weapons aboard."

"I understand. Are there any Dusahn aboard your vessel?" the corporal inquired.

"Negative," Captain Taff replied.

"How many souls aboard?" the corporal asked.

"*Eight, including myself,*" the captain replied.

The outer door on the starboard side of the Mandallon began to open, revealing the airlock on the other side.

"Oh, boy," Loki muttered, realizing there was no turning back.

"Weapons hot; drop anyone who poses a threat," Corporal Eliason told his men. "Let's move out."

The four Ghatazhak walked out the open cargo bay door and across the level cargo ramp, strolling right off the end of the ramp and floating toward the approaching cargo ship.

"Oh, boy, oh, boy, oh, boy..." Loki chanted as he followed them out and off the end of the ramp. "Oh, boy! I'm away!" Loki declared as he drifted quickly toward the Mandallon. "We're all away!"

"*Thrusting,*" Josh announced as the Seiiki's aft docking thrusters fired, slowing the ship's closure rate, and allowing the boarding party greater separation from the ship they had just departed.

Loki's breathing quickened as he closed in on the cargo ship. As planned, one by one, the Ghatazhak soldiers passed through the Mandallon's outer airlock door and into the airlock itself, coming to stand comfortably in the compartment's artificial gravity.

Loki drifted in behind the last man, the gravity pulling him gently downward, allowing him to step normally onto the deck of the airlock and walk inside.

Corporal Eliason activated the outer door controls, causing it to slide closed. Seconds after the outer door closed and sealed, the airlock began to pressurize. The four Ghatazhak took up firing positions on either side of the inner hatch, one man high and one man low, with their weapons held high and ready.

"They're civilians," Loki reminded them.

"Exactly what they'd say if they were Dusahn Zen-Anor," Corporal Eliason commented as he raised his weapon to be ready to fire.

"Oh, boy," Loki muttered, a sinking feeling developing in the pit of his stomach. "You might want to stand to the side, just in case," the corporal suggested.

"Oh, boy."

A minute later the airlock was pressurized, and the inner door slid open.

"Don't shoot!" the crewman inside the next compartment shouted, throwing his hands up in the air to show that he wasn't armed.

The two Ghatazhak who were positioned low stayed put, while the corporal and the other Ghatazhak, standing on the opposite side of the airlock door, moved quickly through and into the next compartment, sweeping their weapons to the outside to search for threats.

"*Clear left,*" Corporal Eliason reported.

"*Clear right,*" the other Ghatazhak added.

The two kneeling Ghatazhak moved inside, as well, quickly moving past the frightened crewman still standing with his hands straight up in the air.

Corporal Eliason raised his faceplate, turning toward the crewman. "Where is everyone else?"

"Jorgy's in engineering, and everyone else is on the bridge," the young man answered as the other soldier patted him down.

"He's clean."

"The Dusahn took away all our guns weeks ago," the crewman assured them.

"What are you doing here?" Corporal Eliason asked.

"The captain told me to show you to the bridge," the crewman explained.

"Mister Sheehan!" Corporal Eliason called. When there was no immediate answer, the corporal turned to look back toward the airlock.

Loki leaned out, his helmet faceplate still closed and locked.

"Care to join us on the bridge, Mister Sheehan?" the corporal wondered.

"Uh, yes," Loki replied, stepping out of the airlock, trying to look confident. "Of course," he added, raising his faceplate and unlocking his helmet as he stepped inside.

Corporal Eliason turned back toward the crewman. "Lead the way, Mister..."

"Porky."

"Seriously?" the corporal replied, one eyebrow raised and a smirk on his face.

"Don't," the crewman said, lowering his hands. "I've heard them all, really," he added, turning to lead them out of the compartment.

Corporal Eliason watched with a smile as Loki followed young Crewman Porky. "Inchin, Gazen, sweep aft. Mitchell and I will sweep forward, once we secure the bridge. Report once you secure engineering."

"You got it," Inchin replied.

"Porky's waiting," Mitchell reminded the corporal with a grin.

* * *

"Captain on the bridge," the guard at the door barked as Nathan entered the bridge.

Nathan cast a disapproving look at the guard as he passed. He had never liked being announced every time he entered a compartment.

"Sorry, sir," the guard said, noticing his captain's expression. "XO's orders."

Nathan rolled his eyes as if to say, 'I don't blame you,' to the guard as he headed aft to his ready room. "Does he *really* have to do that every time?" he complained as he closed the ready room hatch behind him.

"SOPs," Cameron replied, rising from behind the captain's desk and stepping aside to make room for Nathan. "Besides, I thought it would help you acclimate to being in command again."

"If you meant to remind me of all the little things I *didn't* like about being the CO, then it's working."

"Did you like *anything* about being the commanding officer of the Aurora?" Cameron teased as she took the seat in front of the desk.

"I liked having my own galley," Nathan quipped with a smile.

"Even when Vlad did the cooking?"

"Good point," Nathan agreed as he took his seat. "How did the first anti-shipping op go? They make it back yet?"

"We received word about ten minutes ago. They're at the rendezvous point, and the boarding team is sweeping the ship. So far, no casualties, and no battle damage to the Cobras or the cargo ship."

"What about the escorts?" Nathan wondered. "Did they have any?"

"Eight octo-fighters," Cameron replied. "All of them destroyed. Captain Nash reports it went exactly as planned."

"They're not all going to be that easy, you know."

"I know," Cameron assured him. "I expect we'll be able to grab three, maybe four ships before the Dusahn get wise and stop using the standard jump routes."

"Or use more escorts," Nathan added. "Or bigger ones."

"*More*? Perhaps, but I don't think they'll send larger ships. They would be leaving their more important assets unprotected. You know that." "If they think like the Jung," Nathan agreed. "But we still don't know that they do. That's the whole purpose of these anti-shipping ops. To see how they react."

"And all this time I thought it was to get more dollag steaks," Cameron joked. "How did things go on Rakuen?"

Nathan's expression suddenly soured.

"That well, huh?"

"Sebaron and Cornell are so busy jockeying for an advantage over one another, I can't get anything done. They don't seem to get that this alliance is going to make them equals."

"Maybe they *do* get that, and they simply don't want it," Cameron suggested.

"Well, I know Sebaron doesn't want it. Rakuen has enjoyed supremacy over Neramese for more than a century, despite the fact that both worlds are equal in both population *and* industrial capacity. To be honest, if Rakuen would share their water a little more freely with Neramese, both worlds would benefit greatly."

"Surely they see that."

"Neramese does. They've *always* known that. But Rakuen either *doesn't* get it, or they *fear* it. Personally, I think it's the latter, and I *believe* we can use that to our advantage."

Cameron noticed Nathan's grin. "You're not..."

"I am."

"Sebaron is going to come unglued."

Nathan's grin grew larger. "I know. But Cornell will sign in a heartbeat, *if* we offer him jump missile batteries to defend Neramese."

"I'm not sure arming Neramese is the best way to get Rakuen to join our alliance," Cameron warned. "Probably not, but it *will* work. Besides, having *both* worlds armed gives them *both* a better chance of defending themselves. The Dusahn don't have enough ships to glass two worlds at once, especially while protecting their assets in the PC."

"How are you going to convince them that neither world will be able to use their batteries against the other?" Cameron wondered.

"Create a central command," Nathan replied. "Call it 'Rogen Defense Command', or something. Make sure it's staffed by both Neramese *and* Rakuen. I was thinking they could put the command center *on* the Gunyoki race platform. Maybe replace that pompous VIP observation deck with it. After all, the race platform itself has been open to both worlds for several decades now."

"I was under the impression that most of the fans were from Rakuen," Cameron said.

"I think it's sixty-forty, or something like that," Nathan replied. "Doesn't matter where it is, really, as long as it isn't on either world. The race platform would just be the easiest place to put it, for now."

Cameron considered the idea for a moment. "It would also make the Rakuens feel a bit more 'in control'," she said. "The Nerameseans might not like that."

"I think the Nerameseans will just be tickled to see the Rakuens squirm at the thought of Neramese becoming armed again."

Cameron shook her head. "I don't know, Nathan."

"Even if Sebaron *is* dumb enough to refuse to sign, the Gunyoki are not *bound* by that decision. Sebaron said so himself, less than an hour ago."

"Some of the Gunyoki might choose to withdraw," Cameron warned, "to *stay* on the side of Rakuen." "Both worlds need to put that damned war behind them," Nathan insisted. "There are bigger problems beyond their system, and they both know it. We just have to convince them that it's in their best interests to move on... together."

Cameron's eyebrows shot up. "You're not going to try to get them to hold hands and sing songs of togetherness, are you?"

"Stop it."

"When do you meet with them again?"

"Sebaron didn't say, when he called for adjournment," Nathan said. "But if he doesn't call us to meet again in a day or so, I'm going straight to Neramese and offering them an alliance, separate from Rakuen."

"You might want to bring an armed escort," Cameron suggested.

Nathan smiled. "I'll have Telles with me. I'm pretty sure he can kick all their asses."

* * *

Other than a small table, a folding chair, and a mattress on the floor, the apartment was empty. The kitchen was also barren, other than a coffee machine, a mug, and a few utensils. Still, it was far more than he had been allowed in prison.

Every morning, Krispin rose with the sun and went for a run, following the trail that wrapped around the NAU complex in downtown Winnipeg. Afterward, he would pick up his breakfast at the café on the corner and return to his apartment. His days were spent watching the NAU capitol building, particularly the window to the president's office.

Krispin's handler had provided him with everything he needed. Surveillance equipment, sensors, recording gear, anything he'd asked for. Anything short of a weapon, that was. Krispin had not yet asked for one, but if he was to do what had been asked of him, he would eventually need one.

Thus far, Krispin had determined that a simple sniper shot through the president's window would be impossible. The window itself was bulletproof, and there was energy shielding around the entire building. The hit could not be made while the president was inside the capitol, at least not from the outside. And it was highly doubtful that Krispin could get inside the complex. Even if his handler could remove Krispin's identity from all of the facial recognition systems used by NAU security, many ex-EDF types went to work for NAU security, and he couldn't risk being spotted by one of them.

Krispin had already started growing his hair longer and had stopped shaving. He had even dyed his hair darker and gotten colored contacts. But he had the look of a marine, which worked against him. He needed to soften his muscular physic, while remaining fit enough to meet whatever challenges the assignment might bring.

So, Krispin's days remained the same. Watching, waiting, and staying under the radar. Eventually, his opportunity would come. As a former sniper, he understood the patience required. As a marine, he understood the careful planning that went into such a mission. But as a man in love, his concentration was often broken by concerns for his mate. Images of her in a drug-induced haze, suffering the abuses of imprisonment, haunted both his sleep and his waking hours. But they also provided him with the motivation he needed to work for those whom he despised.

Perhaps, if he was successful, and he and his love were set free, he might be able to someday return and set things right.

CHAPTER TWO

Nathan walked across the Aurora's main hangar bay toward the Seiiki as her aft cargo ramp finished deploying with a thud. Loki was the first one down the ramp, followed by Marcus and Dalen. "I take it you had a pleasant journey home?" Nathan asked as he approached.

"I wouldn't call it pleasant," Loki replied.

"The Mandallon's crew give you trouble?"

"Not her crew, her jump-nav system. I don't know what the Dusahn did to it. I had to bypass the entire thing and plot every jump manually. Good thing I thought to bring along a data pad, with all the jump points already in it; otherwise, we'd still be in transit."

"Nice work," Nathan congratulated.

"I'd suggest we wipe that jump-nav system clean and start from scratch," Loki suggested.

"Good idea."

"I'm pretty sure Captain Taff wants to speak with you," Loki told him, pointing back over his shoulder.

"You brought him with you?"

"He insisted. We did take his ship, after all."

"We prefer to think of it as 'liberating'," Nathan reminded him.

"It doesn't matter what we call it, at least not to him."

"Good point," Nathan admitted. "I'll go talk to him. I'll see you at the action debrief."

"Yes, sir," Loki replied, continuing into the hangar.

"No damage taken, Cap'n," Marcus assured him as he came down the ramp with Dalen. "Never even received fire."

"Good to hear," Nathan replied. He was about to head up the ramp when Captain Taff appeared at the top, flanked by Corporal Eliason and his squad of Ghatazhak. "Captain Taff, I presume?"

"I thought they were bullshitting me," the captain replied in disbelief as he headed down the ramp. When he reached the bottom, he came to attention and offered a salute. "Captain Isaiah Taff, formerly specialist Taff of the Corinari, once attached to Major Prechitt's wing aboard the Aurora, sir."

"We served together?" Nathan asked, returning the man's salute.

"Yes, sir. I don't expect you'd remember me, though. I was a flight mechanic back then. Our paths didn't cross very often."

"Laughy Taffy," Marcus said from underneath the Seiiki's starboard nacelle. "I thought you looked familiar," Marcus said, overhearing the conversation.

"You remember this guy?" Nathan asked.

"Yes, sir," Marcus replied. "He was a bit younger and didn't have a beard, but that's him. Kid was always telling jokes, as I recall."

"It's how I deal with stress," Captain Taff said.

"How'd you end up captain of a cargo jump ship?" Nathan wondered.

"Major Prechitt got a bunch of us into flight school when we got back to Corinair. Worked my way up after graduation. I was actually the first officer aboard the Mandallon when the Dusahn initially boarded us. They shot our captain, Tobar McCann." "Why?"

"For not kissing their asses the right way, I suppose. They don't really need much of a reason, from what I hear."

"You hear much?"

"About the Dusahn? Oh, yeah, quite a bit, actually. Cargo crews like to talk to one another over point-to-point whenever we can. The Dusahn haven't gotten around to removing that capability yet. I'm sorry I made such a fuss, insisting to see you for myself, sir. But everyone has been talking about you, ever since you guys dropped those leaflets on Aitkenna announcing your return. No one believes you're alive. Hell, / didn't believe you were alive. That's why I needed to see for myself."

"I understand," Nathan assured him.

Captain Taff rubbed his head, a small laugh escaping. "Damn, Captain, I'm *still* finding it hard to believe that you're alive, and I'm standing right here looking at you," he added, looking around the hangar bay. "Hell, I'm standing on the deck of the Aurora, talking to Na-Tan. Nobody's going to believe me."

"We'll be sure to take a picture together before you return to your ship," Nathan promised.

"What are you going to do with us?" Captain Taff asked.

"That depends," Nathan admitted. "Do you or your crew have any family back home who might be at risk if you don't return?"

"I'm not married," Captain Taff replied. "I don't think any of my crew is either. Maybe a girlfriend or two. Relationships are difficult when you live and work on a cargo jump ship."

"We'll return any of your crew who don't want to join us," Nathan explained. "But we *are* taking your cargo *and* your ship, I'm afraid." "No worries, Captain," Captain Taff assured Nathan. "I can't speak for my entire crew, of course, but I don't expect any of them are eager to return to Corinair, not as long as the Dusahn are in control."

"Thank you, Captain Taff," Nathan replied. "If you can spare some time, I'm sure my chief of intelligence would love to pick your brain."

"Happy to help, sir," Captain Taff replied eagerly.

"Corporal Eliason, would you please escort Captain Taff to Lieutenant Commander Shinoda in the intelligence shack?"

"Aye, sir," Corporal Eliason replied. "Captain Taff, if you'll follow me."

"Captain," Captain Taff said respectfully as he followed the Ghatazhak corporal across the hangar deck.

Nathan turned to watch the young captain walk away as Marcus came up to stand beside him. "What do you think of him?" Nathan wondered.

"Never saw him as a leader, that's for sure," Marcus said. "But he never gave me much trouble. Always did his job and never complained much. Sure as hell seems happy to see you again, I'll tell you that."

"Yeah, he does," Nathan replied. "I have to admit, it kind of caught me off guard." Nathan sighed and turned back toward the Seiiki. "You can stand the ship down," he told Marcus. "The Seiiki's not going on any more missions until Vlad's people finish installing plasma torpedo cannons on her."

"You sure that's necessary, Cap'n?" Marcus wondered. "Seems like the more weapons you install on her, the more dangerous her missions become."

"War is hell," Nathan joked, turning to walk away.

Birk and Cuddy lay in the small, dark cave, still panting. Birk's body ached from the beating it had taken during their escape, and he was certain he had at least a few broken ribs, if not other broken bones in his body. He glanced at Cuddy. Other than dirt, sweat, and a few lacerations that had stopped bleeding hours ago, he appeared to be intact.

"I think we're safe, for now," Michael proclaimed as he stepped back into the cave.

"Shouldn't we keep moving?" Cuddy wondered, concern in his tone.

"Easy for you to say," Birk moaned.

"The ore in these mountains should prevent detection by Dusahn sensors," Michael explained as he placed his small, portable light on the cave floor. "And the entrance to this cave was small enough that I was able to close it off with a few boulders and some eichen moss. Unless one is specifically *lookin*g for it, the entrance should go unnoticed."

"And if they find it?" Cuddy said. "There's no other way out, you know."

"If they find it, we die," Michael admitted. "But we will die fighting," he added, holding up his energy rifle.

"What about air?" Birk wondered. "If you sealed up the entrance..."

"There is still a slight breeze coming through, so there must be some other openings to the surface."

"Maybe there *is* another way out, then?" Birk suggested hopefully.

"It is possible," Michael agreed. "However, it is just as likely that they are impassable."

"I still think we should keep moving," Cuddy insisted. "We could find our way to the nearest town and get some help."

"From whom?" Michael asked.

"Surely there are people who want the Dusahn gone as much as we do," Cuddy said.

"Most people are just trying to keep out of the Dusahn's way at this point," Michael told them. "They'd be just as likely to turn us in, as they would to help us. That was the whole point of the Dusahn's aggressive, initial assault; total dominance. The psychological effect on the population is greater than you think. Caius was well aware of this. That is why he had the Ghatazhak programmed to be loyal to him. So he could use them as shock troops to scare the hell out of people." Michael settled down next to Birk. "We stay put for now. We rest, and we collect our thoughts. Then we decide what to do next."

"We don't have any food or water," Cuddy pointed out.

"We can survive for weeks without food," Michael replied. "As for water, three, maybe four days. There is a river not far from here. In a day or two, it should be safe for me to go out at night to retrieve some water."

"What if the Dusahn are actively scanning the area with satellites?" Cuddy asked. "If we keep moving *now*, we can get further away before they have the chance to retask a satellite to this area, right?"

"Does he look like he can keep moving for much longer?" Michael asked, pointing at Birk.

"I'm good," Birk protested between pants.

"No, you are not," Michael insisted.

Birk looked at Cuddy. "Sorry, he's right. I'm not."

Cuddy leaned back against the rocky wall of the small cave and sighed. "Do you think it was our comm-system?"

"No way," Birk insisted.

"Do not do this to yourself," Michael warned. "It serves no purpose. Besides, there are a hundred ways the Dusahn could have learned of our location." "They tested the system, Cuddy," Birk reminded him.

"Quite thoroughly, in fact," Michael added. "I still believe the system to be safe. But, once the other cells realize we have been compromised, they will stop using it, at least for now."

"Then, we're on our own," Cuddy realized.

"For the foreseeable future, yes." Michael picked up his light from the cave floor and leaned against the wall. "I suggest that everyone try to get some rest." Michael turned off the light, leaving them in complete darkness.

"Can we keep the light on?" Birk asked.

"I think it's best to conserve its energy," Michael insisted.

"Isn't it solar-powered?"

"Yes, but we do not know when we will be able to safely recharge it."

"What's the matter, Birk? Are you afraid of the dark?" Cuddy teased, trying to lighten the mood.

"Today...yes. Yes, I am."

* * *

Kaylah Yosef sat on one of the many balconies of the second-floor café. At least twice per week, she treated herself to a meal here, where she could watch the boats as they meandered down the Seine.

Her recent transfer to Paris had been a dream come true. The research facility here was arguably the best on Earth, if not the best in all the Sol Alliance. Over the last five years, every breakthrough in sensor technology had come from the famed Duquaine Institute. Fortunately, her experience aboard the Aurora, and her involvement in the development of the sensor suites currently being used by the Cape Town, had given her an edge over other applicants. For the first time since she had enlisted, she finally felt as if she were in the right place. If everything worked out, she might even put down some roots, something she had not been able to do over the last ten years.

Kaylah picked up her glass of wine and took a sip. As she placed her glass back on the table, the sounds of the city suddenly went quiet.

"Mind if I join you, Commander?" a man asked from behind.

Kaylah turned to look, her mouth falling agape when she spotted him. "Oh, my God," she exclaimed, rising from her seat to embrace her friend. "What are you doing here?"

"Looking for you," Captain Hunt said as he took a seat.

"How on Earth did you find me?"

"It wasn't easy, believe me," he admitted. "Luckily, you're a creature of habit. I tailed you a few times after work. Once I realized that you ate here on a regular basis, I just waited until you showed up again."

"I don't understand. Why didn't you just call?"

"Comms can be tapped," Captain Hunt replied.

The reason the street sounds had disappeared suddenly became apparent to her. "Are you running a soundsuppression field? We can detect them, you know."

"Everybody's got them these days," Chris insisted. "We'd just be two people who want some privacy, just like millions of others all over the world."

"What's going on, Chris?"

"I'm putting together a crew. One made up of people who once served under Captain Scott. I was hoping you'd be interested. But..."

"But what?"

"Well, now that I see you've landed your dream job... Forget it. Forget I said anything. Let's just have a nice meal and catch up." "Right," she retorted. "Like I'm going to drop it that easily. Spit it out, Chris. What are you up to, and why all the cloak and dagger stuff?"

Chris eyed her for a moment, part suspicion, part trust. "You're one of the few of us left in the service. Why didn't Galiardi push you out, like he did the rest of us?"

"I've thought about that myself, at times," Kaylah admitted. "The best explanation I could come up with was that I was transferred off the Aurora long before those final days. In the end, I was in R&D. Of course, I'd also like to think that I'm just so good that he couldn't afford to get rid of me, but..."

"Do you hear from any of them?" Chris wondered.

"The gang from the Aurora? Not really. So many of them were from the PC, after all. I did run into Cassandra Evans when I first moved back here. She works in administration at the institute. Something to do with psych profiling, I think."

"Anyone else?"

"Not really." She looked at him long and hard. "Spit it out, Chris. What's going on?"

Chris studied her, trying to determine if he could trust her. She had been one of Captain Scott's most trusted officers during her time on the Aurora, and had been with him for their entire adventure through the Pentaurus cluster; from the initial super jump all the way through to the liberation of Earth from the Jung. If anyone would still feel a sense of loyalty to Nathan Scott, it would be Kaylah Yosef. "What I'm about to tell you is a secret," he began. "And when I tell you, you're going to be shocked, so try not to react."

"You think someone is watching us?"

"Not really," Chris admitted, "but it's better to assume they are."

"Okay," she said, mentally preparing herself. "I'm ready."

Chris paused a moment. Not so much for dramatic effect, but because he truly enjoyed this moment. She would be the fifteenth person to whom he would reveal the truth, and all fourteen before her were in complete disbelief, at first.

"Well?" Kaylah urged, growing impatient.

"Nathan Scott is alive. He's back in command of the Aurora and is leading a rebellion against the Dusahn in the PC." Chris waited for the usual reaction, for the look of shock and confusion, but it never came. Instead, he could see the wheels turning inside her head. "You're either not surprised, or you've got incredible self-control," he finally commented.

"Actually, I already knew. In fact, I've known for seven years now."

"What?" Now it was Chris who was shocked. Then it dawned on him. "Hayes."

"We had a big fight when he told me he was going back to the Pentaurus sector."

"I thought you two were already split up by then?"

"Only because I got reassigned," she told him. "When he said he was leaving, it really upset me. I was so hurt. He couldn't stand to see me that way, so he told me the real reason he was leaving."

"Then *he* was in on it, all along?"

"Him, Loki, Deliza, Marcus...all of them. I'm pretty sure I was the only one on Earth who knew. They didn't even tell his family. When did you find out?"

"About two weeks ago," Chris replied. "His sister, Miri, sent me a message asking for help. Apparently, *they* only found out about a month ago, when Nathan sent word back asking her to get a message to Cameron." "Then, *that's* where the Aurora went," Kaylah realized. "No one's heard from her for several weeks, as best I can tell. We just assumed she went dark, chasing a sensor contact, or something. Wow. I can't *believe* Galiardi actually sent the Aurora to the PC... Wait, who are the Dusahn?"

"Some rogue faction of the Jung, as I understand it," Chris explained. "And Galiardi didn't *send* the Aurora to the PC, Captain Taylor took it upon herself to go."

"Cameron Taylor stole her own ship?"

"Yup."

"Cameron Taylor. *By-the-book* Cameron Taylor?"

"The very same."

Now Kaylah was surprised. "What the *hell* is going on, Chris?"

"A lot, believe me," Chris assured her. "So, are you in?" "What do you think?" she replied with a smile.

Just like that, her dream job vanished from her mind and, soon, from her life.

* * *

The small, uninhabited molo farm sat baking in the long day's sun on Haven. Once the home of a poor family, the dusty complex, built into the bottom of a wide sinkhole, had been quiet the last twenty-eight Haven years. Other than a ship that had camped out for a few days some time ago, the farm was abandoned, and for all intents and purposes, it looked it.

An unmarked Ranni jump shuttle suddenly appeared as if from nowhere, skimming low across the surface toward the abandoned molo farm, dust swirling behind it. Seconds later, the thunderous clap of its sudden displacement of the dusty moon's atmosphere preceded the shuttle's arrival at the molo farm. The shuttle slowed as it reached the depression, lowering further as it crossed the ridge, finally touching down in the center of the abandoned complex only a few meters from the stone bunkhouse behind the dilapidated, half-destroyed main house.

As soon as the shuttle's gear touched the dusty surface, its hatch opened, and four armed men stepped out in practiced fashion. Two of them took up defensive positions, while the pilot inside kept the engines running for a quick departure. The other two men moved briskly into the stone bunkhouse.

A minute later, the two men came back outside, and all four men returned to the shuttle. As the last man boarded, the shuttle's engines began to spin up. The shuttle rose slowly off the surface, creating a swirl of dust as it climbed. Once its hatch was closed, the shuttle disappeared, creating a swooshing sound as the air around it moved in to replace the void left behind by the shuttle's sudden departure from Haven's atmosphere.

Once again, the small, uninhabited molo farm was silent, as it would remain until it was visited again.

* * *

Nathan crouched down to one side of the hatch, his energy pistol in hand, watching as Jessica signaled him from the opposite side of the hatch. After nodding his understanding of her instructions, she bolted through the hatch, firing as she moved from right to left into the next room. Nathan immediately followed, moving left to right, a step behind her.

Enemy fire immediately greeted them, slamming into the walls, deck, and overheads all around them as they both charged for the far sides of the next compartment. Splitting up had served its intended purpose and had divided their opponents' aim. The firing pattern was erratic. A few shots at Jessica, then a few at Nathan as he moved the opposite direction. But when the shots were aimed at Nathan, they were not aimed at Jessica. That led Nathan to believe they were facing only one man.

Nathan dove for cover behind a large counter on the far right of the compartment, rolling on the deck as he landed, shots slamming into the counter as he arrived. Jessica opened up again, drawing the enemy's fire. Nathan rose from his cover to take the shooter out, knowing that he would have to step into his firing line to get a clean shot at Jessica.

Unfortunately, it was a mistake. As soon as Nathan stood, three shots landed on his chest, knocking him backward and triggering the alarm on his chest plate.

A horn blared, signaling the training exercise was over.

"What the hell were you thinking?" Jessica barked as she walked out from behind her cover, holstering her weapon.

"I thought I would take him out when he stepped out to fire on you," Nathan replied as he turned off the alarm on his chest piece.

"Did it ever occur to you that there were two of them?" Jessica questioned.

"He fired at you, and *then* me," Nathan defended. "So, I figured there was only the single shooter."

"You fell for an obvious ploy," Jessica chastised. "And an old one, at that."

"Sorry," Nathan apologized as he got back on his feet. "I thought I was being clever."

"If you were being *clever*, you wouldn't have assumed a single shooter. If you were being *clever*, you would have waited for instructions from me. If you were being *clever*,

you would have remembered that you were facing experienced Ghatazhak, who specialize in subterfuge."

"If I were being *clever*, I would have stayed in my ready room instead of agreeing to come down here to be humiliated by you," Nathan interjected.

"Hey, you're the one who decided he wanted to 'be down in the trenches with the troops' this time around. And there's no way I'm letting you cover *my* ass until you've had proper training."

"I believe I've already *covered your ass* on more than one occasion," he reminded her as he removed his chest piece and touched his chest. He winced in pain. "These damned training weapons really pack a wallop, don't they?"

"Provides motivation to not be stupid," Jessica mumbled as General Telles entered the training area.

"Go ahead, tell me how much I suck," Nathan invited.

"I believe the lieutenant commander has already covered that quite well," the general stated. "To be honest, I am surprised that you fell for the lone-shooter fake. You are usually more intuitive under fire."

"I guess I'm a little off my game today," Nathan admitted. "A lot going on up here, what with all the negotiations and such."

"The Ghatazhak are able to block out distractions of the mind when necessary."

"And how do you do that?"

"By first recognizing what those distractions are."

"Simple as that, huh?" Nathan looked at Jessica.

"Don't look at me," she said, putting her hands up. "I haven't mastered that one yet, at least not entirely."

"It takes years of practice," the general said. "Shall we try again?"

Nathan groaned.

"*Captain, Intel*," Lieutenant Commander Shinoda called over Nathan's comm-set.

Nathan tapped his comm-set. "Go ahead."

"We have a message from Terig Espan on Takara."

"We'll be there shortly," Nathan replied. "Thank God," he added, after closing the connection.

* * *

"I can't believe the kid actually had the guts to send a message," Jessica said as she, Nathan, and General Telles entered the Aurora's intelligence office.

"Wait till you see it," Lieutenant Commander Shinoda warned as he handed Nathan a data pad.

Nathan looked at the data pad, immediately becoming silent.

"What does the kid have to report?" Jessica wondered, noticing the look of surprise on Nathan's face.

"Navarro's alive," Nathan replied. "And he's on Takara, using the name Tensen Dalott." Nathan handed Jessica the data pad. "He's planning on stealing the Teyentah."

"Is that even possible?" Jessica wondered, reading the message for herself before handing it to General Telles.

"Somebody want to tell me what the Teyentah is?" Lieutenant Commander Shinoda asked.

"It's a Takaran battleship that was commissioned by House Ta'Akar before Prince Casimir's assassination," General Telles explained.

"That's the big sucker in their shipyards, right?"

"Precisely," the general replied.

"The Dusahn have been trying to finish that thing ever since they got here," Jessica stated.

"According to Mister Espan, they are only a few months away from completion. Her department heads are already aboard, and her crew will begin reporting in a few weeks," Lieutenant Commander Shinoda stated.

"How the hell does Navarro expect to steal a battleship right out from under the Dusahn's nose all by himself?" Jessica wondered.

"By himself, it would be quite impossible," General Telles insisted. "However, with our help, there *might* be a way."

Everyone looked at General Telles.

"I did say *might*," the general reminded them.

"We need to establish communication with Navarro," Nathan said. "The sooner the better."

"The only way we have is through Espan," Jessica reminded him. "I'm not sure he's up for the task."

"We could send our own operatives," Nathan suggested. "Perhaps one of your men, General."

"A possibility," the general agreed. "But that could take time."

"If Terig approaches Navarro, Suvan is just as likely to kill him as believe him," Nathan surmised.

"That's what I would do," Jessica admitted.

"Captain Navarro may require proof that you are alive," General Telles said.

"I have an idea," Nathan said. "Actually, I'm copying one of *your* ideas, General."

"A video?"

"It worked on Cameron."

"It will need to be short, and it cannot contain too much information," Jessica warned. "We don't know for sure that it *is* Navarro."

"Good point," Nathan agreed. "But it definitely should be from me." Nathan took in a deep breath, letting it out slowly. "So, what does one man, who is supposed to be long dead, say to another man, who is also supposed to be dead?" Nathan looked at all three of them.

Only Lieutenant Commander Shinoda responded. "What's new?"

* * *

Michael sat motionless in the bushes, his breath measured and shallow, watching the two Dusahn soldiers not a meter away from him. He had nearly completed his late-night mission to retrieve water for the three of them, when two members of a Dusahn search party had come to the same river as he.

The two soldiers had been standing nearby for several minutes now, talking to one another in a language that Michael had yet to learn. Finally, after what seemed an eternity, one of the men left. But the other turned toward Michael, still not noticing him in the thick bushes, and opened his trousers to relieve himself.

Michael stood perfectly still as the Dusahn soldier drained his bladder into the very bush he stood behind. The soldier looked down as he completed his task. At that moment, Michael slowly began to pull his knife out of its sheath. If the soldier spotted him, he would sound the alarm, and Michael would be doomed. But if Michael took the soldier's life, his friends would realize that he was missing, which would bring more men to the area and doom all three of them.

The other soldier called from afar, causing the Dusahn before him to turn suddenly. The man shouted back, then closed his trousers and departed. Michael remained frozen for several minutes, his boots spattered with Dusahn urine, wondering how he had been lucky enough to encounter the only two Dusahn soldiers without bio-scanners. Once he was certain the men had left the area, Michael moved slowly and quietly toward the cave where Birk and Cuddy waited. He now had water for them to drink, and a variety of edible nuts and berries to sustain them for a few days.

* * *

And his boots would dry.

Ito Yokimah stepped up to the podium carefully, his body still recovering from the injuries he sustained nine days ago. Nanites were swirling about inside of him, busily working to repair his body. He felt fortunate that he had not experienced any of the intense discomfort he had been warned was possible. Yet, he could swear that, at times, he could feel the microscopic robots knitting tissue deep within his neck, despite Doctor Chen's assurances that such sensations were nothing more than his imagination.

Until now, he had managed to avoid the media. The first week had been easy enough, since he had spent it in the Aurora's medical department. A late-night arrival back on Rakuen had helped, as well. But the time had come. Thanks to Captain Scott, Ito Yokimah was now a hero of Rakuen, and any political ambitions he might have were practically guaranteed to be successful. Unfortunately, it also meant he would be forever beholden to the young leader of the Karuzari, as the truth would surely ruin him, not just politically, but financially, as well. His companies were heavily leveraged and deeply in debt. Any interruption in his revenues would be catastrophic, to say the least.

So, he found himself at this podium, in front of fifty reporters who would connect him with all the eyes on Rakuen. Captain Scott had handed him the presidency on a silver platter. All he had to do was take it and run with it. One thing was sure, he had underestimated the young captain. He would not do so again.

"I would like to make a statement," he said after clearing his throat. He waited a moment for the crowd of journalists to quiet down before speaking. "First, I would like to thank Lieutenant Commander Jessica Nash for her quick thinking and her calm under pressure. Her actions saved my life, and her apprehension of my assailant quite possibly saved Rakuen. I will be forever in her debt. Second, I would like to thank Captain Nathan Scott for his kind words on my behalf. However, his rendition of the events was far more flattering than I deserve. The truth is, I *unknowingly* allowed a Dusahn spy to move freely among us, simply because his presence offered an opportunity for financial gain. For that, I am truly sorry. It is sometimes too easy, in our day-to-day lives, to forget what is truly important. I shall not make that mistake again."

Ito pulled himself closer to the podium, straightening up a bit more before continuing. "I now call upon the people of Rakuen to stand in opposition to the Dusahn and all they represent. We must *all* band together... Rakuens, Nerameseans, Karuzari... We must stand together against those who would impose their will upon us through the use of force and intimidation. To that end, I call upon the leaders of Rakuen to sign the Karuzari Alliance charter. Thank you."

Upon completion, Ito immediately turned and departed as gingerly as he had come, ignoring the questions being shouted at him. His lies had been small, no more than a few words bent, at most. But his intentions had been sincere. He truly felt that an alliance with the Karuzari was now the only way Rakuen might survive the conflict that was about to come their way. General Hesson was not pleased. The last few days had been particularly difficult. Their defeat in the Rogen system had not been well received by Lord Dusahn, and their inability to backtrack the Aurora and learn the location of the Karuzari fleet had not helped matters. And now, he had more bad news to report.

Although their hold on the Pentaurus cluster was guite firm, the first seven and a half weeks of occupation had been challenging. The Takaran worlds had been cooperative for the most part, but the Corinairans had proven more difficult, due mostly to the Corinari, despite the fact that they had disbanded years ago. Only recently had the Dusahn's elite Zen-Anor been able to determine the location of several Corinari resistance cells and had beaun apprehending their members. But the network was turning out to be far more extensive than originally estimated. After decades of occupation by the Ta'Akar, the Corinairans were guite adept at underground resistance operations and still had much of their network in place, even after eight years of freedom from Takaran rule.

General Hesson held a begrudging admiration for the Corinairans. They were a strong people, unwilling to trade their freedoms for safety. Unlike the Takarans, who were more concerned with appearances than anything else, the Corinairans were people of action. They were fiercely loyal and did not tolerate dishonesty or deceit. They would make excellent additions to the Dusahn Empire, if they could find a way to get them under control, which the general doubted was possible.

General Hesson entered Lord Dusahn's office, walking toward his leader's desk at the far end of the room. "You asked to see me, my lord?" Lord Dusahn did not look up from his view screen. "Still no sign of the Karuzari fleet, I take it?"

"I'm afraid not, my lord," the general replied. "The Karuzari are going to great lengths to keep their fleet's location a secret. They have developed sophisticated algorithms, varying their jump patterns to a great degree, to evade our tracking drones. The few times we have been able to track them through all of their jumps, they inevitably disappeared in the radiation fields of more massive stars, thus hiding their departure course from our drones."

Lord Dusahn finally looked up from his view screen, obviously displeased. But he knew there was no way to guess their routes beyond the stars the Karuzari used to mask their escape. Space was vast, and the Karuzari fleet was likely far from any well-traveled jump routes, for obvious reasons. Unfortunately, that same vastness made it a fantastic place to hide.

"I would recommend that we keep our eyes on the Rogen system," General Hesson said. "The Karuzari will attempt to form an alliance with the Rakuens, in order to bring their Gunyoki fighters into their fleet."

"The Gunyoki are no match for our heavy fighters," Lord Dusahn insisted.

"As currently configured, they are not," General Hesson agreed. "But if equipped with jump drives, especially ones with series-jump capabilities, they could pose a threat to our security."

"Perhaps, but they have no chance against our warships."

"If used in sufficient numbers, they could be quite effective," General Hesson warned. "And Rakuen has more than five hundred Gunyoki fighters, my lord." "And you think they could equip them *all* with jump drives?" Lord Dusahn challenged. "In short order?"

"I think they will try," the general replied. "It will take time, of course. Once the Teyentah is operational, we should be able to shut them down, thus neutralizing the threat long before their numbers become a concern."

"Then the Teyentah's completion is ahead of schedule?" Lord Dusahn inquired.

"She should be ready for limited operations in a few weeks."

"*Limited operations*?" Lord Dusahn wondered.

"She is already able to navigate, and her jump drive should be operational by week's end. Once her shields and main gun batteries are complete, she will be more than capable of providing basic defenses for the Pentaurus cluster," General Hesson explained. "This will make it possible for us to send one of our battleships to dispatch Rakuen *and* Neramese, if necessary."

"I would prefer that both worlds are completely destroyed," Lord Dusahn grumbled. "Better to make examples of them."

"Neramese, I would agree with destroying," the general agreed. "Her meager resources are not worth considering. Rakuen, on the other hand, has enough water to last us for centuries. Perhaps we should consider targeting her population centers with non-radiological weapons. Destroy her populations, but leave the world habitable for our purposes."

Lord Dusahn cast a disproving gaze the general's way. "I will consider it," he agreed, returning his attention to his view screen. "Increase the frequency of our reconnaissance missions to Rakuen," he instructed the general. "We must monitor the Rakuens closely." "As you wish, my lord."

* * *

"The Teyentah is a *large* ship," General Telles stated, "more than twice the size of the Aurora. She will require a large crew to achieve maximum effectiveness."

"It will take time to put together a crew," Cameron added, "let alone, train them."

"And to learn all her systems," Vladimir said. "Gospadee...that will take forever."

Nathan looked around the conference table in the Aurora's command briefing room. His senior officers had just started discussing the issue of the Teyentah, and they were already painting a rather grim picture. "It would help if we could get some of the Teyentah's designers to join us."

"That would be most difficult," General Telles warned. "Such men are very well paid and respected. Convincing them to risk everything, even to free their own world, will be difficult. Takarans tend to protect what they have, even if it means putting up with a brutal dictator. The reign of Caius Ta'Akar demonstrated this. In fact, it *depended* on it. The nobles are prime examples. They will do *anything* to protect their individual little empires, *including* turning a blind eye to atrocities committed against other humans. The fact that nearly half of Captain Navarro's crew remained on board when he denounced the new Takaran leadership was quite surprising."

"We're all talking about whether or not we could crew and operate the Teyentah," Lieutenant Commander Shinoda said. "Is stealing her even *possible*?"

"Anything is possible," Nathan insisted.

"In this case, I would not be so sure," General Telles admitted.

Nathan looked at him, surprised.

"I am basing my opinion on limited information," General Telles admitted. "It may change as we get more intelligence from Captain Navarro."

"Are we *expecting* more intel?" Cameron wondered.

"We sent a return message to Terig Espan through our Haven comm-relay," Jessica explained. "We asked him to make direct contact with Captain Navarro."

"Is that wise?" Cameron wondered. "How can we be sure it's really him? Even if it is, he could be compromised. The Dusahn may have the same type of nanites that the Jung used to control Lieutenant Scalotti."

"The nanites used by the Jung were obtained from a world called Estuason, which was conquered long after the Dusahn were exiled," Lieutenant Commander Shinoda told her.

"That doesn't mean the Dusahn didn't get them someplace else," Cameron said. "The Corinairans have them, after all."

"The Corinairan nanites do not control their hosts," General Telles pointed out. "However, your point is well taken."

"We can take appropriate steps to verify his identity," Jessica insisted. "However, determining whether or not Navarro has been compromised will be difficult." She looked at General Telles, then at Nathan. "This *could* be an elaborate plan, meant to draw us into an ambush, and on *their* terms." She leaned back in her chair, sighing in frustration. "When it comes down to it, we're going to be putting a lot of faith in Navarro, *and* we're going to be asking a *lot* of Terig Espan. Just making contact with Navarro *alone* is going to be risky. If Navarro gets spooked, who knows what he'll do to Terig." "Suvan Navarro never struck me as the type to get *spooked*," Nathan insisted.

"He will most likely realize that his chances of success rise dramatically if we coordinate our efforts," General Telles pointed out.

"I have a question," Vladimir said, raising his hand from the far end of the table. "How do we take control of the ship? Surely, they have command codes, just like we do."

"I have the codes," Deliza announced as she entered the room, along with Abby.

"Our apologies, Captain," Abby said.

"The Teyentah was designed and commissioned during my father's short tenure," Deliza explained as she and Abby took their seats at the conference table. "It was to be the first jump warship built by Takara from the ground up. It was to be a symbol of peace and cooperation between all the worlds of the Pentaurus cluster that were formerly ruled by Caius. Actually, *Teyentah* means *togetherness*, in old Takaran."

"How does this help us?" Vladimir wondered.

"My father did not completely trust the houses who were contributing to the cost of the Teyentah's construction," Deliza continued. "He had command override codes built into the Teyentah's core command and control computers. It is hard-coded, deep in the root directories of her security cores."

"Surely, the Dusahn have removed the codes," Jessica insisted.

"Only four people knew of my father's embedded override codes," Deliza explained. "My father, myself, the technician who burned the codes into the core chips, and Yanni, of course."

"Yanni?" Jessica asked.

"It was his idea to burn them into the security core chips," Deliza explained. "That way, no one could see them unless they were directly connected to those chips, which would require climbing into the core itself to make the connection."

"Are you saying we have to climb into the core of the Teyentah's computer in order to take control of her?" Nathan wondered.

"Not at all," Deliza replied. "When a command code is entered, the security system starts by checking command codes at the lowest security level. If a match is not found, it goes up to the next level, and so on, until it finds a match. If none are found, access is not granted, and control is not given to the user. That search *includes* the hard-coded chips in the security core."

"Even though a user cannot see them without being directly connected to the chips," Nathan said.

"Precisely," Deliza replied.

"Then it *is* possible," Vladimir said.

"To take control, yes," General Telles agreed. "But we still have to figure out how to get *inside* the Teyentah. *That* will not be easy. The Takaran shipyards are very well protected. And if the ship is nearing completion, some of her crew will already be aboard, *including* security personnel."

"And the shipyards are deep in the heart of a Dusahnheld system," Lieutenant Commander Shinoda added.

"Any plan that we devise will be risky, to say the least," General Telles warned. "The question will not be *if* it can be done. The question will be, *should* we do it?"

"Is the risk worth the benefit," Jessica said.

Nathan sighed. "We lost a lot of very good people just to secure six gunships. I can't imagine how many the Teyentah might cost us." General Telles looked around the briefing room. No one was saying what they were all thinking. "A battleship *would* give us a fighting chance. If nothing else, it would give us the ability to protect our fleet and the Rogen system, *while* we engaged the Dusahn in the Pentaurus cluster."

"Which we could also do after arming Rakuen and Neramese with a few thousand jump missiles," Jessica surmised.

"And how long will *that* take?" Nathan wondered. "Months? Years? And how much more powerful will the Dusahn become in that time?"

"A difficult decision," General Telles said.

Nathan sighed again. "We need more information," he decided. "We *need* Terig Espan to put us in direct communication with Suvan Navarro, so we can determine if, one, he *is* Suvan Navarro, and two, whether or not he has been compromised."

"Are you sure you want to risk our only asset on Takara?" Jessica wondered.

"*Want*? No. But I don't see that we have a choice. We can't turn our back on a *battleship*."

"Then you intend to steal the Teyentah?" Cameron asked, shocked.

"I intend on gathering more information," Nathan corrected. "Nothing more." He turned to Jessica. "Get us in contact with Suvan Navarro...whatever it takes."

"Aye, sir," Jessica replied.

* * *

"In fourteen days, the Jung battle platforms in the Nor-Susuian, Nor-Kini, and Nor-Torisay systems will receive word of our initial retaliatory strikes on Jung military targets," Admiral Galiardi explained to the representatives of the member worlds of the Sol Alliance. "Five days after that, the battle platform in the Nor-Hensi system will be alerted, and three days after that, the one in the Nor-Benati system. That's *five* Jung battle platforms. Assuming that they are immediately ordered to head for Sol, and using their known maximum FTL speed, we can postulate it will take three years for them to reach us. During those three years, the Trinidad, the Charleston, and the Philadelphia will be completed, along with eight more destroyers and a few hundred more Cobra gunships."

"Surely, that will be enough to protect us," the representative from the Tau Ceti system insisted.

"A single capital ship cannot defeat a Jung battle platform," Admiral Galiardi warned. "By our estimates, it takes a minimum of two, perhaps even three. So, we would already be outnumbered, and that's just the battle platforms themselves. They never travel alone. They carry numerous frigates and gunships, and are usually accompanied by at least one, often *two*, battleships. The platforms in Nor-Susuian and Nor-Hensi each have two battleships and one heavy cruiser with them." Admiral Galiardi looked at the men and women in the room. "Quite frankly, we will not be able to repel such an attack. Even if, by some miracle, we *do*, it will be at great cost...a cost we may not be able to bear."

"Perhaps we should not have launched that initial strike," President Scott said from the opposite end of the table.

"That strike was *retaliatory* in nature, in response to Jung incursions into Alliance space," Admiral Galiardi reminded them. "Had we *not* done so, the Jung would *already* be on their way."

"What I do not understand is why they intruded into our space to begin with," the representative from 82 Eridani wondered. "Surely, they knew that we'd not take such transgressions lightly."

"I cannot answer that," Admiral Galiardi admitted. "I can only tell you how to best protect *Alliance* worlds. Destroying those battle platforms *before* they can receive marching orders *is* the best way to protect *all* of our worlds."

"Doing so will *guarantee* an all-out war with the Jung," President Scott warned. "There will not be five battle platforms and their associated escorts, there will be more than a hundred warships headed our way."

"Taking out their battle platforms will send a message that we mean business," Admiral Galiardi insisted. "That we are both willing *and* able to take the fight to *them*, rather than defending ourselves with our backs against the wall. If we take out their battle platforms, our capital ships will be free to attack their critical assets. I promise you, we will bring the Jung to their knees in a matter of months, with minimal Alliance losses, long *before* they can reach *our* worlds."

"They already have," the minister from Alpha Centauri reminded them.

"Those ships had to have been in transit for some time," Admiral Galiardi insisted. "For all we know, they were in Alliance space since before the cease-fire."

"That still does not explain *why* the Jung—assuming they *were* Jung ships—decided to show themselves, knowing full well that we would be forced to respond," President Scott challenged.

"Again, I cannot explain the actions of the Jung leadership," Admiral Galiardi reiterated. "Perhaps they *want* another war. Perhaps they were simply testing our resolve prior to launching an attack. Perhaps their leadership has gone off the deep end." Admiral Galiardi paused a moment, his gaze fixing on President Scott at the other end of the table. "Perhaps they discovered something—something not yet known by us—that compelled them to provoke the renewal of hostilities. We can speculate as to their reasons from dusk till dawn..."

"Which is precisely my point," the president interjected. "All we *can* do is speculate. I, for one, am not comfortable launching a strike against their most valuable military assets, based on *speculation*." The president looked around at the other representatives in the room. "We are leaders. Leaders of worlds. Worlds that have banded together to ensure the safety and freedom of all. We cannot afford to *speculate*."

"Trust me, Mister President," Admiral Galiardi countered. "When I tell you that we cannot stop an onslaught of five battle platforms and their accompanying warships, I am *not* speculating. I am stating facts. And the facts are, if we do not take those platforms out now, before they are alerted, our odds of survival change from quite good to quite poor. The question you must ask yourselves is, what is more important to each of you? Your morals and ethics, or the safety of those you represent. If it is the latter, perhaps you should consider stepping down to allow those who have the stomach for war, to fight this war."

"Even if *this* war does not *need* to be fought?" President Scott asked, challenging the admiral.

"Do you honestly believe the Jung planned on honoring the cease-fire forever, Mister President? It was only a matter of time. To be honest, I'm surprised it has taken them *this* long."

"And what of the Jung in the Pentaurus cluster?" President Scott wondered. "If *they* have jump drives, wouldn't it be prudent to assume the Jung *here* have them, as well?"

Admiral Galiardi took a moment, considering his position. "Again, it is all speculation," he finally said. "We don't even have confirmation that the ships that invaded the Pentaurus cluster *are* Jung ships."

"We have seen the images..." one of the representatives insisted.

"...Of ships that look *similar* to those of the Jung, but with obvious differences," Admiral Galiardi replied, cutting him off.

"Has anyone bothered to *ask* the Jung if they are responsible for the attacks in the Pentaurus cluster?" the representative from the Tau Ceti system asked.

"We have sent an invitation to Nor-Patri, via the diplomatic jump comm-drone that we maintain between the Jung homeworld and Earth," President Scott replied.

"And?"

"They have yet to respond," the president admitted.

"Which, I assert, speaks volumes," Admiral Galiardi warned. "If they were innocent of either of the attacks on the PC or the trespasses into Sol Alliance space, would they not say as much? Even if they *were* guilty, wouldn't they *deny* responsibility, at least for appearance's sake? Certainly, if they do not *wish* a return of hostilities, they would have replied, if for no other reason than to delay. All this tells me the Jung are *up* to *something*. And time is running out. We must assume the worst-case scenario, which is that the moment those battle platforms receive word, they will make best possible speed for Sol. We cannot allow that to happen. We must strike now, before it is too late!"

President Scott sat motionless in his seat, even as he spoke, in calm, measured tones. "Your argument is flawed, Admiral, in that it depends entirely on assumptions, and not facts. The only facts you offer us is that the Pentaurus cluster has been invaded by jump-capable warships similar in design to those of the Jung, and linear-FTL warships, *definitely* of Jung design, have trespassed in Alliance space. Your only cogent argument is that once the Jung battle platforms are alerted, we will lose our ability to easily neutralize them. You have no real evidence of Jung involvement, yet you wish us to authorize a strike of unprecedented proportions, all without any serious attempt to diffuse the situation through diplomatic means. Such actions are not those of a leader, at least not a leader whom I would wish upon the people I represent. And as the strike that you are recommending is, in essence, a declaration of war against the Jung Empire, you require a unanimous vote of this council. As long as I hold my office, I shall not authorize such a declaration, not until I am certain that all possible diplomatic solutions have been exhausted. We have fourteen days in which to do just that. I intend to use them."

* * *

Milan Jento looked confused as he listened to Quory explain his plans to the team of mechanics and systems technicians gathered in the Yokimah Racing team's suit, within the Gunyoki racing platform.

"I sense something is bothering you, Mister Jento," Quory said, noticing the look on the young man's face.

"Where are we going to put these jump field generators you speak of?" Milan asked.

"We are replacing our traditional variable-state reactors with the static-state designs used in the Ranni jump shuttles. They are more compact, are capable of thirty percent more steady-state power output, and nearly sixty percent more burst power output than those currently installed."

Milan and the other technicians looked at the jump field generators sitting on carts, next to the Gunyoki fighter they were about to work on, then at the Ranni static-state reactors on the next cart over. "I still do not believe they will fit."

"They will, *if* we remove the battery systems that power the race-monitoring systems, from the bay just forward of the reactors, and knock out the wall between the bays," Quory explained.

"But those systems are required by the racing commission," Milan insisted, surprised that his supervisor was even considering their removal.

"We will no longer be *racing*, gentlemen. And these ships are no longer racers, they are to become jump fighters."

"We all swore oaths to uphold the rules of the Gunyoki racing commission," another technician argued. "We could lose our certifications."

"None of the ships we alter will ever be entered in sanctioned Gunyoki races again. In fact, this particular ship has already been decertified by the commission, so you have nothing to worry about, I promise you." Quory clapped his hands, rubbing them together eagerly. "Now, shall we get started?" He turned to face the opened sides of the Gunyoki fighter, stepping forward. "I've wanted to rip this garbage out of our ships for a long time," he muttered with a satisfied smile on his face.

"Man, that was something," Aiden exclaimed as he took his seat in the Aurora's mess hall and set his tray of food down on the table in front of him. "It went like clockwork."

* * *

"Except when Ledge let that guy slip under us," Ali teased.

"I could've gotten him if we hadn't jumped," Ledge insisted.

"Thirty seconds in the hot zone, those are the rules of engagement," Kenji reminded them.

"We didn't miss any of our targets," Charnelle bragged as she sat down next to Aiden.

"Still, it went a *lot* easier than I expected," Aiden said.

"It was eight octo-fighters and a cargo ship, Aiden," Kenji reminded him. "Against four *gunships*. What did you expect?"

"More than what we got, that's for sure," Aiden replied. "Everyone talks about how ruthless the Dusahn are."

"Careful what you wish for, Aiden," Sari warned.

"I heard Captain Nash and Captain Roselle talking," Sergeant Dagata said in between bites. "Captain Roselle said we just caught them by surprise...that the Dusahn didn't expect any trouble. He doesn't think it will be that way next time."

"Still, it felt good to go on the offensive," Aiden insisted.

"Again, it was a cargo ship and eight octo-fighters," Kenji insisted.

"Eight less octo-fighters," Aiden corrected with a smile. "Am I right?" he added, leaning into Charnelle momentarily. "I can't wait for the next mission."

"I can," Kenji said.

* * *

"Gentlemen," Nathan greeted as he entered the meeting chamber in the capitol building on Neramese. "I apologize for my tardiness," he continued as he took his seat at the conference table. "As you might imagine, running a rebellion requires many demands of one's time." Nathan adjusted his chair, placing his hands on the table in front of him. "So, have you given my proposal any additional thought?" he asked, looking specifically at Minister Sebaron.

"I believe I have given your proposal its due consideration, Captain," Minister Sebaron replied. "However, I'm afraid that my position has not changed. I do not believe it is in Rakuen's best interest to align itself with the Karuzari, thereby positioning Rakuen as an enemy of the Dusahn Empire."

"I see," Nathan replied. He turned to Minister Cornell. "And do you share Minister Sebaron's position?"

"While I share Minister Sebaron's concerns about the Karuzari's ability to defend the Rogen system, I do *not* share his opinion that the system would be safer remaining neutral. Therefore, Neramese is prepared to support the Karuzari, to the extent we are able."

Minister Sebaron glared at Minister Cornell. "We agreed to stand together in this matter."

"We agreed it would be *better* to stand together in this matter," Minister Cornell corrected. "But your refusal to recognize the obvious threat the Dusahn pose to the Rogen system confirms our suspicions that Rakuen only cares about Rakuen. Therefore, Neramese must take steps to ensure its own safety." Minister Cornell turned to Nathan. "Neramese is ready to sign your charter, Captain Scott, in exchange for technologies that you have offered to share, including, but not limited to, the jump-missile surface launch batteries you spoke of at our last meeting."

"This is outrageous!" Minister Sebaron exclaimed, pounding his fists on the table. "Captain, you cannot arm the Nerameseans! It would be a violation of the Treaty of Carain, which has forbidden the Nerameseans to possess any weapons that could be used to attack Rakuen." "That treaty also requires Rakuen to provide for the defense of Neramese against any and all aggressors, foreign or domestic, Minister Sebaron," Nathan reminded him. "Should Rakuen fail to do so, Neramese has the right to provide for its own defense. Minister Cornell is simply exercising his rights under the Treaty of Carain."

"Rakuen is still willing to provide for the defense of the *entire* Rogen system, *including* Neramese!"

"Given your unwillingness to take reasonable steps to do so, in the face of new and greater threats, I think any arbiter would side with Neramese on this one," Nathan insisted.

"If Neramese becomes armed, Rakuen will be forced to take action to ensure its own safety, *including* attacks on military assets on Neramese, even those *provided* by you, Captain Scott."

"And as a member of the Karuzari Alliance, the Karuzari and the Aurora will come to the defense of Neramese, against any and all aggressors," Nathan warned, "*including* Rakuen."

Minister Sebaron appeared incensed. "Are you threatening Rakuen, Captain Scott?"

"I am merely stating facts, Minister Sebaron," Nathan replied calmly. "You may take them as you wish."

"Do you really believe the Aurora can defeat our Gunyoki?" Minister Sebaron challenged, one eyebrow raised. "All five hundred of them?"

"Four hundred and eighty," Nathan corrected. "And yes, without even breaking a sweat. You see, Minister, your Gunyoki fighters, while amazing in their own right, are nothing more than targets, when not equipped with jump drives."

"And what is to stop us from seizing control of the Ranni plant on Rakuen and installing the jump drives ourselves?" Minister Sebaron asked, his threat poorly veiled.

"Perhaps I have not made myself clear," Nathan said, leaning forward to emphasize his point. "If Neramese chooses to join our alliance, the Karuzari will see to its safety, including arming Neramese so they may defend themselves against the Dusahn *and* Rakuen. Should Rakuen take any overt action *against* Neramese, or in any way threaten the safety of Neramese, you will find the barrels of all of the Aurora's weapons pointed your way, and I will be the one who gives the order to open fire. Is that clear enough for you?"

"Is *this* how you force worlds to join your so-called *alliance*, Captain Scott?" Minister Sebaron wondered.

"No, this is how I stop pompous world leaders from using the misfortune of others to their own advantage," Nathan replied. "You see, Minister, everything in life needs to be balanced. Nature itself always seeks such balance. Balance of weights, balance of pressures, balance of salinity, balance of energies...and in this case, a balance of power. Balances They promote harmony. They are aood. promote cooperation. That's all we seek. Harmony. Unfortunately, you seek advantage when you should be seeking balance, harmony, and cooperation. You see, cooperation would get Rakuen everything it wants, including the cooperation and support of both Neramese *and* the Karuzari. Now, *you* may perceive the Karuzari as just a handful of ships protected by the Aurora and a few gunships, but you are seeing what we are *now*, not what we will become. That would be shortsighted, and it would be unworthy of a man of your intelligence." Nathan leaned back in his chair again, as if trying to de-escalate things a bit. "Now, the Karuzari will offer Neramese membership in our alliance, complete with all the benefits that entails. We offer the same to Rakuen.

but we are prepared and *willing* to deal with the consequences of Rakuen's refusal of our offer. I would strongly suggest that you return to your world, share what I have said to you with your people, and let *them* decide." Nathan rose from his seat. "If you'll excuse me, gentlemen, I have other matters to attend to. Good day."

Nathan turned and left the meeting chambers, fighting hard to restrain the smile that threatened to adorn his face.

CHAPTER THREE

Terig sat in the café in Valatton, picking nervously at his dinner. His wife had not been pleased when he told her he was working late, which was uncharacteristic of Terig. Had she known the real reason he would not be dining with her this night, she would be even more unhappy.

Terig did not like keeping secrets from his wife, but he had little choice in the matter. Keeping her out of his clandestine activities was for her protection. At least, that's what he kept telling himself.

Terig had been surprised when the Karuzari had replied to his message. He was even more surprised, and more than a little terrified, when they instructed him to make contact with the man claiming to be Captain Navarro. More frightening still was the warning the Karuzari had included. If the man claiming to be Suvan Navarro turned out *not* to be who he claimed, Terig was expected to eliminate him.

Eliminate? Are they insane? Terig couldn't kill an esani beetle, let alone a human. The best he could hope for was to stun the man and bind him, which would do little good. Either way, he and his wife would have to go into hiding. If the man was a spy, any action taken against him would have consequences. Even talking to him was risky. If the man *was* working for the Dusahn, the mere act of approaching him would identify Terig as a Karuzari spy in the eyes of the Dusahn. Although, the Dusahn might not take immediate action, instead waiting to see what bigger

fish they could land through Terig; eventually, he, and most likely his wife, would be arrested. Terig only hoped her lack of any knowledge of his activities would shield her from punishment.

As he watched the man claiming to be Suvan Navarro dine on the far side of the café, every fiber of his being told him to pay his bill, head home to his wife, and to never make contact with the Karuzari again. Once he disposed of the specialized data storage chip Lieutenant Commander Nash had given him, there would be nothing to connect him with the Karuzari, other than an innocent order for molo twine from a dealer on Haven, the largest producer of molo and molo-based products in the sector. The encrypted message added to that order would appear to anyone as special delivery instructions that somehow got scrambled in the transmission, which was not an uncommon event in interstellar, jump comm-drone communications. It would be so easy to walk away, save for one thing.

We will defeat the Dusahn, or we will die trying.

Captain Scott's words, aboard the Mystic Empress, still rang in his ears. Men and women, who had no requirement to do so, had pledged their lives to liberate others. Every one of them could leave the area and seek refuge on some other inhabited world, far enough away from the Dusahn so as to enable them to live out their lives in peace. Yet, they had chosen to stay and defend those who could not, or *would* not, defend themselves. How could Terig not do the same and live with himself?

Sometimes, being an honorable man just plain sucked.

Out of the corner of his eye, Terig spotted Tensen Dalott paying his bill at his table. Terig immediately pulled out his personal credit chip and inserted it into the terminal at the center of the table, paying his own bill, as well. "Was your food not to your liking?" the waiter asked, pausing when he noticed his customer rising to leave with a full plate of food still on his table.

"Huh? Oh, no, it was fine. I'm just not as hungry as I thought," Terig replied. "I think I have a touch of something," he added, patting his stomach.

"Would you like me to package it up for you, to take with you?"

"No, thank you," Terig replied, keeping his eyes on Tensen Dalott, who was already heading for the exit. "The hour is late, and I don't want to miss my train."

"As you wish, sir," the waiter replied politely. "Pleasant journey to you."

"Thank you," Terig replied, heading for the exit himself as Tensen left the café. As he made his way across the café, Terig kept his eyes on the windows but did not see Tensen passing by, which meant he had gone to the right upon exiting the café. Terig followed suit, turning right and heading down the street. At first, he thought he had already lost Tensen, but a moment later, he spotted him crossing the boulevard at the next intersection. Terig quickly darted across the roadway, which at this hour was not busy, quickening his pace in order to move closer to his target.

His target. Terig found the thought amusing, as if he were some kind of assassin. If he weren't so scared, he might have laughed at the thought. Instead, he kept his head down, glancing up, only as often as needed, to keep track of the man he was following. But how would he make contact? Wait for the man to get to his residence and then knock on the door? Get on the same train as him? Just walk up to him on the street and strike up a conversation?

The truth was, Terig had no idea what he was doing, which scared him even more. He continued to follow Tensen

to the subway station in the city center. Valatton was one of several transportation hubs around Siskeena, used to ferry workers to the shipyards well beyond the orbit of Takara. It was not uncommon for workers to stop for dinner on their way from the spaceport to the subway to Siskeena, which was where most of them lived.

Terig got in line with only a few people behind Tensen. He kept his eye on Tensen as he inserted his personal credit chip to pay for entry into the subway system. Tensen had taken the escalator down to the northbound platform, confirming that he was, in fact, headed for Siskeena. Terig was quick to follow, taking the same escalator to the platform below. As he descended, he spotted Tensen moving through the crowd, positioning himself to board the next train.

Terig followed suit, moving to the same area, but maintaining a few meters between himself and Tensen, so as not to be too obvious in his actions.

Minutes later, the train arrived, its warning horn sounding while it decelerated sharply as it approached the underground platform. It came to a stop, and its doors opened. As expected, very few disembarked, and Terig was swept aboard in the wave of passengers, managing to come to stand a meter behind Tensen.

Tensen moved away, taking one of two empty seats along the left side of the cabin. Terig immediately followed but was beaten to the seat by another man, forcing him to continue standing.

It was a fifteen-minute ride to the Siskeena station, with several stops along the way. By the second stop, the man sitting next to Tensen had departed, and Terig immediately took the empty seat. Finally, he was in a position to speak with the man claiming to be Suvan Navarro. Unfortunately, Terig found a lump in his throat. More accurately, it was a lack of courage. He was about to take a step from which there would be no turning back. He thought he had crossed that line when he sent his first message back to the Karuzari. But this...*this* was *definitely* crossing that line.

The last exit before Siskeena came and went, and Terig still had not found the courage to speak. Finally, as they began to decelerate into Siskeena station, he found the strength. "I am a friend of Yassey's," he said just loud enough for Tensen to hear him.

Tensen offered no noticeable reaction, other than turning his head slightly and glancing at Terig.

"It is imperative that I speak with you," Terig added.

Tensen still did not respond. Finally, as the train came to a stop, Terig spoke again. "I said I..."

"I heard you," Tensen said, cutting him off. "Denton Prospect and Illyander. Twenty minutes," he added, before rising and leaving the train.

Terig sat motionless, stunned, failing to disembark before the train doors closed. He had just initiated contact with a former noble of Takara. A man who had been exiled and stricken from the records, and had returned to steal the Teyentah right out from under the noses of the Dusahn Empire.

He would have to catch the southbound train at the next station and move quickly to make the rendezvous. But, for now, he was still alive, and that was good.

* * *

"Odds and evens, highs and lows," Captain Nash's voice instructed over Aiden's comm-set. "Five by two, start at ten. Manual execution, as rehearsed. Striker Three has lead. Attack sequence starts in ten seconds." "Striker Three has lead," Aiden replied. "Check in, boys and girls," he ordered his crew.

"Port gunner."

"Starboard gunner."

"Systems."

"Sensors."

"Jumping in three," Kenji added, completing the check sequence.

"Guns down," Aiden reminded his gunners as the cockpit windows turned opaque for the jump. Two seconds later, the windows cleared, revealing the cargo ship Soster only one hundred meters ahead of them. Aiden immediately pitched their nose up sharply, bringing the four plasma torpedo cannon barrels, on their underside, onto the Dusahn octofighter trailing its charge.

"Torpedoes locked," Kenji reported.

"Let'em have it," Aiden ordered as he pressed the firing button on his flight control stick. Four plasma torpedoes streaked across their windows, illuminating the cockpit with red-orange light.

"Four seconds," Kenji warned.

Three of the four torpedoes slammed into the trailing octo-fighter, causing it to come apart in a brilliant explosion.

"Six seconds," Kenji reported as bolts of plasma energy from Striker Three's port and starboard gun turrets opened fire on the Dusahn fighters on either side of the Soster.

"Eight seconds," Kenji warned as the octo-fighter to port of the Soster broke in two, the result of plasma bolts slicing through its midsection.

"*Oh, yeah!*" Ledge exclaimed over comm-sets.

"Pitching down," Aiden warned his gunners, who would have to adjust their firing angles accordingly.

"I'm with ya," Ali assured her captain.

"Ten seconds," Kenji announced with a sense of urgency. "Time to go."

"Just a moment," Aiden said as the octo-fighter to starboard of the cargo ship was blown into hundreds of pieces.

"We have to jump!" Kenji insisted.

Aiden got a torpedo lock on the final octo-fighter a few hundred meters in front of the Soster and pressed the firing trigger. As soon as the cockpit was awash with red-orange light, he pressed his jump button. "Jumping!"

"Jesus, Aiden!" Kenji exclaimed. "You were four seconds too long in the engagement zone!"

"But we got all four of them, right?" Aiden replied. "Dags, tell me we got that last one."

"Just a moment," Sergeant Dagata replied.

"That's not the point, Aiden," Kenji chided. "The next gunship was supposed to take care of the lead octo-fighter. By staying in four seconds too long, you almost put us in Striker Four's jump path!"

"But I didn't," Aiden reminded him.

"We got him, Skipper," Sergeant Dagata reported.

"*And* we took out all four escorts ourselves," Aiden boasted. "Nice job, people!"

Kenji just shook his head. "Roselle's going to have your ass, Aiden," he warned, "and with good reason."

"Bullshit," Aiden argued. "We had the shot, we took the shot, and we got out before Striker Four jumped in. It's called taking the initiative."

"It's called disregarding the battle plan," Kenji insisted. "It's called disobeying orders. What if Charnelle would have jumped in one or two seconds early?"

"Then I wouldn't have to be listening to you complaining," Aiden joked.

"Not funny."

"You know damned well Charnelle would never jump in early, Kenji. For one, she's too anal about the battle plan, just like you. Second, she knows that I'm likely to stay a second or two longer, but would be sure to be out of her way *before* she jumped, as long as she jumped on time, according to plan. That's *why* there's a five-second gap minimum between attack jumps, so that we don't jump into one another. The battle plan has wiggle room built into it. All I did was use that wiggle room to score another kill, and all without receiving any return fire, I might add."

"But Nash and Roselle are looking for *compliance* at this point, Aiden. Not innovation. They need to know you can follow the plan. That's the only way everyone else can be sure we've all got one another's back."

"I'm sorry, Kenji, I just disagree. If I had jumped in early, I'd agree that I was breaking the attack plan. But like I said, I just used the wiggle room. If we had gotten the shots off a few seconds faster, we might have taken them all out *within* our ten-second window."

"Don't you see, Aiden," Kenji argued, "it's not about whether or not you *can* do it, or even if you can do it *safely*. It's about you taking risks just because you can, not because the situation calls for it. I promise you, Roselle and Nash are going to say the same thing. Just wait and see."

"Striker Leader to all Strikers. Target is secure. Take up monitoring positions," Captain Nash instructed over comms.

Aiden's eyebrows rose. "He could have at least congratulated us on four kills in fourteen seconds."

"Oh, he will, when we get back to the Aurora," Kenji warned indignantly.

Terig walked in and out of the streetlights along Illyander Boulevard. It was now twenty-five minutes since the man claiming to be Suvan Navarro had directed him to the approaching intersection. He only hoped he had not grown impatient and left.

Terig had almost missed the southbound train at the Willette station and was forced to run up the stairs, across the foyer, and back down the escalator to the southbound platform. He had ducked into the train just as the doors were closing and had then run from the train to the street upon arrival back in Siskeena.

Terig glanced about, looking for any sign of the man going by the name of Tensen Dalott, but he was nowhere to be seen. In fact, there were surprisingly few people on the streets. They were only a few blocks from the hotel in which Lord Mahtize had instructed Tensen to stay, which was probably why Tensen had chosen this location. Illyander Boulevard was more of a back street than a main thoroughfare, used mostly to access the backside of businesses which faced Keffin Prospect.

As he approached the intersection, he slowed his pace somewhat. Just a little. Enough to be easily diverted by a whisper from the shadows but not so much as to attract attention, or even worse, suspicion. He could see the intersection of Denton Prospect and Illyander fifty meters ahead, and he suspected that, at any moment, Tensen would step out of a doorway to intercept him.

Instead, someone grabbed him from behind, dragging him to the narrow alleyway between two buildings. Terig wanted to yell out in panic, but his mouth was firmly covered by a man's hand. Terig struggled at first but had to settle for simply trying to stay on his feet as the stranger dragged him backwards into the darkness. A moment later, Terig found himself with his back firmly against the wall, held tightly by his throat, with the tip of a knife threatening to pierce his chest just below his xiphoid process and slightly left.

"Move, and my blade will pierce your diaphragm and find its way easily to your heart, causing you to bleed out in seconds," his abductor threatened in a barely audible, yet menacing, growl.

Terig froze, afraid to even breathe.

"You wanted to speak with me," the voice continued. "Speak."

"I work for Lord Mahtize," Terig began.

"Keep your voice down," Tensen warned.

"I know of your conversation with him." Terig felt Tensen's grip on him tighten, the tip of his blade already poking through Terig's jacket. "I know who you are and what you wish to do."

"Then I guess I have no choice," Tensen said, a tinge of reluctance in his voice as he prepared to thrust his knife deep into Terig and end the young man's life.

"Please!" Terig begged. "I can help you," he continued, lowering his voice again. "I work for the Karuzari..."

"Now, I *know* you are lying," Tensen said, again tensing up to deliver the fatal blow.

"I speak the truth, I swear it!" Terig insisted. "I am in contact with them..."

"With whom?" Tensen demanded, becoming agitated.

"Captain Scott!" Terig replied, certain of his imminent demise.

"Fool! Nathan Scott died seven years ago! You have sealed your fate!"

"I speak the truth!" Terig pleaded. "He is alive. I have spoken with him and Jessica Nash, aboard the Mystic Empress, only a few weeks ago. I can prove it!"

"A convincing effort," Tensen admitted as he again prepared to take the young man's life.

"He said to tell you 'come hard to starboard and pitch down forty-five degrees, and do it quickly!"

Tensen paused, momentarily confused. Then he regained his composure. "Why!" he barked, again tensing up. "Why did he tell me this?"

"Because a bunch of comm-drones were about to slam into you!"

Tensen could not believe what he was hearing. His grip on the young man eased a bit, and the tip of his knife began to slowly back away from the young man's chest. "At what speed were the comm-drones approaching?" he wondered.

"Ten times the speed of light," Terig replied in a barely audible whimper.

Tensen released his grip on the young man's throat, stepping back. "My God, is it possible?" he asked no one in particular. "Is he really alive?" He looked Terig in the eyes as his emotions swirled wildly within him.

"It is true," Terig promised, still afraid to relax. "He is back in command of the Aurora and is working with General Telles, and the Ghatazhak, and Deliza Ta'Akar."

"Then, the princess *survived* the attack?"

"Yes. Together, they have reformed the Karuzari."

"Then, they have operatives on Takara," Tensen realized. "A cell, perhaps."

"I'm afraid I'm it," Terig told him. "As far as I know. But, I suppose there could be others. I don't know. I've only contacted them once, to tell them about you and your conversation with my employer."

"Then you are not a covert operative?"

"No, not really. I believe they referred to me as a 'digispook'."

Tensen thought for a moment. "And you can communicate with them?"

"Yes."

"Without fear of discovery?"

"I believe so, yes," Terig replied. "Through a relay on Haven."

Tensen looked at Terig with one eyebrow raised. "First rule for a covert operative is to reveal as little information as possible, even to friends."

"I'm sorry," Terig said. "I just didn't want you to kill me. I have a wife..."

"As do I."

"Then, you truly *are* Suvan Navarro? Captain of the Avendahl?"

"I am," Suvan confessed as a wave of relief washed over him. His odds of succeeding in his impossible mission had just gotten measurably better.

* * *

Admiral Galiardi moved briskly down the corridor from his personal jump shuttle's private hangar to the nearest shuttle tube.

"I take it things did not go well," Commander Macklay said as he met the admiral at the intersection and fell in step alongside him.

"Nothing ever goes well when dealing with the Alliance Council," the admiral grumbled, disdain in his voice.

"How many voted against your recommendation?" the commander wondered.

"It never got to a vote. Scott voiced his opposition, which made it unnecessary. He prefers to wait until 'all possible diplomatic solutions have been exhausted.' Those damned battle platforms are going to get their marching orders and disappear into FTL, making them nearly impossible to find until they're within striking distance of Earth."

"What can we do?" the commander said.

Admiral Galiardi ignored the commander, realizing it was a rhetorical question. They turned the corner into a shuttle station, where a handful of technicians were waiting to board. "Make a hole!" the admiral barked. The men moved aside, clearing a path for the admiral and the commander.

Commander Macklay turned back toward the men preparing to board behind them. "Next one," he instructed. A moment later, the door closed, and the shuttle car accelerated smoothly away, its inertial dampening fields making the sensation of movement nearly unnoticeable to its occupants.

"What 'diplomatic solutions' does the president plan to use?" the commander wondered as he took a seat opposite his commanding officer. "The Jung haven't answered a direct message from us in over five years, and their envoy and his staff are all in custody."

"To be honest, I don't care," the admiral admitted. "I'm tired of having my hands tied behind my back by bureaucrats and politicians, none of whom have the slightest inkling of how to protect their worlds from the Jung." The admiral looked at his trusted aide and sighed. "We need to prepare 'Clean Slate'."

Commander Macklay did not look pleased. "Admiral, Clean Slate is meant to be a last resort. It is meant to be used during an internal insurrection or after a devastating attack by our enemy."

"Which is exactly what will happen if we do not strike now, and strike hard." "Then, launch the strikes. Take the initiative and do what you know must be done. Leave the politicians to run their worlds, while *you* protect them. Hell, they won't even know the strikes have occurred, and by the time they find out, the war will likely be over."

"Oh, they'll find out, and much sooner than you think," the admiral insisted. "Scott's had his spies watching me since the day I was reinstated—against his better judgment, I remind you."

"But Clean Slate is essentially a military coup, Admiral..."

"I know what the hell it is," the admiral quipped. "I wrote the damned thing. But it's not a coup. I fully intend to open up all worlds to elections, once the Jung have been dealt with and all the Alliance worlds are fully capable of defending themselves. If the Jung are defeated, their defensive needs will be greatly reduced," Admiral Galiardi pointed out.

Commander Macklay did not look convinced. "If the public ever finds out..."

"If the public finds out, nearly half of them will agree with what we did," the admiral insisted. "At least half of the people on Earth, and to be honest, *those* are the only ones *I* really care about. Times have changed, Commander. Unfortunately, the governments of Earth have not. It's a dangerous galaxy, and we've only discovered a fraction of what's going on out there. If we let people like Dayton Scott weaken us, the Jung will roll over us, again and again. I will *not* let that happen."

"Even if it means violating your oath?"

"You make a promise to *protect* the people, while at the same time promising to yield to their will, even if their will makes you unable to protect them. The reason men like us are in charge is because we *understand* that sometimes two wrongs *do* make a right."

The shuttle car began to decelerate as it approached the fleet command and administration complex, deep within the asteroid that was Port Terra.

Commander Macklay sighed as the car came to a stop. "I'll get everything ready, sir. However, I beg you to make one last plea to President Scott, perhaps in private. Maybe you can use our knowledge of his son's activities to convince him to play ball with us."

"It won't work. I know Dayton Scott."

"But at least history will show that you tried everything possible before taking such drastic measures."

"I don't give a rat's ass what history says," the admiral replied as the shuttle car door opened, "as long as it says we won. But I see your point."

* * *

"And you are certain this method is secure?" Suvan wondered as he examined the information on the view screen in his hotel room.

"Nothing is one hundred percent secure," Terig warned. "But I checked this place out. They do quite a lot of business, from all over the sector."

"Is molo twine the only thing they sell?"

"No, they sell many things. Some of them made from molo plants, some not."

"Then, why the twine?"

"There are only three products that the Karuzari are monitoring for messages. Molo twine, Haven prayer baskets, and dunsel spice. I chose molo twine, which is commonly used as candle wicks. I even started making my own candles, just in case." "Good thinking," Suvan praised. "I still cannot believe that Nathan Scott is alive."

"He looked a lot younger than I expected," Terig commented.

"You are not the first person to make that observation, believe me. So, I just order one of those three products, put the encrypted message into the special delivery instructions field, and that's all there is to it?"

"That's it. But I should warn you, it took nearly a week for them to respond to my first message."

"If you told them about me, then I suspect they will be watching for messages more closely," Suvan insisted as he began typing his message.

Terig watched Captain Navarro while he typed, wondering what he had been through the last few weeks. "Do you really think you can steal the Teyentah?"

"To be honest, my odds of success are extremely low. However, they are no longer as low as they were an hour ago," he added with a wry smile. "Thanks to you." He looked at the young man. "It took a lot of courage to approach me like that. It was also not very smart."

"I couldn't think of another way."

"Next time, write a note and slip it into the target's pocket or something," Suvan suggested as he pressed the order button. "The order is placed. How do I get the reply?"

"It will come in the shipping confirmation message."

"So, the Aurora is nearby?" Suvan wondered.

"I don't believe so," Terig replied. "I think she is in an entirely different sector, to be honest. They didn't really tell me much."

"You do know you have gotten involved in a dangerous game, do you not?"

"I'm starting to realize that, yes," Terig admitted. "I just hope my wife doesn't find out. Give me your comm-unit," he added.

"Why?"

"I know a trick to make text messages more secure."

Suvan handed Terig his comm-unit. "One of the advantages of being a digi-spook, I imagine."

Terig nodded as he worked. "Does your wife know what you are doing?"

"She does not know the details, but she knows that I am here and that I am risking my life."

"And she doesn't mind?"

"She minds," Suvan replied. "But she also knows that I cannot turn my back on such things."

"You do not worry about her safety?" Terig wondered.

"I have taken proper steps to ensure she is as safe as can be expected. I would strongly suggest that you do the same for your wife."

"I'm not sure I know how," Terig admitted.

"Perhaps you should send her away, on an extended vacation. Someplace far."

"Easier said than done, I'm afraid. My position in House Mahtize does not pay that well. Besides, she would not leave without me, *especially* if she knew what I was doing." He handed Suvan his comm-unit. "Done. You can now send me text messages without fear of the Dusahn reading them. At least, not immediately."

"What do you mean, 'not immediately?" Suvan wondered.

"No encryption is one hundred percent," Terig explained. "It's just a matter of how long it takes to decrypt it."

"And this one?" Suvan asked. "How long will it take them?"

"A few days. Perhaps a week."

"I'll try to restrict its use."

Terig looked at his watch. "I should be getting home." He looked at Suvan as he rose. "Thank you for not killing me, Captain."

"You're welcome. And call me Tensen, remember?"

"Of course," Terig replied, feeling stupid.

* * *

"The subject rarely leaves the building, and when he does, he is protected by a moving shield, capable of repelling both energy and projectile weapons," Krispin explained. "In order to complete the assignment, I would need access to the interior of the facility. Even then, I cannot promise anything."

Mister Dakota looked displeased. He took a long sip of his drink, gazing out across the courtyard as shoppers moved between stores. "I would hate to see you returned to captivity," he said, his insincerity obvious. "Especially after getting another taste of freedom."

"You call *this* freedom?" Krispin laughed. "A dead man has no freedom. I can deal with captivity, if I must."

"Perhaps, but I fear your significant other finds incarceration a bit more challenging."

Krispin glared at his handler, thoughts of his beloved Sara hovering on the edge of reality in a drug-induced haze, at the mercy of guards who despised her very existence. "If you expect me to complete this mission...*voluntarily*...then the odds of success need to be better than trying to free Sara of my own accord."

"Perhaps I underestimated your abilities," Mister Dakota declared, setting his glass down on the table. "Are you refusing to carry out your mission, Mister Bornet?" "I am saying that the mission cannot be accomplished... by anyone...without a way to get *inside* the target's considerable security measures. But I suspect you already knew this."

"We had hoped you might uncover a weakness that we had not," Mister Dakota admitted. He placed a credit on the table, then rose, buttoning his suit jacket. "I will make some inquiries. Good day, Mister Bornet."

Krispin picked up his glass, quickly tossing the remainder of his beverage down his throat as he watched Mister Dakota disappear into the crowd of weekend shoppers. He knew that killing the President of the North American Union would be an impossible task, and he was quite sure his employers had been aware of that fact from the beginning. What he didn't understand was why they had made the offer in the first place.

Krispin added another credit to the table and then rose to depart. His answers would come soon enough. Of that, he was certain.

* * *

Captain Hunt stepped into the forward cargo bay of the Perryton, joining the four members of his original crew whom he felt he could trust and the eight men and women who he had contacted to replace those he could not. "To those of you new to the Perryton, I bid you welcome, and I thank you all for agreeing to join us," he greeted as he made his way through the group to the middle of the bay. "All of you, new and old alike, will eventually be leaving everything and everyone you know behind, for a new life in another part of the galaxy. I know the Perryton is only a cargo vessel, but make no mistake...what we are planning to do with her *will* put us in harm's way. While those of you who served during the original Jung War are no stranger to such risks, those of you who have served with me on this ship the last few months are. If any of you do *not* wish to remain aboard, you will be free to resign your positions, complete with all earned bonuses, just prior to our final departure from the Sol sector."

The crew of the Kinney looked at one another, unsure of what they were getting into.

"You mind telling us *where* we're going?" Mister Dalton, the Kinney's chief engineer, asked.

"Not until everyone has made their decision," Captain Hunt replied. "I haven't even told *these* people where we're going, or why," he added, gesturing to the new people joining the crew.

"Then why the hell are *they* here?" Mister Dalton wondered.

"Because they believed me when I told them that if they knew, they would want to come. *That* is the question the four of *you* now must ask yourselves."

"Are we gonna get hazard pay?" Crewman Parks asked.

"Doubtful," Captain Hunt replied.

"Are we going to get *any* pay?" Crewman Sakhof wondered.

"Some, but how much, I do not know."

"What the hell *are* we going to get?" Mister Dalton asked.

"Pride in knowing you are doing something important, something to help change things for the better, rather than hauling cargo to nameless asteroids. Pride in knowing you're following someone you can believe in, rather than some arrogant, power-hungry, revenge-seeking, old fart with delusions of grandeur."

"Tell us how you *really* feel, Chris," Denny remarked with a laugh.

"I take it what you're planning *isn't* sanctioned by the Alliance or by our employers," Mister Dalton surmised.

"No, it is not," Captain Hunt admitted.

"Well, hot damn. Count me in," the old engineer exclaimed.

Captain Hunt looked at the other three men on his original crew, each of them nodding their heads in agreement with Mister Dalton. "Then, we're all staying," he said, checking for any looks of doubt. "Very well."

"So, what are we doing?" Mister Dalton asked. "We robbing a bank, or something?"

"Not exactly," Captain Hunt replied. "We're going to start funneling portions of our cargo to the Karuzari Alliance in the Pentaurus sector."

"Uh, the Pentaurus sector is a two-week journey for this ship, Captain," Mister Dalton reminded him. "One-way. Don't you think the Alliance is gonna notice we're missing?"

"We're not going to the PC; at least, not at first," Captain Hunt explained. "We'll rendezvous with Karuzari cargo ships here in the Sol sector; that way, we'll stay on schedule."

"But won't the Alliance notice that some of their cargo didn't reach their depots?" Crewman Sakhof wondered.

"That's where Mister Souza here comes in," Captain Hunt replied. "He'll hack each depot's automated cargo inventory system, making it *think* that all the cargo has been delivered."

"But they have inspectors," Crewman Sakhof said. "I have a buddy who flies them around from depot to depot, double-checking inventory."

"Which is why we only expect to do this four, maybe five times," Captain Hunt explained. "Eventually, we're going to have to leave the sector and head for the PC ourselves, to avoid getting arrested." "So, we're basically becoming pirates," Crewman Parks surmised.

"Depends on your point of view," Captain Hunt replied. "I prefer to think of us as 'freedom fighters'."

"Whose freedom are we fighting for?" Crewman Sakhof wondered.

"The same people who once fought for *our* freedom," Denny said, speaking up proudly. "The Corinairans and the Takarans."

"And everyone else in the Pentaurus sector," Captain Hunt added.

"Damn straight," Denny agreed.

"Who's leading all this?" Mister Dalton wondered.

"I kind of want to know that myself, Chris," Cassandra chimed in.

Captain Hunt smiled. "I was saving the best for last. Nathan Scott. He's alive and well, and leading the Karuzari rebellion against the Dusahn in the Pentaurus sector."

"What?" Cassandra's mouth dropped open in disbelief. "That's impossible!"

"That's what I said when he first told me," Denny said.

"You told Denny?" Cassandra said in shock.

"Only because I was sure he would join me," Chris defended.

"But we *dated* for *six months*," Cassandra reminded him in protest.

"That's why I wasn't sure you'd want to go," Chris admitted.

"This is getting *really* good," Mister Dalton exclaimed.

* * *

Michael wiggled his way through the last meter of the crack that connected the cave, in which they had been hiding for the last two days, to the outside. As his head poked out into the open, he paused for a moment, moving only his eyes from side to side, looking and listening for any sign of Dusahn search parties. Fortunately, all he heard were the creatures of the Corinairan night, tweeting, whooping, and cawing. In the distance, he could hear the sound of the nearby river where he had obtained fresh water two nights ago.

Satisfied that no one was nearby, Michael wiggled his way into the open, immediately shifting over into another crevice in the side of the mountain, concealing himself. For several more minutes, he listened and looked, waiting for the slightest hint that they were not the only humans in the area, but found none. Finally, he tossed a small rock down the crack in the side of the mountain, signaling to Birk and Cuddy, waiting inside the cave, that they could begin their ascent.

Michael closed his eyes, breathing in the cool night air. Two days inside the tiny cave had been more than enough. He only hoped it had been enough time for the Dusahn to give up their search. He continued to listen, cringing with every grunt and groan emanating from the crack as Birk and Cuddy wiggled their way up to the surface. If anyone *was* nearby, they would surely hear them and respond. However, at this point, they had little choice. They were out of both water and food, and the smell of their own bodily waste had already made their hiding place unbearable. It was time to move.

Birk, still nursing broken ribs, was the next to emerge, helped along by Cuddy pushing him from behind. He slid out of the crack and rolled onto his back, taking in a deep breath of fresh air, enjoying it every bit as much as Michael.

Michael reached over and pulled Birk toward the crevice, urging him to find concealment as Cuddy emerged from the crack and quickly joined them. They waited for several minutes while they recuperated from their climb and continued to listen for signs of trouble. Again, they found nothing but the sounds of the forest at night.

"We will follow the ravine down the side, all the way to the river," Michael explained. "Then we'll follow the river downstream until it crosses a road."

"And then we follow the road?" Birk surmised.

"We will see." Michael carefully stepped out of the crevice, looking around the forest as he moved. "We must move quickly, but quietly. We will try to make it to the nearest town before dawn. If we are unsuccessful, we will have to find another hiding place for the day."

"As long as it isn't a cave," Birk muttered as he followed Michael out of the crevice.

* * *

"*I got right!*" Ledge exclaimed as their gunship came out of the jump.

"*I got left!*" Ali followed.

"And I've got the middle," Aiden mumbled as his plasma torpedo targeting system locked onto the Dusahn octofighter directly ahead of them. He pressed his firing trigger, sending four balls of red-orange plasma towards the target ahead of him, but the fighter pitched up and disappeared in a blue-white flash of light. "Shit! The bastard jumped!"

"That was quick," Kenji said, his tone ominous.

"They must have been expecting us," Aiden realized as he pitched down to dive underneath the approaching cargo vessel.

"Four jump flashes!" Sergeant Dagata reported. "Two to port, two to starboard!"

The ship rocked as bolts of energy slammed into their shields, momentarily turning their protective barrier pale

orange with each impact.

"It's an ambush!" Kenji exclaimed.

"You got'em?" Aiden asked his gunners.

"*Oh, shit!*" Ledge exclaimed as he swung his turret around and opened fire on the newly approaching targets.

"I've got three coming in fast!" Ali yelled as she fired away in rapid succession.

"*Striker Four just jumped in behind us!*" Sergeant Dagata added.

"Shields down by fifty percent!" Chief Benetti warned.

"Eight seconds!" Kenji announced.

"Char!" Aiden called over comms. "It's an ambush. Eight bandits! Repeat, eight!"

"Actually, it's six now!" Ledge corrected.

"Whatever!" Aiden replied.

"Twelve seconds!" Kenji announced. "Time to go!"

"No argument here," Aiden agreed as more energy weapons fire lit up their shields and rocked the ship violently. "Jumping!"

The gunship's windows turned opaque, and the shaking stopped as the ship jumped away from the incoming fire.

"Coming to port sixty, down twenty," Aiden announced with a sigh of relief as he steered his ship onto its new course. "Got the next jump ready?"

"Already locked in," Kenji replied before Aiden finished asking.

"Two jump flashes!" Sergeant Dagata warned. *"One directly behind us, twenty clicks! The other ahead fifty and fifteen degrees above! I think they're searching for us!"*

"If we see them, they see us," Kenji warned.

"*How the hell did they track us?*" Chief Benetti wondered.

"They didn't," Aiden insisted. "They're jumping random intercept patterns, trying to box us in. Dial it up two light minutes and recalc!"

"I'm on it," Kenji replied.

"*Target behind us has acquired,*" Sergeant Dagata warned.

"Launch a ghost drone!" Aiden ordered.

"Ghost drone away!" Sergeant Dagata replied. "Flying straight and true. Target is firing!"

Aiden twisted his flight control stick, putting the ship into a roll to port.

"Jump loaded..." Kenji began to announce.

Aiden wasn't waiting and pressed the jump button again. His shields were already down by half their strength, and he needed them for another pass at the Dusahn fighters who were escorting the Hotchkess. Their windows turned opaque again as they jumped four light minutes forward. Aiden immediately rolled to starboard and dialed up a three-lightminute escape jump.

"We're supposed to be turning to port again, Aiden," Kenji warned.

"They'll guess that," Aiden insisted, tapping the escape jump button, instantly sending his gunship ahead three light minutes. "I'll come about here instead."

"That'll put us ten seconds behind sequence," Kenji warned.

"Fifteen-second gaps this time," Aiden replied. "That leaves us a three-second window. I'll jump out early to catch up."

"*You*, jump out *early*?"

"Ha, fucking, ha," Aiden exclaimed as he finished his one-hundred-and-eighty-degree turn. "You got the attack jump plotted, smart guy?" "Before you even started your turn," Kenji replied.

"That's why I love you," Aiden joked as he pressed the jump button. Their windows again turned opaque, but when they cleared, the Hotchkess was nowhere to be found, nor were the Dusahn octo-fighters. Only a massive debris field remained. "What the hell?" Aiden wondered as pieces of debris bounced off their shields. "Where'd everybody go?"

"*The debris is from the Hotchkess!*" Sergeant Dagata announced in shock.

"Are you sure?" Aiden asked, also surprised. "Who the fuck took out the Hotchkess?"

"Striker Leader to all Strikers," Captain Nash called over comms. "The Hotchkess is gone. The Dusahn took it out themselves, once they realized they were outgunned. Escape and evade. Rendezvous at the outbound rally point. We're done here."

"Holy shit," Aiden exclaimed, still in disbelief. "How many people were on board that ship?" he asked his copilot.

"Probably a dozen."

"Why the hell did they kill them?"

"They didn't want us to have the ship, I guess," Kenji surmised.

"Those are some cold fuckers," Chief Benetti commented.

"Escape and evade jump, plotted and locked in," Kenji reported solemnly.

"Damn," Aiden said, shaking his head as he pressed the jump button.

* * *

Despite his growing contempt for the aging president and lifelong politician, Admiral Michael Galiardi gave both the man and his office its due—if for no other reason than to maintain appearances. No matter how careful one was to keep such meetings clandestine, eventually word got out, and when it did, he needed to at least *appear* to be following the rules. He had learned long ago that those who followed the rules strictly as written were doomed to a mediocre career at best. Rules had to be treated as guidelines, not as gospel, and he had done so with wild abandon at times. Especially as of late, which made it all the more important to keep up appearances. It mattered not *what* you did, rather what you could *prove* you had done.

Therefore, Galiardi was careful to give smart salutes to all who greeted him, and patient respect for the security measures that protected the President of the North American Union and the leader of both the Earth and Sol Alliance.

Admiral Galiardi smiled at the irony as he approached the outer office and President Scott's secretary.

"Good morning, Admiral," the young man greeted. "The president is expecting you."

"Thank you," the admiral replied as he moved past the man, toward the president's office. The two men in black suits who flanked the doors reached over in unison, pulling them open for the admiral, allowing him to enter the president's office without breaking his stride. President Scott never liked to keep anyone waiting, feeling it was a sign of disrespect. He was also not one to play the tricks of positioning or sitting slightly higher than his guests. It was one of the few things Admiral Galiardi actually *liked* about Dayton Scott, and it almost made him regret what he was about to do.

Almost.

"Admiral," the president greeted, stepping out from behind his desk to properly greet the man who had caused him such concern in the past few weeks. "May I offer you something?"

"Thank you, no," the admiral replied, moving quickly to one of the overstuffed chairs in the middle of the office.

"As you wish," the president replied, nodding to the gentlemen at the door.

Admiral Galiardi waited for the doors to close and for the president to take his seat before reaching into his pocket and pulling out a small sound-suppression field generator, which he placed on the side table to his right and activated.

President Scott watched the admiral, no surprise evident on his face.

"We both know you record every conversation that takes place in this room," the admiral stated plainly, "be it live or via comms."

"I take it you plan to get directly to the point of your visit," President Scott replied, one eyebrow raised.

"You know why I am here, Mister President," the admiral began.

"I believe I made my position quite clear, yesterday."

"How about we cut the crap, Dayton," the admiral insisted. "I *know* that your son is alive and has been all along. I *also* know that he and his cohorts attacked the Cobra plant on Kohara, and made off with at least six gunships. I also know *you* or someone from your staff—for example, your daughter Miri—helped them."

"An interesting story," the president replied. "I assume you have evidence to back up these accusations?"

"I don't need evidence. Some computer-enhanced video of your son running about during the attack on Kohara will be more than enough to provoke public outrage. Probably enough to bring down your presidency. And, as you are well aware, I would be well within my rights to declare martial law and assume control of Earth until such time as a new leader could be elected. And we all know how long *that* can take."

President Scott studied the admiral for a moment, taking measure of his words. "Allow me to share what / know to be true," the president began after a pause. "/ know the Jung ships which intruded into Alliance space in the Sol sector were *not* operated by the Jung. In fact, it is highly doubtful the Jung are even aware that such transgressions have occurred. I also know *you* are well aware that the incursions are more likely part of a false-flag operation by the Dusahn, in an attempt to keep us from interfering with their actions in the Pentaurus cluster, which, I should point out, is technically still our ally. An ally who came to *our* aid when we most desperately needed them."

"And I suppose you have proof of *these* accusations, as well?" the admiral wondered.

"Probably about as much as you have. Sensor logs of the same Jung warships in both Sol space and Pentaurus space, only weeks apart. Not entirely convincing, I admit, but enough to create just as much public outrage, should the need arise."

Admiral Galiardi sighed. Not a sigh of resignation but one of sadness. "Of all the people of Earth, *you* have suffered more personal loss than most. Your world, your wife, your eldest son, your son-in-law, and now your youngest son has become an enemy of the state. You should want revenge more than any of us, Dayton."

"Revenge is not my right," the president replied. "Not as the leader of my world. My responsibility is to the people. My family knows this...*especially* Nathan."

"Yet, he committed the one act that is sure to bring the full force of the Jung Empire down upon us," Admiral Galiardi pointed out.

"You say this about a young man who offered his life to save everyone else's?"

"And then put those very lives at risk for the sake of his own skin," the admiral replied sharply. His posture changed from one of defiance to one of pleading, leaning forward slightly, as if trying to make a personal connection with the man opposing him. "Dayton, you and I both know the Earth will *never* be safe until the Jung are completely disarmed and at our mercy."

"You speak of the Earth, alone," Dayton countered. "Perhaps you have forgotten what an alliance truly is."

"Stop dancing around the issue!" the admiral snapped. "The Jung, the Dusahn, all of them! They are a threat to all free men and women, be they from Earth, Tau Ceti, or any other world! They must be stopped, and stopped cold! All of them!"

"There are other ways to prevent a war," the president stated calmly.

"Negotiate? You want to negotiate with the Jung? Hell, we've already fired the first shots!"

"In response to what we, mistakenly, believed to be acts of aggression *by* the Jung Empire," the president replied, taking great measure to remain calm despite the admiral's increased volume and emotion. "If presented with the same evidence, that we discovered after the fact, they will surely see..."

"They will see what they want to see," the admiral insisted. "Just like all people. They will see an excuse to attack us with everything they've got. They are Jung. That is what they do. That is how they became an empire, for Christ's sake! They will do whatever is necessary to achieve their goal." "And what would their goal be?" President Scott asked, still remaining calm.

"To rule everyone and everything," the admiral replied, dialing his emotions down a notch. "And I, for one, do not intend to allow them to do so." Admiral Galiardi leaned back in his chair, regaining his composure. "I have dedicated my life to the protection of my world. And, like our enemies, I, too, am willing to do *whatever* it takes to achieve *our* goals."

"And what do *you* perceive *our* goals to be?" the president wondered, his eyebrow again shooting up. It was the first sign of emotion the old politician had displayed since the admiral had activated his sound-suppression field generator.

"The safety and security of the Earth and all her reasonable allies."

"Through the destruction of the Jung Empire," the president surmised.

"If need be, yes."

"And who decides if an ally is *reasonable*?" the president wondered.

"We cannot protect everyone," the admiral insisted with a wave of his hand. "We barely have enough resources to protect ourselves. And the Dusahn are but a handful of ships...a few dozen at most. The Jung number in the hundreds, with at least a dozen battle platforms included in those numbers, which, I should remind you, will be receiving marching orders any day now. If we do not take those platforms out now, while we can..."

"I've heard this before, Admiral," the president said, cutting him off.

"Mister President...*Dayton*..." The admiral was again pleading.

"What we have is a basic difference of opinion," the president explained. "We both seek the same end result... peace and security. Our disagreement is only in *how* this end is obtained. Fortunately, *I* hold the office of president, not you. It is *my* finger on the button of the very weapons you command, Admiral. Let's not forget that."

Admiral Galiardi leaned back in his chair again. "Are you sure about that, Mister President?" he asked, his right hand tapping the side of his sound-suppression field generator, as if to remind the president that nothing they had said had been recorded.

This time, it was President Scott who sighed. "I have never liked being threatened, Admiral. Need I remind you that I, alone, have the power to remove you from your post, with only a single utterance?"

"I believe you need a majority vote of the Alliance Council," the admiral replied.

"Only to confirm your removal," the president corrected. "I can muzzle you for an indefinite period, while we debate the issue. However, I admit that we are better off *with* your experience and expertise at Fleet Command."

"And yet, you ignore my most fervent recommendations."

"And with good cause," the president replied, "which you have now confirmed."

"I have always respected you, Dayton," Admiral Galiardi said as he rose from his seat. "It saddens me to know that we will now be staring down one another's barrels," he added before turning and heading out of the president's office.

President Scott sat unmoving, watching the admiral leave. As soon as the door closed, Miri entered his office from a side door.

"A sound-suppression field?" she said, spotting the device as her father reached over and turned it off. "He brought a sound suppressor into the office of the president?"

"Michael Galiardi fears no one," the president said. "And apparently respects no one, as well." He turned to look at his daughter. "I'm afraid things are about to become very dangerous."

"Dangerous for whom?" Miri wondered.

"For all of us."

* * *

"What have you got?" Nathan asked as he entered the Aurora's intelligence office.

"New message thru the molo front," Lieutenant Commander Shinoda replied.

"And?"

"He answered every question correctly," Jessica said. "It's him. The man going by the name Tensen Dalott *is* Suvan Navarro."

"You're sure?"

"As sure as I can be without standing face-to-face with the guy," Jessica assured him.

"I thought this was a good thing," the lieutenant commander commented.

"It is," Nathan agreed, "assuming he *is* Navarro."

"If he *is* Navarro, shouldn't he have gone down with his ship?" Lieutenant Commander Shinoda wondered.

"I spoke with Deliza," Jessica said. "She said he regularly took trips with his wife outside of the Darvano system. Resorts, retreats, things like that. If he was away when the Dusahn attacked..."

Nathan tried very hard not to smile. The idea of adding Captain Navarro's skill and experience to their fleet, especially if it came along with a captured Takaran battleship, was exciting. But it was also quite dangerous. "What else did he say?"

"He basically sent us everything he knows about the Takaran orbital shipyard, as well as the Teyentah herself," the lieutenant commander explained. "He even sent a few ideas on how we might go about stealing her, although they all seem a bit impossible, if you ask me."

"We already know quite a bit about the shipyards," Jessica said.

"There have probably been a few changes since the Dusahn took over," Nathan pointed out.

"How much could they have changed in six weeks?" the lieutenant commander wondered.

"Plenty," Jessica insisted, "considering it's probably their most important asset at the moment."

"She's right," Nathan agreed. "Just the ability to service their existing ships makes it priceless."

"Not to mention building new ones," Jessica added.

"Something that we definitely *cannot* let them do," Nathan added as he scanned the entire message. "Get this to General Telles, and see what he has to say about it. We'll start brainstorming in the morning."

"Aye, sir," the lieutenant commander replied.

Nathan turned and exited the compartment, with Jessica hot on his heels.

"You're not *really* considering stealing the Teyentah, are you?" Jessica asked as she pursued Nathan down the corridor toward the bridge.

"I consider everything," Nathan replied as he walked.

"A nearly completed battleship... Don't you think the Dusahn will have it heavily guarded?"

"I'm certain of it." Nathan looked at her as he walked. "Why do you ask?"

"It just seems like after suffering so many casualties in the Kohara raid, you might be a little more apprehensive about taking such risks."

"I'm always apprehensive about taking *any* risk," Nathan replied. "Especially when the lives of those under my command will be put at risk."

"Just checking," Jessica replied. She took Nathan's arm just as he was about to enter the bridge. "It's a long shot, Nathan. You know that, right?"

"I'm aware of that, yes," Nathan assured her. "Maybe you should get together with Telles and figure out a way to reduce the risk and increase our chances of success. I'm sure he could use some of your 'out-of-the-box' thinking on this one."

"You got it," Jessica replied with a wink.

Nathan turned, continuing onto the bridge, as Jessica headed back down the corridor in the direction they had come.

"Captain on deck," the guard announced as Nathan passed by.

"Captain," Nathan called to Cameron. "My ready room."

Cameron rose from the command chair at the center of the bridge, speaking to her tactical officer as she headed aft. "You have the conn, Lieutenant."

Nathan walked around his desk as Cameron entered the ready room, closing the hatch behind her. "News?"

"Looks like it's Navarro," he said as he took his seat. "And he's got some crazy ideas on how to steal the Teyentah, as well."

"Anything promising?"

"Not really. But he may not have included *everything* in this first message. I know I wouldn't."

"How is he getting all this intel?" Cameron wondered.

"Apparently he convinced one of the nobles to get him hired on as a crawler operator in the shipyard. He's been working on the Teyentah for a couple of weeks now."

Cameron looked concerned. "The Teyentah has to be three or four kilometers long. One crawler operator is probably only going to see a tiny portion of the entire ship, and from the outside. How much could he possibly learn about her?"

"All we really need is a way in," Nathan insisted. "The Teyentah is a *Takaran* ship, so Navarro *should* be able to figure out how to operate it."

"Assuming that Deliza's family override codes are still valid," Cameron pointed out. "I don't suppose there is any way to verify them ahead of time."

"Not without tipping off the Dusahn that the codes exist."

"Can he pilot the Teyentah single-handed?"

"Telles and his men should be able to help," Nathan explained. "And all they have to do is make a few jumps to get clear. Then we can put a small crew on board and jump her back to us."

"If the Dusahn don't shoot her down first."

Nathan looked at her, a puzzled expression on his face. "Are you always this pessimistic?"

"You wanted me as your XO, remember," she replied. "Shooting holes in your plans is part of the job."

"That must be why you liked being my XO so much," Nathan joked.

"The position does have its perks," Cameron replied with an impish smile as she rose from her seat to return to her duties. "Let me know what Telles comes up with."

"How'd you know I sent it to Telles?" Nathan wondered.

"Also a part of the job," she added as she departed the ready room.

Nathan punched his command code into his console and called up the images of the Teyentah that Captain Navarro had included in his message, displaying them on the view screen on the wall of his ready room. The Takaran battleship was big, nearly as big as the older Jung battleships which flanked her in the bays on either side.

Nathan leaned back in his chair, staring at the images on the view screen. The Teyentah would be a tremendous asset. The question that remained was, what it would cost them to acquire her?

CHAPTER FOUR

"How long are we going to stare at this place?" Birk asked as he, Cuddy, and Michael knelt behind the bushes alongside the roadway, peering through the foliage at the ranch on the other side.

"Until the sun goes down and I'm satisfied that no one will see us approach," Michael replied.

"The sun won't be down for another hour," Cuddy stated.

"Nobody has moved at that place since we've been here," Birk pointed out. "It's probably abandoned."

"The front hedges are trimmed, the lawn is watered, and the fence and barn all appear in good repair," Michael said. "Someone lives here."

"Maybe they're at work," Cuddy suggested.

"It's possible," Michael admitted. "But this far out, people usually work the ranch they live on."

"Shopping?"

"They'd be home by now," Michael insisted. "Dusahn curfew starts at sundown. Being caught out after dark guarantees imprisonment, at the very least."

"All the more reason for us to get off the streets," Birk insisted.

"We spent all of last night on the move," Cuddy reminded him. "*Now* you want to be off the streets before dark?"

"We were in a forest, not on the streets," Birk replied. "So, yeah, I want to be off them before curfew." Birk sighed. "Mostly, I just want to lie down somewhere and take a nap." "There's a light," Michael announced.

Birk raised his head, looking at the distant house again. "Where?"

"The little window to the right," Michael replied. "Probably the bathroom."

"It's already getting dark," Cuddy said. "Maybe they're done for the day."

"It is a possibility," Michael admitted.

"Why aren't there any other lights on?" Birk wondered.

"Single occupant?" Cuddy suggested.

"Also a possibility," Michael admitted. "If it is only a single person, he or she is likely to be cleaning up. Now may be our best chance."

"Chance for what?" Birk wondered, not sure he wanted to know the answer.

"To get into that barn unnoticed," Michael explained.

"Three warm bodies in a barn, all night long," Birk questioned. "Don't you think we'll look suspicious on Dusahn sat-scans?"

"Barns have hay lofts, which will shield our heat signatures from satellites," Michael explained. "Most of these places keep their power plants in the barn, as well, which will also make the Dusahn satellites less effective."

"Wouldn't it make more sense to knock on the front door and ask to spend the night?" Birk suggested, desperate for a warm bed.

Michael looked at him. "And tell them what?"

"That our vehicle broke down, and we need a place to hold up for the night so we aren't breaking curfew," Cuddy offered.

"A good cover story," Michael admitted. "But the occupant of that house is just as likely to report us to the

Dusahn as he, or she, is to allow us to spend the night. We can't take the risk."

"Barn it is, then," Birk agreed.

"We need to move soon," Cuddy insisted. "Our heat signatures will become easier to detect once the sun goes down and the ground cools off."

"Hey, if they've got satellites that can track us, why didn't they find us tromping through the forest last night?" Birk wondered.

"Many of our satellites were destroyed during the initial invasion," Michael explained. "They have to task the ones that are still operational as needed. The area we were in was likely not a high priority area at the time."

"But weren't they searching *for* us?" Cuddy asked.

"Yes, but by the time we left the cave, their search perimeter would have expanded beyond the capabilities of the satellites servicing that area."

"If they are short on satellites, why would they use them on a ranch out in the middle of nowhere?" Birk challenged.

"We do not know that they would," Michael admitted. "But we do not know that they would not, either."

"So, better to play it safe," Cuddy surmised.

"Precisely." Michael scanned the area one last time. "Shall we?" Michael stood slowly and carefully, as if he were half-expecting someone to spot him and yell. After one last look around, he headed out across the road, walking as if there was nothing unusual about his presence.

Birk and Cuddy followed, neither one looking as inconspicuous as their leader. The three of them continued down the opposite side of the road, until they were far enough past the barn so that no one in the ranch house could see them, before hopping the fence and making a run for the barn itself. Michael was the first to enter, cracking the large door just enough to slip inside, followed by Birk and Cuddy. There was barely enough light spilling in through the skylights above for them to get their bearings and find their way to the area directly under the hayloft, near the tractor and the various attachments that came with it.

"This should do for the night," Michael said as he began pulling apart a nearby bale of hay.

"What are you doing?" Birk wondered.

"Making a place to sleep."

"In the hay?" Birk couldn't believe what he was seeing. "Won't that be...scratchy?"

"See those tarps?" Michael said, pointing to the other side of the barn. "Throw one of those on top of a couple feet of loosely packed hay, and you've got yourself a bed."

"Not any bed I've ever slept in," Birk muttered as he fetched the tarps. "How are we going to keep warm?"

"Just pile more hay on top of you," Michael replied.

"Great."

"Beats the hell out of sleeping on a cave floor," Cuddy reminded him.

"Barely."

"We'll have to clear out before the sun rises," Michael warned as he spread out his tarp. "Ranchers start work early, and they do not care much for trespassers."

"How do you know so much about ranchers?" Cuddy wondered.

"My uncle was a rancher," Michael explained. "He had a small place east of Ballard. My mom used to send me to stay with him for a week each summer, while she went to her annual refresher training class."

"What did your mom do?" Birk asked as he lay down on his tarp-covered pile of hay. "She was a critical care nurse."

"What did your father do?" Cuddy asked as he finished making up his bed for the night.

"He never returned from his service to the empire."

"The *Takaran* Empire?" Cuddy asked, sounding surprised. "Yes."

"Hey, this hay bed isn't half bad," Birk admitted as he settled into his makeshift bed.

"You served, as well, didn't you," Cuddy said.

"I did," Michael admitted. "Four and a half years, in fact."

"You're lucky you made it back," Cuddy said. "I heard that less than half who were drafted ever returned."

"What, they died?" Birk asked, surprised.

"Actually, most of them survived their tours but were discharged far away from home, without a way to get back. Only the ones who scrimped and saved their meager pay, or were lucky enough to get discharged close to their homeworld, made it back."

"Which one were you?" Birk wondered.

"I was a unique case," Michael admitted.

"How so?"

"Let's just say that an unusual opportunity presented itself, and I used it to my advantage," Michael replied modestly.

A shocked expression washed over Cuddy. "*Now* I know where I've heard your name before," he exclaimed. "*You're* Michael Willard!"

"Uh, we already knew that, Cuddy," Birk reminded his friend.

"*Michael Willard*," Cuddy repeated. "*The* Michael Willard. The guy who mutinied and took control of the Yamaro, saving Corinair!" "Get out!" Birk exclaimed, equally shocked. He looked at Michael. "Is that true? Is that you? I mean, are you him? Did you save the whole planet?"

"The entire planet *is* a bit of an exaggeration," Michael insisted. "A few million lives, at the most."

"Oh, is *that* all?"

"You really mutinied against a *Takaran nobleman*?" Birk shook his head in disbelief. "Man, that took guts."

"Not really," Michael admitted. "Not when you take into account that there were at least a few surface-to-orbit nukes headed our way, and our shields were too weak to protect us."

"I don't understand," Cuddy said. "If the ship was about to be destroyed, why didn't the captain surrender?"

"Takaran nobles do not like to admit defeat," Michael explained. "Some more than others."

"Still, it took guts," Cuddy agreed.

"Didn't you receive the Star of Corinair for that?" Birk asked.

"Yes, a few years later, after I returned from Sol."

"That's right," Birk said, remembering. "You served on the Aurora, *with* Nathan Scott. What was *that* like?"

"Far scarier than anything I went through in service to the empire," Michael replied. "Except for that mutiny incident."

"So, do you *really* think he's still alive?" Cuddy wondered.

"I admit, it is difficult to believe. And, it *could* be an impostor on the other end of the comms. However, even if it is *not* him, what he is *trying* to do is important enough for me to support him."

"Even if it isn't *Na-Tan*?" Birk wondered, half teasing.

"If you study the Legend of Origins, you'll realize that *Na-Tan* is not a person. *Na-Tan* is an idea. An idea that *one person* can make a difference. People think that *Na-Tan* is Takaran for *Nathan*, but it isn't. It is ancient Loranese, which was the original language of the Legend of Origins. It means 'the one'."

"The one what?" Birk asked.

"The one who made a difference. The one who took responsibility. The one who led others to fight injustice." Michael looked whimsically at the ceiling. "It means whatever you need it to mean." He looked at them. "You know, in Hebrew, it means 'gift from God'."

"What's Hebrew?"

"An ancient language from Earth," Michael replied. "I believe that because *Na-Tan* has so many different meanings, all of which identify the person carrying the title to be someone trying to do good for all, is why it is such an easy persona for people of all backgrounds to follow."

"And that's why you're willing to follow him, even if you're not sure it is *really* him?" Birk said. "I'm sorry, but that doesn't make much sense to me."

"Do you believe in God?" Michael asked.

Birk looked surprised by the question. "I don't know. I guess."

"Why?" Michael asked. "Have you ever met God? Has God spoken to you?"

"No."

"Then why do you believe in God?" Michael challenged.

Birk thought for a moment. "I guess I'm hedging my bets," he finally admitted. "You know, better that I'm on board with it all, just in case there *is* a God, after all."

"And if it turns out that there *is* no God, will you be upset that you spent your entire life believing?" "Not really," Birk admitted.

"Why?" Michael asked, leading Birk to his own conclusions.

"Because *believing* in something good is likely to make me a better person, I suppose," Birk explained. "At least, that's what my mother told me."

"I am just following your mother's advice, then," Michael told him. "I am believing that Nathan Scott is alive and is trying to help us defeat the Dusahn and regain our freedom, just as he helped us defeat the Takaran Empire. And in doing so, *I* am doing good. Or, at least, I am trying to."

"I see your point," Birk admitted. "Either that, or I'm too tired to argue with you."

* * *

"Major Aran has sent word that the roundup of the remaining Corinari is nearly complete," General Hesson reported to Lord Dusahn as they walked through the gardens of the new Dusahn capitol complex at the center of Answari.

"Nearly complete?"

"There are still a few cells yet to be raided," the general explained. "The major's numbers are limited, and he now has a sizeable number of prisoners to guard."

"When does he estimate completion?" Lord Dusahn wondered.

"Two weeks, maximum." The general braced himself for a scathing response from his leader but received none.

"Very well," Lord Dusahn replied.

"My lord?"

Lord Dusahn looked at his trusted general and smiled. "You were expecting a more emotional response?"

"Respectfully, yes. Yes, I was."

Lord Dusahn laughed. "Sorry to disappoint you, my friend." He looked around at the brilliant skies and the lush, colorful gardens around him. All along the hills that surrounded the once-proud capital of the Takaran Empire, there were estates, office buildings, factories...all the signs of a thriving civilization...all of which *he* now controlled. "Look around you, my dear general. All of this is ours, now. And with it, we will build an empire, the likes of which will make the one that once cast our forefathers out pale in comparison." Lord Dusahn looked at the general. "And all because I granted an audience with an old man selling miracles."

"Opportunity often comes from unexpected sources."

Lord Dusahn nodded agreement. "Corralius Narcor. One of my favorites." He looked around again. "Everything we need is here, in this tiny cluster of stars. Resources, manpower, technology, infrastructure. Hell, even the food isn't bad," he laughed.

"Taking control is only the beginning," General Hesson warned. "We still must win the hearts and minds of those we have subjugated."

"Peace and prosperity is the magic elixir that wins the loyalty of the human herds," Lord Dusahn stated.

"Fina Dortel. A controversial."

"Another of my favorites. Even those with radical thoughts and agendas can sometimes spout truths worth remembering. None could be truer."

"And what are we to do with the captured Corinari?" General Hesson asked.

"The same that we do with all those we subjugate," Lord Dusahn replied. "Offer them a chance to serve the empire either as soldiers or slaves." "The Corinari are unlike most warriors we have conquered in the past, my lord. They are proud, they are loyal, and they are dedicated. Even in their retirement, they serve their world. I am not sure they could be trusted to serve us faithfully."

"Do we trust *any* of the soldiers we absorb?" Lord Dusahn questioned.

"Not entirely, no."

"Then, I do not see the problem. Even the most dedicated soldier's patriotism can be swayed, if given the right enticements. Power, respect, financial reward, every man has his needs. The Corinari are no different, trust me."

"Of course, my lord."

"We grant them the same opportunity as we do all those we conquer. The choice is theirs," Lord Dusahn stated firmly.

"I will see to it, my lord," General Hesson promised, taking a step backward before turning and walking away.

Lord Dusahn took in a deep breath. The smell of the garden was intoxicating. The previous world they conquered had been an ugly place, cursed with a putrid atmosphere. Takara and her sister worlds were lush and beautiful, each with their own unique charms. The Takarans were truly masters at terraforming. It was one of the many Takaran technologies Lord Dusahn planned to use to his advantage as he expanded his empire.

* * *

"You need to get out in front of this," Miri insisted, "before Galiardi makes his next move."

"What do you propose I do?" her father asked. "Tell the public everything? That my son, their hero, put all their lives at risk by circumventing his own execution? That he *stole* gunships from the very alliance *he* founded?" "And that *he* is trying to *honor* our commitments to our allies, just as they once honored *their* commitments to *us*."

"They will think I knew he was alive all along," the president said.

"But you didn't," Miri reminded him. "*None* of us did."

"Galiardi's right," the president said, shaking his head. "The truth doesn't matter. All that matters is what the public will believe."

"Which is *exactly* why we need to get in front of this. Beat Galiardi to the punch. We tell the public he's known all along that the Jung ships that trespassed against us were a false-flag operation by the Dusahn, to *keep* us from sending ships to the Pentaurus cluster. That he recommended a retaliatory strike against the Jung when he *knew* they had done nothing wrong, all because he *wants* a war with them. He *wants* an excuse to get revenge."

"That may not play as well as you think," the president insisted. "Plenty of people feel as he does. They *want* revenge."

Miri plopped down in a chair, frustrated. "What I *don't* understand is *why*? Why does Galiardi want a war *now*? Why not a year from now? Two years. Five years. We'd be better armed by then, wouldn't we?"

"He wants this war *now* because the *Dusahn* have jump drives," President Scott explained.

"What?"

"He fears that if the Dusahn somehow gained access to jump drive technology, then the Jung will, as well. And if they do, we will not be able to defend ourselves. Not if they outfit their entire fleet with jump drives."

"But we don't even know *where* the Dusahn got the jump drive technology," Miri argued. "For all we know, they figured it out on their own." "It doesn't matter," the president argued. "His point is still valid. Deal with the enemy *now*, while you still can, or risk not being able to handle them later. He's been handed an opportunity to do exactly that, and even if the truth is revealed, he still comes out looking good in the eyes of all who want revenge. He looks like a hero. A hero who made the tough call, deciding to lie in order to protect everyone."

"Jesus, Pop. You sound like you admire the guy!"

"In a way, I suppose, I do. At least, I admire his dedication, even if I disagree with his methods."

"But what about the Dusahn?" Miri wondered. "Even if Galiardi defeats the Jung, he'll still have the Dusahn to deal with. And they *do* have jump drives."

"The Dusahn are not a direct threat to the Sol sector," the president insisted. "They have too few ships, and by the time they are able to build up their fleet, ours will be even greater. It will take at least a century for the Dusahn to grow their forces to a level that would pose a significant threat to us."

"Then you think Galiardi is doing the right thing?"

"Not at all," the president replied. "I just understand *why* he feels he must do it."

"What do you plan to do, then?" Miri asked.

"I plan to continue to oppose him."

"And if he lies to the public and tells them that you knew about Nathan being alive all along, and *helped* him with the raid on Kohara?"

"I will deny it, and I will tell the truth...that we found out he was alive only a few days before the raid on the Koharan Cobra plant, and that we knew nothing about the raid."

"But you won't tell the public that Galiardi has lied to them about the Jung? That he's starting a war that doesn't *need* to be fought." "It may not *need* to be fought, but many will be happy to see it fought *and* won."

"Will he win?" Miri wondered.

"If he strikes now, probably."

"So, you're going to *let* him?"

"No, I'm not," the president replied. "But the truth of the matter is, if he decides to attack without authorization, I'm not sure I can stop him. I may even be forced to choose between fully opposing him and risk losing control of this office, or appearing to back him in order to remain president and possibly keep him from completely annihilating the Jung."

"You can't just roll over on this," Miri protested.

"I'm not rolling over, Miri," her father insisted. "I'm doing what's necessary to ensure the safety of our people. That's my job. Unpleasant at times, yes, but it comes with the territory. What you have to understand is that Admiral Galiardi *believes* he is doing the right thing, just as / believe that / am doing the right thing. Our end goals are the same. Only our methodologies differ."

"This is wrong," Miri insisted. "He answers to you. You have the power to fire him, and without cause."

"Which would instantly destabilize our military forces."

"One of his underlings would step in."

"And likely continue with the same plan that Galiardi has. They are *his* underlings, after all. Loyal to him and believing in *his* plan. Better the devil we know."

Miri leaned back in her chair and sighed in frustration. "This is exactly why Nathan hated politics so much," she finally said. "And I have to say that I agree with him."

"The bad is necessary, in order to accomplish the good," her father reminded her. "A good politician never loses sight of that." Birk had drawn the first watch and had sat staring at the landscape between the barn, the house, and the roadway for going on several hours now. At first, staying awake had been difficult. After hiking all night and day, every muscle in his body was tired. But he had gotten into a rhythm, moving his eyes from target to target, then closing them for ten seconds before repeating. He had even begun humming one of his favorite tunes to help keep himself awake and provide timing. He was actually quite proud of himself for handling his watch duty so diligently. Right up until the moment that he felt the cold muzzle of a gun against his left cheek.

Birk's eyes popped open with a start, immediately shifting to his left. His body tensed, about to spring into action...

"I wouldn't," the old man whispered.

"Fuck," Birk exclaimed, not quite under his breath.

Michael woke quickly, immediately raising his weapon and taking aim as the nearly silent whine of his charge pack announced that his weapon was ready to fire.

"Touch that trigger and your buddy here will have a really big hole in his head," the old man warned in a calm and confident manner.

"He's not my buddy," Michael replied with a similar demeanor.

"What the..." Cuddy exclaimed, also waking.

"That burner of yours will bring the Dusahn down on us in minutes," the old man warned. "This thing's air-powered. Not as deadly, but deadly enough...especially at close range. Your call, kid."

Michael remained still, his weapon still trained on the old man, ready to burn a hole through his head and melt his brain. "Who are you?" The old man ignored Michael's question. "You aren't Dusahn. If you were, you wouldn't be sleeping in the hay trying to avoid the satellite sensors."

"No, we're not," Michael replied. "I'll ask one last time. Who are you?"

"I own this place, so I don't feel the need to answer to you," the old man stated.

"This gun says otherwise," Michael argued.

"I have an idea," Birk interrupted. "How about you both put the guns down, and we can converse calmly...without a gun pointed at my head."

"Since you are all trespassing on my property, I insist that you lower *your* weapon first," the old man told them.

"Very well," Michael replied, slowly lowering his weapon as he switched its power off.

The old man watched Michael out of the corner of his eye, waiting until he had placed the powered-down weapon on the hay beside him before finally lowering his own weapon.

"Oh, thank God," Birk exclaimed.

"Now, who the hell are *you*, and what are you doing in my barn?"

"We're just innocent travelers, trying to make our way back to Aitkenna," Michael lied. "Our vehicle broke down about twenty kilometers south of here...wherever *here* is. We're just trying to make it to a transport station, so we can catch a ride to the city. That's all. We mean you no harm, I assure you."

The old man laughed. "You're a really bad liar, son." He looked the three men over. "You're in charge of these two, that much I can tell. And that blaster you're carrying is the same type that was dropped by the Karuzari during the raid on the holding facility in Aitkenna a few weeks back. Now, you may be travelers, and you may be on your way to the city, but you sure as hell aren't innocent. Either way, I don't care to know more than that." He looked at Birk and then Cuddy. "You two got burners, as well?"

Cuddy slowly pushed the hay back to reveal the energy rifle lying next to him.

"Uh, huh," the old man said. He looked at Birk. "Where's yours?"

"Uh, I think you're standing on it, sir."

The old man stepped back and brushed the hay away with his foot, revealing another energy rifle. "You be gone by sunup, understood?"

"Yes, sir," Michael replied respectfully.

"And if I see you outside of this barn, I will shoot you...for appearance's sake."

"Understood," Michael added.

"Damn fools," the old man muttered as he turned to depart.

"Uh, sir, if you don't mind my asking, how did you figure out we were here?" Michael asked.

"Your sentry here was snoring. It was so damned loud I thought my tractor had started all by itself."

Cuddy looked at Birk.

"I thought I was wide awake, I swear."

"Damn fools," the old man repeated.

"Sir," Birk called after him. "I don't suppose you have anything to eat?"

The old man ignored him, shaking his head as he stepped through the crack in the barn door, pulling it closed behind him.

"Way to go, Birk," Cuddy chided.

"I was sure I was awake," Birk defended. "I couldn't have been out for more than a minute or two, honest. What time is it, anyway?"

"Twenty-two thirty," Michael replied.

"Really?" Birk said sheepishly. "Okay, I admit, I might have been out for more than a minute or two."

* * *

"Tell me it went well," Commander Macklay said as he met the admiral in the corridor, outside the Fleet Command shuttle station, deep inside Port Terra.

"The president has his opinion, and I have mine."

"Then nothing has changed," the commander realized, falling in step alongside the admiral.

"Funny thing is, I'm pretty sure he knows that I'll attack with or without his consent, and I'm pretty sure he's not going to try to stop me."

"How is that possible?"

"It's possible because he knows I'm right and that we must seize this opportunity while we can. He just doesn't want to go down in history as the one who made the ugly call."

"So, he's passing the buck to you."

"In a manner of speaking, yes," the admiral agreed. "And to be honest, I'm fine with that."

"Surely, he can't know *everything* we plan to do," the commander said.

"Not everything, no. He's a smart man, but he's too quick to turn a blind eye to the evil that men can do. He always has been."

"Then, you're green-lighting the op?"

Admiral Galiardi stopped in his tracks, looking at the commander. "Yes, Commander. You have a green light."

Commander Macklay sighed, the reality of it still not fully sinking in. "Jesus, Admiral. Are we sure about this?"

"We don't have a choice, Commander. That's the irony of it. The *President* of Earth left us with *no* other choice."

* * *

"I *never* snore," Birk insisted.

"He's not lying," Cuddy agreed. "I've never heard him snore."

"If you can't stay awake during watch, you are supposed to wake someone up to either help you stay awake or let them take the watch if able," Michael said sternly. "That's basic training stuff."

"You forget, neither of us has ever been through *basic training*," Birk pointed out.

"Still, it seems like common sense."

"To you, maybe."

"I see your point."

"Uh, guys?" Cuddy tried to interrupt.

"Perhaps the resistance should create some kind of a handbook for new recruits, or something..."

"Guys?"

"Perhaps," Michael agreed, if for no other reason than to end the discussion.

"Guys," Cuddy repeated, more urgently. "He's coming back."

Birk immediately reached for his energy rifle.

"Don't," Michael warned.

"But he's probably armed," Birk argued.

"He's armed," Cuddy confirmed, still peering out through a crack in the door.

"The old man was right," Michael insisted. "If we use our weapons, the Dusahn will detect the energy discharges and be on us in minutes. Besides, he gave us permission to stay for the night." "Maybe he changed his mind," Birk suggested. "Maybe he's coming to boot us out."

"If he changed his mind, it is more likely that he would contact the Dusahn and win favor for himself," Michael said.

"He's carrying something."

"Yeah, a gun," Birk said.

"In addition to his gun," Cuddy explained. "A bag," he added, stepping back to allow the old man to enter.

The door opened slowly, and the old man cautiously peeked inside before entering. He tossed the bag to the ground in front of Birk's feet. "Took guts to ask, kid."

"What's this?" Birk asked, reaching down for the bag.

"About a dozen military ration packs."

"Food?" Birk asked, excitedly digging into the bag.

"Some call it that," the old man admitted. "I don't."

"Thank you," Michael said respectfully. He moved over next to Birk, taking one of the ration packs and inspecting it. "These are Corinari issue and quite old. Where did you get them?"

"I had family in the Corinari. They're still good. They've got a shelf life of like a million years, or something. Or so I'm told."

"That's true," Michael laughed. "They do. This is quite generous of you."

"Not really," the old man replied. "I never much cared for them, to be honest."

"How do these work?" Birk wondered, examining one of the ration packs.

"Press in the center to break the heat pack seal, then shake thoroughly," Michael instructed. "In a few minutes, the contents will be fully heated and ready to eat."

Birk wasted no time in getting started, popping the seal and shaking the ration pack like a crazy man. "You three resistance?" the old man asked out of nowhere.

"I thought you didn't want to know," Michael reminded him.

"I don't.....and I do."

"Let's just say that we are not fans of the Dusahn, and leave it at that," Michael suggested.

"Fair enough." The old man watched as Birk and Cuddy opened their ration packs and started eating with their fingers. "Sorry, I forgot to bring utensils."

Both Birk and Cuddy made sounds indicating it didn't matter to them.

"Just thought you should know," the old man said, turning to Michael, "the Dusahn have been making surprise inspections throughout this area the last few days. So, you might want to have someone other than tractor-nose here on sentry."

"I swear, I have never snored before!"

The old man slipped back through the door, headed back to the main house as Birk defended himself.

Cuddy looked at Michael. "What if he turns us in?"

"If he was planning on turning us in, he wouldn't have warned us that the Dusahn make surprise inspections," Michael insisted. "He would have just turned us in. Besides, he had family who served in the Corinari, which means he would likely support the resistance if he could. In a way, by letting us sleep here and giving us these rations, he *is* supporting the resistance."

"You call this support?" Birk wondered, tossing an empty ration pack to the ground. "These things are barely edible."

"You ate two of them," Cuddy pointed out.

"I'm hungry."

"Be sure to eat some of the kaka bites while on watch," Michael instructed. "They'll help keep you awake."

* * *

"This is not my first time in the back seat of a Gunyoki," Loki reminded his pilot.

"My apologies," Vol replied. "My intent was not to offend."

"I don't offend that easily," Loki told the old Gunyoki pilot. "I fly with Josh, remember?"

Vol Kaguchi smiled. "Ah, yes. Patience and a thick skin would be required for that assignment."

"A lot of patience," Loki remarked under his breath as he ran another diagnostics cycle on the Gunyoki fighter's newly installed jump drive.

Vol continued to smile as he checked his flight instruments. "One minute to the test area."

"I'll be ready."

"So, how does this thing work?" Vol wondered.

"I'm not really qualified to explain the physics," Loki admitted. "But as I understand it, the jump field creates a bubble of normal, four-dimensional space around us. The power is dumped into the inner field as the outer field collapses and makes contact with the inner field. The result is that the bubble of normal space, and all objects contained within, transition in *three*-dimensional space, with *time* being the missing dimension. The inner field—which is still in normal space where time exists—decays at a rate that is dependent on how much energy was dumped into it at the moment of transition. Once it decays enough to become unstable, the field collapses, which forces us to transition *back* into normal space, thus ending the jump. We still travel along the same path, as if we were flying through normal space, but we don't experience the time it takes to do so." "Thank you for that explanation," Vol replied politely. "But I'm simply asking how we activate the system."

"Oh. Well, you just put the ship on the correct course and speed, select the desired jump distance, and press the jump button. But for these tests, I'll be activating the jump drive from my console."

"And just like that, you travel between the stars," Vol stated. "Incredible."

"You already knew about jump drives, right?" Loki questioned.

"Of course," Vol replied. "Jump ships have been plying our system for several years now. I have just never actually traveled in one."

Loki smiled. "It does take some getting used to."

"What does it feel like?" Vol wondered.

"You don't *feel* anything," Loki promised. "And since the Gunyoki fighters are getting *stealth* jump drives, you don't have to worry about the flash, either."

"Marcus Taggart said the jumps make his teeth hurt."

"Yeah, well, he's the only person I know of who could ever *feel* a jump."

"I wonder why." Vol looked down at his console again. "We are entering the jump test area now."

"Test Control, Test One," Loki called over the comms. "We are in the test area and ready for the first jump test."

"Test One, Test Control," Josh replied over comms. *"The princess says we're ready here. You can jump when ready... Wait. Oh, and she also says I should stop calling her 'princess',"* he added with a chuckle.

"The young man does like to anger those around him, doesn't he," Vol observed.

"Yeah, it's kind of his thing." Loki rechecked his console. "All systems show ready back here." "We are on the designated course and speed," Vol assured him.

"You ready?"

"Very much so," Vol assured him.

"Test Control, Test One. Jumping in three..." Loki armed the jump drive. "...Two..." He flipped the safety off the jump button. "...One..." He took a deep breath and pressed the jump button, looking out the window as he did so.

Pale, blue-white light spilled quickly out of the jump emitters on the Gunyoki fighter's hull, spreading out and engulfing the ship. Only a split second after it had started, the blue-white light completely covered the ship and increased in its intensity, but it did not flash. Instead, it faded away as quickly as it had come. Loki thought he noticed the stars shifting slightly but knew otherwise. Their first jump had been only a few light seconds, which would have resulted in no perceptible stellar shift. "Jump complete."

"Did it work?" Vol wondered.

Loki scanned his instruments, checking and rechecking their position. "We are three light seconds further along our course than before the jump, so, yes, it worked."

"Incredible."

"Test Control, Test One," Loki called over comms. It took several seconds for Josh to reply, as he was now three light seconds further behind the test ship.

"Test One, zero indicators," Josh reported. "One moment you were there, and the next you were gone. Wait... We've got you now. Three light seconds downrange. Go ahead with the simulated stealth penetration jump."

"Test One. Understood," Loki replied.

"Coming about on a reciprocal heading," Vol reported as he put the Gunyoki fighter into a tight turn to port. "Setting up for cold-coast," Loki announced as he began powering down the ship's unnecessary systems in preparation for the next test jump.

"These ships aren't exactly designed for stealth recon, you know," Vol reminded him.

"It's just a matter of reducing emissions," Loki insisted. "Any ship can cold-coast. You just have to turn everything off, that's all."

"Not exactly sure I like the sound of that...turning things off, that is. These ships weren't designed to be restarted in flight."

"That's why they modified them."

"I still don't know where they found the room for all of this," Vol admitted.

"You'd be surprised how much room all that broadcasting and monitoring gear takes up," Loki told him. "Not to mention all that race commission safety gear."

"That gear keeps us safe," Vol insisted. "Hence the name."

"The only safety gear you need in combat is your ejection seat and what you're wearing," Loki insisted. "That, and your shields. Trust me."

"You sound like you've seen your share of combat, my young friend."

"More than I'd like, that's for sure."

"Then, why are you here?"

Loki sighed. "To be honest, I don't really know. Josh asked; Nathan asked; I couldn't say no."

"Even with a wife and baby at home?"

"I guess that's why," Loki admitted. "They don't *have* a home. Not anymore."

"Could you not have retired and lived out your life on Corinair, even under Dusahn rule?" "I'd always be worried the Dusahn would realize that I had once served, and lock me up just like they've been doing to all the Corinari."

"So, you fight for a better life for those you love, then."

"I guess so."

"It is why we all fight," Vol told him. "We are now on the return course and at the proper speed."

"All systems except the jump drive are going cold," Loki reported. "The jump drive will go cold as soon as the jump is completed." Loki scanned his instruments again. "Jumping in three.....two.....one.....jumping."

Again, the subdued, pale, blue-white light spilled out over their hull, quickly engulfing them, and then fading quickly away a second later.

"Jump complete," Loki announced. "All systems are offline. We're cold-coasting. The only things on are the lowpower comms and the passive sensors, both of which put out no detectable emissions."

"When *should* the Aurora be able to detect us?" Vol wondered.

"I'm detecting them on passive," Loki replied. "So, they should be able to detect us."

"They should have jumped by now," Lieutenant Commander Kono stated from the Aurora's sensor station.

"He counted down, as usual," Josh assured them from the auxiliary station on the starboard side of the bridge. "They're out there."

"I've got no indication of anyone jumping into the area," the lieutenant commander assured her captain. "Not on passive, anyway. Shall I go active?"

"That would be cheating," Nathan said, half-joking. "Go ahead and hail them, Mister Hayes." "Test One, Control. You out there?" Josh called over comms. After half a minute, he added. "Loki, how do you copy?" Josh looked at Nathan. "I don't know, Cap'n. Maybe they haven't jumped yet."

"Go active," Nathan ordered.

"Switching to active sensors," Lieutenant Commander Kono announced. "Holy crap," she declared a few seconds later. "I've got them, Captain. Off the starboard bow, about ten kilometers and closing fast."

"What the hell, Loki?" Josh called over comms.

"Sorry," Loki replied. "I just wanted to see how close we could get without being detected. Not bad, huh?"

"Not bad, at all," Nathan agreed, turning to look at Abby and Deliza, both of whom were standing behind the tactical station watching the test. "Congratulations. How long until we can outfit all of the Gunyokis with stealth jump drives?"

"Our plant on Rakuen has already finished the retooling process and is just waiting for word from us to get started," Deliza said. "Once word is given, we can start installation on the first ship within a few days. Then we'll be able to outfit one ship each day."

"How long until you're certain of the test results?" Nathan asked.

"We still have quite a few more test jumps to conduct," Abby warned. "I'd like to be sure of the stealth emitter's long-range performance and series-jump performance, as well, before committing them to production."

"How about we streamline the process with a compromise?" Nathan suggested. "Outfit the first dozen, or so, with the prototype designs, and limit them to shortrange stealth jumps only and no series stealth jumps. At least, not in combat." "I'd prefer to conduct thorough, real-world testing," Abby insisted. "However, if we can install data recorders on all the Gunyokis using the prototypes, I guess we could use that data to extrapolate and predict performance parameters for longer stealth jumps. Series stealth jumps, however, need to be thoroughly tested on a *dedicated* test ship, since there is much more risk of the emitters overheating."

"Agreed," Nathan said. "Make the call, Deliza." "Yes. sir."

* * *

"Maybe we should have saved a few of those ration packs for tomorrow," Cuddy commented.

"I was hungry now," Birk replied as he lay back in his makeshift hay bed.

"If I remember correctly, there is a transportation station in the town a few more kilometers down the road. We should be able to pick up some food there, before getting on the train into Aitkenna."

"Where are we going to go, once we get to Aitkenna?" Birk wondered. "Our rent is more than a month overdue by now. I wouldn't be surprised if the manager already sold all our stuff and rented the place out."

"I have some contacts in the city who may not have been compromised," Michael assured them. "Once we get into the city, I can initiate contact."

"And if they *have* been compromised?" Cuddy asked.

"Then we'll check to see if your apartment manager has rented out your place yet. If not, I can pay your back rent, and we can hide out there for a while, until the Dusahn give up looking for us."

"Do you think they know what we look like?" Birk wondered.

"Doubtful," Michael replied. "Our encounters with them in the tunnels were brief, and there was a lot of dust and weapons fire in the air. Even if they were using battle cameras, it would have been difficult to get clear images of our faces. Three average-sized males, all with brown hair, is likely the best description they have, which could fit just about anyone."

"The old man's coming back," Cuddy warned. "And he's running this time."

Michael sprang from his hay bed, picking up his energy rifle and moving into position to defend himself.

Birk took notice with a start, following Michael's lead and grabbing his own rifle. "I thought you said we could trust him?"

"I do. I mean, I did," Michael replied as he moved into position. "But there is a *reason* he's running."

Seconds later, the old man burst through the barn doors, panting. "They are coming," he warned between breaths. "A friend called, they are two houses down. They have searched every home and outbuilding on this road. They will be here within the hour."

"We've got to get out of here while we can," Birk exclaimed.

"No, you must stay put," the old man insisted.

"He's right," Michael agreed. "If they are actively searching this area, they will have tasked either a satellite or a shuttle to monitor the area for movement."

"Then they saw him running out here to warn us," Cuddy surmised.

"Possibly," Michael admitted as the old man moved over toward the livestock trailer in the corner of the barn, behind the tractor. "Unless their sensor scans are more narrowly focused. These properties are far apart, and at night, a narrower sensor beam is usually required for optimal resolution." A puzzled look came across his face as he watched the old man preparing to move the large trailer. "What are you doing?"

"There is an underground shelter, that was originally a root cellar, dug out of the rock below us. It is big enough to hide all three of you, and then some. The entrance is underneath this trailer."

"They'll see us on their hand scanners," Birk insisted.

"Maybe not," Michael corrected. "This entire area is rich with terrak deposits. Between that and the magnetic fields of that fusion reactor, they might not detect anything below, not even the cave itself."

"That is why it was dug into the rock decades ago," the old man argued. "To hide from the Takarans. Now help me."

Michael and Birk helped the old man push the trailer forward a full meter. Once the trailer was moved, the old man brushed away the hay and dirt on the floor, revealing a half-meter-square door. He pulled out his buck knife, stuck it into the edge, and pried the door up, grabbing its edge and pulling it aside. "Inside, quickly," the old man urged. "I need to get everything in here back in order and get back inside before their sensor beams reach my property, or they will know that I was up to something."

Birk was the first one down the hole, followed by Cuddy, and then Michael, who paused halfway down and looked up at the old man. "I do not mean to sound ungrateful, but *why* are you helping us?"

"For my son...and for his son, as well. No man should outlive his heirs."

"But you are putting your *own life* at *risk*."

"We all die sooner or later," the old man insisted. "The only choice we have is how we *live*. If I am to die this day, I choose to do so in a manner that would make both my son and grandson proud."

The old man said no more as he moved the hatch back into position, forcing Michael down into the hiding place below. He quickly moved the dirt and straw back over the hatch, and then pushed with all his might to move the trailer back to its previous position, before attempting to restore the barn to its original condition, hiding all evidence of his guests.

CHAPTER FIVE

"Jump complete," Kenji reported.

Aiden glanced up from his console and out the forward windows. The cargo ship Prestipino was directly ahead of them, already filling half the window and growing larger with each passing second.

"Four contacts!" Sergeant Dagata reported over Aiden's comm-set. *"Dusahn fighter escorts. Peeling off to port and starboard. Turning to intercept us now."*

"We *are* the bait," Aiden commented.

"We have a firing solution," Kenji reported.

"Firing plasma torpedoes," Aiden announced as he pressed the firing button on his flight control stick. Three groups of four red-orange plasma torpedoes streaked away from under their gunship's nose, closing the distance between them and the Prestipino in the blink of an eye. All twelve torpedoes slammed into the cargo vessel's aft shields, causing them to shimmer in opaque, pale-orange flashes with each impact. It was frightening looking, to be sure, and likely shook the crew of the cargo vessel quite a bit, but their shields held.

"*Targets one and three are turning into us,*" Sergeant Dagata warned.

"How about somebody fires on them?" Aiden suggested.

"*Roll twenty to starboard, Captain,*" Ali requested over the comm-sets. Aiden didn't reply, simply tapping his flight control stick, pushing it momentarily to the right to initiate the roll and bring his port cannon turret to a more advantageous angle, as requested. A second later, the young specialist opened fire, sending successive bolts of plasma energy streaking toward the approaching fighters. The first Dusahn octofighter took several hits, causing its shields to flash reddishorange as it absorbed the incoming energy. She continued to pour the plasma bolts into the diving fighter as it too opened fire, causing the gunship's shields to flash, as well.

"Forward shields down to eighty percent," Kenji warned.

"Firing another round," Aiden announced as he sent another group of twelve low-powered plasma torpedoes toward the Prestipino. The first four torpedoes found the cargo vessel's aft shields, just as before, but the remaining torpedoes missed, as the target rolled into a turn to port in an effort to evade the incoming fire.

"*All four octo-fighters are engaging us,*" Sergeant Dagata warned.

The cockpit was flooded with repeated flashes of redorange light as the incoming fire slammed into their forward shields.

"Forward shields down to fifty percent," Kenji warned.

"First two targets are in the kill box," Sergeant Dagata announced.

The nearest attacking Dusahn octo-fighter suddenly exploded, as its shields failed, allowing the incoming fire from Ali's plasma cannons to reach its hull.

"*I got one!*" she exclaimed in glee.

"The last two fighters are entering the kill box," Sergeant Dagata announced.

"We're outta here," Aiden exclaimed, pressing the jump button.

Striker Three disappeared in a blue-white flash as it jumped clear of the engagement area. A split second later, jump flashes appeared to the left and right, as well as above. Red-orange balls of energy poured in from three sides at once, pummeling the shields of the remaining three octo-fighters. One of the fighters managed to jump away as the other two exploded. Then, just as quickly as they had appeared, the three gunships, which had jumped in and ambushed the remaining Dusahn fighters, jumped away in blue-white flashes.

"Jump complete," Kenji reported.

"Coming about," Aiden added. "Got anything?" he asked his sensor operator.

"One moment," Sergeant Dagata replied. "I've got the Prestipino, still rolling away to port...and a whole lot of debris!"

"Striker Leader to all Strikers," Captain Nash's voice called over comms. *"One bandit still active. Unknown position."*

"The Prestipino is jumping!" Sergeant Dagata reported.

"Did you get her track?" Aiden asked.

"Track and field energy levels," the sergeant assured him. *"Calculating her jump destination coordinates and sending them to you now."*

"I've got them," Kenji reported. "Turn to one five seven, twenty down."

Aiden immediately turned to the new heading as his copilot fed the estimated coordinates of the Prestipino into the jump drive. "Striker Three in the blind," Aiden called out over comms. "Prestipino has jumped. We are pursuing."

"Loading jump plot now," Kenji reported.

"What were the Prestipino's shields down to?" Aiden asked.

"Her aft shields were down to forty percent when we jumped," Sergeant Dagata replied. "Probably back up to at least sixty by now."

"Plot loaded."

"Jumping," Aiden announced as their windows turned opaque momentarily. Aiden looked out the windows but saw nothing. "Where is she?"

"Got her!" Sergeant Dagata reported. "One one five, five up! Two thousand clicks!"

"Changing course," Aiden reported.

"Plotting intercept jump," Kenji followed.

"She's powering up for another jump," the sergeant warned.

"Kenji," Aiden urged.

"Plotted and loaded," he replied.

Aiden pressed the jump button, and the windows turned opaque again. When they cleared, the Prestipino was directly ahead, closer than expected, completely filling their windows. "Oh, shit!" he exclaimed. "A little close, don't you think!"

"She's jumping!" Sergeant Dagata announced.

Aiden pressed the firing button on his flight control stick, sending twelve more plasma torpedoes into the cargo ship's aft shields. The Prestipino's shields flashed with the impact of the first eleven plasma torpedoes but collapsed completely just before the last one arrived. The cargo ship's propulsion section came apart, breaking away from the main body of the ship and spinning off to her starboard side, just as the ship's jump fields began to form. The spinning propulsion section exploded, sending debris flying in all directions and causing the Prestipino's jump fields to collapse before they could fully form.

"*Target's jump drive is down!*" Sergeant Dagata exclaimed.

"So is her main propulsion!" Aiden exclaimed, ducking as debris slammed into their forward shields and bounced harmlessly clear of their gunship.

"Target is disabled!" Sergeant Dagata added. "She's dead stick, unable to jump."

"Dags, send a comm-drone back to the engagement area," Aiden ordered. "Let them know our location."

"I'm on it," Sergeant Dagata replied.

* * *

Surprisingly, Birk had not fallen asleep. With a belly full of lousy food and total darkness surrounding him, he should have dozed off long ago. However, something was keeping him wide awake.

Perhaps it was the Dusahn troops who had just searched the ranch and all its outbuildings. It had been an hour since they heard the faint sound of men yelling back and forth to one another and stuff being moved about. It was difficult to hear much of anything, since there were about two meters of rock between them and the surface. What little they did hear was coming through the switchback tunnel which led to the hatch hidden under the trailer in the barn. The bend in the tunnel prevented handheld scanners from getting any readings from within their little cave, but it didn't stop sound from traveling. Because of this, few words had been exchanged between the three of them, even in whispers.

Birk leaned closer to Michael, who he knew was sitting nearby in the pitch-dark cave. "How much longer?" he asked in a barely audible whisper.

"I do not know," Michael replied in similar tones. "Why?"

"I gotta pee."

"Go ahead."

If there had been any light, Michael would have seen Birk frown.

A minute later, it was Cuddy who spoke. "Seriously?" he complained in a whisper. "Can you keep it to your side of the cave, at least?"

"Sorry."

"Quiet," Michael snapped.

"I think they're gone," Birk insisted. "In fact, I think they left a long time ago."

"Do you really want to take that chance?" Michael whispered. "Leaving one man in hiding is a very old trick."

"Why are you in such a hurry?" Cuddy wondered. "You gotta poop, too?"

"No," Birk defended. "But I'm not crazy about sitting around in my own pee."

"We don't enjoy it either," Cuddy replied. "Trust me."

"We can't stay down here forever," Birk insisted. "Sooner or later, we're going to have to take the chance."

Michael sighed. "He's right, I'm afraid. It would be better to come out while it is dark, in case someone is still here."

"If they searched and left, wouldn't the old man come tell us?" Cuddy suggested.

"That's what has me worried," Michael admitted.

"You think something happened to him?" Cuddy asked.

"I do not know," Michael replied. "But I intend to find out," he added, moving in the darkness toward the tunnel that snaked its way back and forth to the surface.

After several minutes of twisting and wiggling his way up the narrow switchback tunnel, Michael reached the hatch. He pushed upward on one edge, very slowly, straining his neck to get one eye into position to peek into the barn. There was very little light, just what moonlight was spilling through the partially opened barn door. For all he knew, there could be several Dusahn soldiers sitting on the other side of the nearby tractor, waiting for him.

However, if they knew he would come out in the barn, then they already knew about their hiding spot. If that were the case, they would have ordered them to come out or simply would have dropped a grenade down the hatch and been done with them.

Michael lay there for several minutes, his neck beginning to cramp up as he looked and listened for any indication that they were not alone, but no such indication came. Finally, he slowly and quietly slid the hatch aside, contorting his body further to squeeze between the hay-covered barn floor and the trailer above him.

Once out, he rolled quietly clear of the trailer and stood up. Michael looked around, checking behind everything in the barn large enough to conceal a human being. Once he was satisfied he was the only one inside, he pushed the trailer over a meter and whispered to Birk and Cuddy that they could now come out of hiding.

"Are they gone?" Cuddy asked after climbing out of the underground hiding place.

Michael peered out of the crack in the barn door, staring into the night, looking for any signs of movement. "I'm not seeing any movement. No vehicles, no troops, not anything."

"What about in the main house?" Cuddy wondered.

"The lights are still on, but I'm not seeing any movement there either," Michael replied, concern in his voice. "To be honest, that has me a little worried, also."

"Why?" Birk asked, stepping up behind the two of them, after climbing up from the hatch. "The old man always turned the lights on when he entered a room and off when he left. All old people do. It's a habit they picked up during the original Takaran occupation, when electrical power was difficult to come by and expensive."

"But he's got a fusion reactor, just like everyone else," Birk commented, pointing over his shoulder at the reactor in the corner of the barn.

"Fusion reactors in every building didn't come until long *after* the Takarans took over. It was one of the ways Caius tried to convince us that life was *better* under his rule. A lot of people refused to accept the reactors. I have a feeling the old man was one of them."

"You think they took him?" Birk asked.

"Or worse," Michael said. "Either way, we have to check on him. We owe him that much." Michael slowly pushed on the barn door, moving out into the open and heading toward the main house.

"I guess we should follow him," Cuddy said, looking at Birk.

"And here I thought we were supposed to lie low and survive," Birk grumbled, following Cuddy out the door.

* * *

"She's still got maneuvering," Sergeant Dagata reported. "And her jump drive is still operational."

"But her entire propulsion section is missing," Aiden exclaimed. "Hell, a quarter of her emitters were probably on that part of the ship."

"Emitters are independent of one another," Kenji reminded Aiden. "They're all fed power through dedicated lines. They're just timed to work together. If a few of them are offline the others can still form a jump field, as long as not too many of them are missing. It just takes longer for the field to fully form, and they won't be able to jump as far. But they could still jump...*theoretically*."

*"*Would *you* risk that jump?" Aiden asked. *"Theoretically*?"

"Probably not," Kenji admitted.

"Multiple jump flashes," the sergeant reported. "Three of them. Strikers One, Two, and Four."

"Three, Leader. What the hell happened?"

"Sorry, sir," Aiden apologized. "They tried to jump away. We pursued and jumped in a little close. We fired as they were trying to jump away again, and, well..."

"Leader to all Strikers," Captain Nash continued, ignoring Aiden's apology. "Move to over watch positions."

"You heard the man," Kenji said.

Aiden manipulated his flight controls, moving his gunship to their assigned watch position, in preparation for the Seiiki's arrival, to begin the next phase of the mission.

"One is launching a comm-drone," Sergeant Dagata reported.

"He sounded a little angry," Kenji said.

"Who, Nash?"

"Yeah, Nash."

"Nah."

"We weren't supposed to blow the tail off the Prestipino, you know."

Aiden said nothing, just glaring at his copilot who seemed to be taking great joy in Aiden's mistake.

* * *

Michael slowly opened the back door to the main house, peering inside. Like most ranch houses, the back door led to a mudroom which then led to the utility room, both of which seemed to be the only rooms in the entire house that were not lit. Michael moved through the mudroom and into the utility room, guided only by the light spilling through the partially open kitchen door. The utility room provided the first indication that the Dusahn had been in the house. Cupboards above the laundry unit were open, the laundry bin was knocked over, and clothing was scattered across the floor.

Michael continued to move quietly toward the kitchen, being careful not to disturb anything along the way. He paused at the door, peeking inside of the well-lit kitchen, but spotted no one.

The kitchen was also in disarray. The table was tipped over, pots and pans were strewn about, and the floor was littered with broken dishes. In addition, the refrigerator was standing open, and it looked as if much of the food stored within had been taken.

Like common thugs, Michael thought as he moved through the kitchen toward the living room. It was not an uncommon phenomenon among conscripted troops. He remembered his own days in service of the Takaran Empire. Stories abounded of soldiers taking whatever they wanted from the populations they were supposed to be protecting. He had even known one man who was quite methodical in his looting, planning to use his ill-gotten gains to fund his transportation home upon completion of his service. Ironically, that man had not survived long enough to complete his plan, and all that he had taken ended up in the hands of officers above him...men who were of noble houses and therefore, did not *need* such trinkets.

Michael moved out of the kitchen and through the dining room. That's when he saw something that made him stop in his tracks. A pair of legs, just beyond the doorway into the living room. They were at an angle, as if the man to whom they belonged was leaning back in a chair with his legs outstretched to relax.

Michael stood there for several seconds, frozen with indecision, the only sounds being that of his own breathing. "Sir?" he finally called, barely above a whisper. When he got no response, he took two steps forward, just enough to see the man's unmoving hands. One more step provided his answer. The edge of a pool of blood on the floor, just under the man's thighs.

Michael continued walking slowly forward, revealing the full view of the old man. He stood there, staring at the victim. The old man's expression told the horror of his death. His shirt was open, and his chest and abdomen had been sliced open with near surgical precision. His intestines were hanging out, and blood and bile were dripping from his severed colon.

The old man had been tortured. Michael was certain of it. And it had been brutal. Yet, the tough, old guy had not given them up to the Dusahn.

"Oh, my God," Cuddy exclaimed in a shocked, breathless whisper.

"Oh, fuck," Birk added as he came into the room, as well. "What happened?"

"He was tortured."

"Why?" Cuddy wondered.

Michael spotted something on the floor next to the chair in which the old man had died. A small cube, which he recognized as a 3D image projector. He bent over and picked it up, wiping it on his pant leg to get the blood off. Holding it in the palm of his hand, he pressed the small button on the side to activate the projector.

In the air before them was a meter-tall image of a man in uniform. He looked to be in his late thirties and was wearing the uniform of the Corinari...a lieutenant. Standing beside him was a much younger man, who bore a striking resemblance to the old man sitting dead in the chair beside him.

Michael felt a wave of emotion wash over him, as he recognized the man in uniform. "Because of him," Michael said, answering Cuddy's question. "I knew this man," he added, struggling to hold back tears. "His name was Waddell. This man must be his father." Michael began to lose it, squinting to keep control of his emotions as tears ran down his cheeks. "He didn't give us up, in order to honor his son and grandson, both of whom died in combat." Michael paused, sniffling. "He's with them now."

* * *

"What the hell are we doing here?" Josh wondered from the cockpit of the Seiiki. "The Prestipino's main propulsion is toast."

"She's still got maneuvering, and her jump drive might still work," Loki insisted. "If so, we could jump her to a safe location and wait for a tug to haul her back to the fleet for repairs."

"We're not even two jumps from the original engagement area," Josh argued. "And it's gonna take you guys at least half an hour to get inside and determine if the damn thing is salvageable. I say we cut our losses and head home."

"Intel says that ship is carrying a lot of useful cargo," Corporal Eliason said. "Medical supplies, consumables, small arms, energy rifles, even portable fusion reactors. If we can jump her to a safe location, we might at least be able to unload her."

"Guns, reactors, medical supplies?" Josh wondered. "*That* doesn't sound suspicious to you?" He looked at Loki.

"Sounds like the perfect *bait* to me."

"Good point," Loki agreed.

"I thought that myself," the corporal admitted. "But going over there now to investigate holds no more risk than any of the previous cargo ships we've boarded."

"Unless the whole thing is a trap," Josh insisted. "Let's not forget that one of the escort fighters is still unaccounted for. What if they went for reinforcements?"

"If they did, they left *before* the Prestipino jumped, so they don't know where she is, at the moment," the corporal argued.

"But they will shortly."

"Which is why we should stop talking and board her now," the corporal insisted.

"This is nuts," Josh argued, shaking his head.

"Maybe, but it's *my* call," Corporal Eliason reminded Josh. "My responsibility."

"And it's *my* responsibility to keep this ship, and her crew, safe," Josh argued. "And that means not flying her into what looks like a trap."

"If it is a trap, then they're going to wait until we're on board to spring it," the corporal insisted. "So, just get us on our way, and then move off to a safe distance, like usual. If something goes wrong inside, you can jump away."

"Sounds great," Josh agreed with a bit of sarcasm in his voice. "Except for one thing. You're taking Loki with you. And *that's* an unacceptable risk, since he's the *only* one with the training necessary to jump these captured cargo ships back to the fleet, using our pursuit-evasion algorithm."

"Agreed," the corporal replied. "Loki stays here. Once we secure the ship, we'll assess her condition. If she's able, we'll make another jump, rendezvous with you there, and bring Mister Sheehan aboard. Sound good?" "No," Josh replied, "but it *does* sound acceptable."

"Fantastic," Corporal Eliason said, relieved. "Get us onto that ship, then."

"You got it," Josh replied, turning back to his console.

As soon as the corporal left the Seiiki's bridge, Loki spoke up. "Thanks. I *really* did not want to go over there."

"I've always got your back, Lok," Josh replied. "You know that."

* * *

After what seemed an eternity, Birk finally broke the silence. "We have to decide what to do."

Michael looked up from where he had been sitting, staring at old man Waddell's body. "We should stay here for a while."

"I thought we were trying to get to Aitkenna?" Cuddy said.

"Ultimately, yes," Michael agreed. "But, as unfortunate as this man's death is, his sacrifice is an opportunity for us."

"I'm not following you," Birk admitted.

"The Dusahn have already been here. They tortured this man to death, and he revealed nothing of importance to them. Therefore, it is highly unlikely that they will return. We should be able to stay here for days, if need be, without fear of discovery."

"What about their satellites?" Cuddy asked.

"If the Dusahn have already swept this area, it is unlikely their satellites will be conducting scans any longer. Also, most of these ranch houses have sensor-blocking nets installed in their attic spaces from during the Takaran occupation. We should check that now, while the satellites are least likely to be looking in this area."

Birk looked at the old man's dead body. "What do we do with him? Maybe we should bury him, or something."

"No, we must leave everything as it is, including Mister Waddell's body," Michael insisted. "In case the Dusahn return."

"We're supposed to stare at a dead body for a few days?" Birk asked, surprised.

"I'm afraid we have little choice."

"Could we at least put a sheet over him, or something?" "I'm afraid not."

Birk sighed. "He's gonna start to smell soon."

"I know," Michael replied. "Perhaps we should stay out of this part of the house completely. The two of you gather up what you can of benefit. Food, water, that kind of thing. But try not to change the way things look. Don't put anything away, or touch or move anything that you don't have to. Understood?"

"I've got it," Birk replied.

"What are you going to do?" Cuddy wondered.

"I'm going up into the attic to check for those nets," Michael replied.

* * *

"*They're still not answering our hails,*" Loki reported over comms.

"That's alright," Corporal Eliason replied. "We brought a universal key. Pop the door, Inchin."

"*I'm on it*," the Ghatazhak soldier at the outer airlock door replied as he attached his override device to the door controller. Five seconds later, the red light on the control console turned green, and the outer doors slid open, disappearing into the cargo ship's hull. "*We're in.*"

"Inchin and Gazen," the corporal instructed.

The two Ghatazhak soldiers pulled themselves into the airlock, its artificial gravity pulling them to the floor so they could easily transition from floating to walking. Troopers Inchin and Gazen moved into the airlock with weapons held ready, positioning themselves on either side of the airlock's inner doors. Trooper Inchin leaned in just enough to peer through the portal in the left door as Trooper Gazen dropped to one knee to ready himself.

Corporal Eliason and Trooper Mitchell also moved into the airlock, and the corporal activated the outer doors, causing them to slide closed. Trooper Inchin reached up to the control console next to him and started the airlock pressurization cycle. "One minute to pressure."

"Seiiki, Eliason. We're about to enter. Maintain a safe distance."

"*Don't you worry,"* Josh replied.

"If any more Dusahn fighters show up, bug out," the corporal added.

"Yet another unnecessary instruction," Josh quipped.

"We really need to get another pilot," the corporal said, looking at Trooper Mitchell.

"And miss all this witty repartee?"

"Full pressure," Inchin announced. "Popping inner door."

Trooper Gazen pulled his energy rifle tight to his shoulder, readying himself to open fire if needed. Inchin activated the inner doors, causing them to slide open, giving them access to the interior of the Prestipino.

"Here we go," the corporal said, moving forward with his weapon high and ready. He stepped through the inner doors, immediately moving left as he swept his rifle from side to side. Trooper Mitchell followed suit, moving right as he swept the compartment in a similar fashion. The two men moved quickly to the far side of the compartment, taking up firing positions in case anyone came through the next hatchway leading into the corridor. As soon as the two men were set, Troopers Inchin and Gazen came out of the airlock, as well, moving straight ahead through the compartment and into the corridor.

"*Corridor is clear,*" Trooper Inchin reported.

"Seiiki, Eliason. We're in, moving to the bridge."

"Copy that."

"Aren't we splitting up, like usual?" Trooper Gazen asked.

"Negative," the corporal stated firmly. "If this *is* a trap, it's better we stay together. If we get to the bridge without any trouble, it's a pretty safe bet this *isn't* a trap."

"Jump flashes," Loki reported. "Two Cobra gunships." "Seiiki, Striker Leader. Sit rep."

"Leader, Seiiki," Loki replied. "Boarding party is on the Prestipino, headed for the bridge."

"Why aren't you with them?" Captain Nash wondered.

"The whole thing felt hinky, Captain. So, Corporal Eliason decided I should stay put until they secured the Prestipino."

"Understood."

"Did you guys find the fourth octo-fighter?" Josh asked.

"Negative," Captain Nash replied. "Two and Three are still looking. We'll take up over watch."

"Understood," Josh replied. He looked at Loki. "Man, I'd feel a whole lot better if they found that fourth fighter."

Corporal Eliason and Trooper Mitchell led the way, moving quickly forward through the Prestipino's central foreaft corridor. At each hatch, they paused to peek inside the compartments to be sure that no one surprised them from behind after they passed.

Finally, they reached the midship cargo bay hatch which, according to the tactical display on the inside of their helmet visors, was the last large compartment between them and the forward portion of the ship, where the crew quarters and bridge were located.

Corporal Eliason studied the tactical display on his visor. Something was wrong. "The next bay is half empty," he said. He looked at Trooper Mitchell. "Why would a cargo ship, *with escorts*, have a bay that was half empty?"

"Kill zone?" Trooper Mitchell surmised.

"That's what I'm thinking," the corporal replied. "Are you picking up any warm targets?"

"Negative," Trooper Mitchell replied. "But I am picking up a lot of dead spots that shouldn't be there, if you catch my drift."

Corporal Eliason nodded. "We pop stunners on twentysecond delays. You go deep right, I'll go deep left. Gazen and Inchin go shallow, left and right. We give them four targets to deal with. Stay moving, shoot in all directions. Switch to yellow fire. If a target is firing any other color, fucking kill it."

"Hell, yeah," Trooper Mitchell replied.

"Pass them over," the corporal instructed as he pulled out his two stun grenades and set their delays to twenty seconds each.

Troopers Inchin and Gazen pulled their stun grenades and set the delays, before handing them to Corporal Eliason and Trooper Mitchell.

"They won't fire until all four of us are inside," the corporal reminded his men. "So, you two hold back ten seconds to give us time to get forward, otherwise they'll have us pinned against the aft bulkhead."

"Got it," Trooper Inchin acknowledged as Trooper Gazen nodded agreement.

"Here goes nothing," the corporal declared. He hit the hatch button and the doors split, sliding into the bulkhead on either side of the hatchway. He stepped inside and ran to the left, tossing stun grenades high in the air toward the forward and aft corners of the large cargo bay as he ran. Trooper Mitchell did the same to the right. Ten seconds later, Troopers Inchin and Gazen charged in, as well, moving immediately toward the aft corners of the compartment. As soon as they entered, red energy weapons fire erupted from all sides, slamming into cargo containers and ricocheting off of bulkheads. It was a dizzying frenzy of fire, with only a few bolts of yellow energy being offered in return, in order to keep the enemy engaged.

Then, without warning, eight stun grenades went off in near unison. The effect would be overwhelming to anyone not wearing protective gear, such as that worn by the Ghatazhak, and Corporal Eliason was certain that the crew of the Prestipino would not be so equipped.

Unfortunately, he was wrong. The stun grenades did not stop the barrage of red energy weapons fire. In fact, it was getting more intense with each passing second.

Despite the increased onslaught, Corporal Eliason remained calm as he returned fire, methodically picking his targets in the most efficient pattern possible.

"*What the fuck?*" Inchin exclaimed.

"I've got ten to starboard, moving directly toward you, Eliason!" Mitchell warned.

"Fuck! I'm hit!" Inchin yelled over comms.

"Inchin! Sit rep!" Corporal Eliason barked as he scanned his tactical display and continued to return fire.

"*My left leg is fucked!*" Inchin replied. "*But I'm still in the fight, sir!*"

"Mitchell! Shift aft and cover Inchin!" the corporal ordered. "I'm heading up the middle, between the pods!"

"*Moving aft!*" Trooper Mitchell replied as he rose and ran toward Trooper Inchin, firing as he moved.

Corporal Eliason pulled a grenade from his belt, flipped the toggle, and tossed it toward the source of the heaviest incoming weapons fire, then ducked down as the grenade went off. He could hear the bloodcurdling screams of men as they were torn apart by the explosion, but he paid it no heed. Instead, he moved quickly between cargo pods, toward the center of the cargo bay, in an attempt to draw fire away from his wounded comrade. As he ran, he pulled another grenade, flipped the toggle, tossed it toward another group of enemy troops, and then dove for cover as the second grenade went off.

More screams were heard, but the red bolts of energy continued to rain down upon them from every corner of the bay. The corporal scrambled to his feet, putting his back against one of the cargo pods that he was using as cover, when two men in black and crimson combat armor came around the corner and charged toward him. The corporal swung his rifle around and opened fire. His first bolt of energy slammed into the nearest charging soldier, knocking him off his feet but not killing him. He continued firing, but the second soldier dodged to the right to avoid fire before diving toward the corporal with a knife in his hand. The corporal took the man's knife hand as he dove into him, rolling to his side with his attacker's momentum, tossing the enemy soldier over him, into the side of the next cargo pod. The corporal rolled onto his knees, straddling his attacker, falling into him and driving his right elbow into the man's visor, shattering it and driving the soldier's helmeted head into the deck. With his right hand, he twisted the enemy soldier's knife hand over, trying to use the extra strength provided by his assistive bodysuit to snap his attacker's wrist, but the enemy soldier's armor protected him well. Instead, he pushed the man's knife hand down into the deck, knocking the knife free. The corporal then dove forward, releasing his hold on his attacker and picking up the soldier's knife from the deck in front of him as he tucked and rolled. When he came up, the first soldier was back on his feet and nearly upon him. Corporal Eliason drove his newly acquired blade in between the abdominal plates in the enemy soldier's armor, thrusting it deep into the man's liver, and twisting it for good measure. Then, in a smooth motion, the corporal wrapped his free hand around the wounded soldier's head and rolled to the right, twisting the soldier's head around and snapping his neck. As the corporal fell, he pulled the dead man's body around with him, using the fallen soldier as a shield from the weapons fire of the second soldier. With no weapon in his hand, the corporal pulled the sidearm from the lifeless hulk lying atop him and opened fire in the direction of the second soldier. His first three shots glanced off the man's body armor, but his fourth shot found the enemy soldier's shattered visor, as well as the man's face behind it.

With both attackers dead, the corporal had a moment to push the dead man off of him and scramble for the nearest cover as energy weapons fire continued to slam into everything around him.

"*It's the fucking Zen-Anor!*" Trooper Gazen exclaimed.

Corporal Eliason paused a moment, checking the tactical display on the inside of his visor. There were at least twenty to thirty red dots located all around them. On the catwalks above and among the cargo pods throughout the cargo bay, the Zen-Anor soldiers were everywhere, and they were well armed and well trained. "Seiiki! Eliason! We're surrounded by two dozen Zen-Anor, with no fucking way out!" the corporal called over comms. "I need you to take out the Prestipino's power plant, and then target her forward cargo bay doors!"

"What?" Josh exclaimed in shock.

"Take out her power, then bust her open!" the corporal repeated even more urgently. *"And do it now, or we're all fucking dead!"*

"Oh, shit," Josh exclaimed as he grabbed his flight controls and put the ship into an accelerating turn to port.

"Marcus! Dalen!" Loki called out over comm-sets. "Get ready to target the Prestipino's forward cargo bay doors!"

"If we fire on those doors, everything and everyone in that cargo bay will be vaporized," Marcus warned.

"Target the hinges!" Loki instructed, "not the doors themselves!"

"Fuck that!" Corporal Eliason insisted. "Power first, then take out those fucking doors. On my authority!"

"Oh, my fucking God," Josh exclaimed as the cargo ship came into view. "Plasma torpedoes?"

"Charged and ready," Loki replied.

"I hope this doesn't blow the whole fucking ship up, with them in it," Josh muttered as he pushed the firing button on his flight control stick.

Four red-orange balls of plasma energy streaked away from the Seiiki, taking several seconds to reach the Prestipino ahead of them. On impact, the torpedoes tore into her hull, precisely where her main power plant was located. Multiple secondary explosions erupted from deep within the cargo ship, and her midsection burst open. As Josh rolled the ship over to give his gunners a better firing angle, all of the Prestipino's running lights went dark.

"Target has lost all power," Loki reported.

"Crack her open, guys," Josh instructed.

"Mags off! Helmets sealed!" Corporal Eliason barked over his helmet comms. A split second later, the ceiling over them came apart in brilliant flashes of red and orange. Sparks flew in all directions as power lines shorted out, and hydraulic fluid sprayed into the bay as lines were severed. Suddenly, the weakened doors over them tore away, and the entire compartment was open to the vacuum of outer space.

Men, equipment, and cargo alike went flying upward, as all were sucked out of the massive cargo bay. Energy weapons fire, although greatly reduced, continued to fly, only it was poorly directed and was firing in *all* directions, even away from them.

Corporal Eliason found himself tumbling into space, drifting away from the Prestipino, bumping into cargo pods and Zen-Anor soldiers as he spun about. He felt a hand grab at his shoulder and a knife blade glance off his helmet. The blow caused him to spin halfway around to his left, and he spotted a Zen-Anor soldier attempting to shove his knife into his neck. The corporal raised his left arm to block the parry, reaching for his own blade from his thigh sheath, pulling it, and driving it into the neck joint of his attacker. The wounded soldier let go of the corporal, grasping the wound in his neck as it spilled blood and precious oxygen into space. Within moments, the man stopped moving, his face and eyes bulging as the vacuum around him took his life.

Corporal Eliason finally managed to activate his attitude thrusters, gaining control and ending his tumbling. He thrusted and spun himself around, just in time to spot the Prestipino as her midship starboard bay doors opened, revealing a self-powered heavy cannon operated by two Zen-Anor standing behind the weapon in the open doorway. "Seiiki! Seiiki! Portable, self-powered gun emplacements in the target's side bays! Take that fucking ship out! Repeat! Take the Prestipino out!"

"What did he just say?" Josh wondered.

"He said to take it out," Loki realized.

"What about the crew?" Josh asked over comms.

"Fuck the crew!" Captain Nash barked as his gunship flew past the Seiiki's port side. "They're probably dead anyway!"

The gunship opened fire, sending a barrage of plasma torpedoes into the cargo ship, tearing her apart in a fiery, but short-lived, explosion.

"Jesus!" Loki exclaimed.

"Eliason!" Josh called out. "Are you alright?" He looked at Loki while he waited for a reply. "Seiiki to any Ghatazhak, do you copy?"

"This is Mitchell," the comms finally crackled. *"I'm alright. I'm with Inchin. His comms are down, but he's alive. We could use a ride, though."*

"We're on our way," Josh assured him.

"I'm picking up transponders for Eliason and Gazen," Loki reported. "They're still breathing."

"Eliason! Gazen!" Josh called. "If you can hear us, we've got your transponders, and we're coming to get you!"

"Seiiki, Mitchell. There are still Zen-Anor floating about, and they're armed and fucking determined, so watch out."

"Marcus! Dalen! Feel free to fire on any hostiles you spot! Just don't shoot our guys!"

"Make it quick, Josh," Captain Nash insisted. "If this was an ambush, I expect fighters will show up soon." "Great," Josh replied.

CHAPTER SIX

Despite being a prisoner for nearly two months, Jorus Loden still conducted himself with all the pride and professionalism expected of a man of his station. His prison uniform was clean and well pressed, appearing as if new, and his hair and goatee were perfectly groomed. He appeared every bit the man he had been when he first arrived on Earth seven years ago.

As expected, he showed no surprise when he was led into the warden's private office and found, not the chief administrator of the facility in which he was incarcerated but, rather, the President of the North American Union-the leader of both the Earth and Sol Alliance. The man standing before him in a suit and tie, waiting for him with an equally unreadable expression, was technically his enemy, but Jorus could not help but respect both the man and the office. Such respect went part and parcel with his position as the Jung Ambassador to Earth.

"Ambassador Loden," President Scott greeted with a nod.

"President Scott. To what do I owe this honor?" the ambassador asked, extending his hand.

One of the president's two bodyguards stepped forward, his hand held out to block the contact. He inspected the ambassador's hand, then his sleeve, and then patted him down from head to toe.

"My apologies," the president offered. "I instructed otherwise, but they refused to listen."

"I take no insult, I assure you," the ambassador insisted. "Such are the times, I'm afraid."

The bodyguard nodded his approval to the president, then he and his cohort stepped back, assuming positions on either side of the well-appointed office.

"Please, Ambassador," the president said, gesturing toward the seat next to him.

Ambassador Loden took his seat, as did President Scott. The president then leaned forward, touching the soundsuppression field generator sitting on the small table between them. Once the green light came on, the president began. "My biggest regret will always be that I did not have this conversation with you at the outset of this situation."

"My response would have been easily anticipated," the ambassador admitted. "The logistics of linear, faster-thanlight communications systems are somewhat limiting."

"Which is why your operatives have been piggybacking messages to your leaders, via the jump-comm diplomatic link between our worlds, for years now," the president replied.

Other than a slight rise of his left eyebrow, the ambassador still showed no emotion. "I take it this conversation is 'off-the-record', allowing us to be more direct than men in our positions might otherwise be?"

"That is my hope, yes," the president agreed.

Ambassador Loden smiled. "Then, perhaps you should call me Jorus."

"Please, call me Dayton," the president replied.

Ambassador Loden nodded. "What is on your mind, Dayton?"

"You are, no doubt, aware that several Jung warships trespassed into Alliance space fifty-six days ago," the president began. "I am aware of the reports, yes."

"And that, when ordered to withdraw, several of these ships engaged in armed conflict with Alliance ships."

"Again, I am aware of the reports," the ambassador stated, obviously choosing his words quite carefully.

"At the same time, warships, many of which were of Jung design, invaded the Pentaurus cluster, conquering the Takar and Darvano systems, both of which are allies of Earth, killing hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of people, military *and* civilian. Were you aware of this fact, as well?"

"They do allow us to watch the news in here," the ambassador stated, already tiring of the president's approach.

"Are you saying that you had no foreknowledge of these actions?"

"As I have already attested, yes," the ambassador replied. "I must say, *Dayton*, if your intent is a direct, *informal* exchange, your approach is less than inspiring."

President Scott took a deep breath, letting it out slowly. "Old habits, I'm afraid."

Ambassador Loden smiled. "Perhaps I can be of assistance, Dayton. It is my belief that these ships, whomever they may belong to, were not acting under the authority of the Jung Empire. And while I understand why you felt a retaliatory response was needed, I regret that you did not speak to me first, as well, for such death and destruction could have been avoided, and all of this," the ambassador added, gesturing with a sweeping motion of his arm, "might also have been avoided."

"New intelligence has convinced us that the trespassing ships were operated by the Dusahn, *not* the Jung," the president stated. Ambassador Loden finally revealed an emotion in his expression, one of considerable surprise. "The *Dusahn*? Are you *certain* of this?"

"We are certain the *Dusahn* have invaded the Pentaurus cluster, and we are *reasonably* certain the Dusahn also operated the Jung ships that trespassed into Alliance space. We suspect that this was a false-flag operation, executed with the hope of preventing forces in the Sol sector from coming to the aid of our allies in the Pentaurus cluster."

"I see," the ambassador replied. His mind was obviously in overdrive, contemplating all the possible ramifications of this new information. "And was their false-flag operation successful?"

"You *are* a prisoner, are you not?"

Ambassador Loden smiled, nodding. "Then, the Dusahn have somehow acquired your jump drive technology?"

President Scott couldn't help but notice a hint of pleasure in the ambassador's tone. "That would be correct."

"And your next question would be, do the Jung have this technology, as well?"

The president said nothing.

"Unfortunately, I can neither confirm nor deny this. As you might expect, if, in fact, the Jung *did* possess such technology, it is highly unlikely they would reveal this to me, for fear of a meeting such as this."

"Of course," the president said.

Ambassador Loden, who was quite adept at reading people, noticed a hint of disappointment in the president's voice. "Dayton, allow me to share with you what I *do* know. I know that the Jung science directorate has been attempting to acquire, and or recreate, your jump technology long before the Aurora made her first jump. As you probably know, we have had spies on your world since before your people were *aware* of our existence. Yet, to my knowledge, all our efforts have yielded little to no success."

President Scott sighed. "You will forgive me if I take your statement with a grain of salt."

"An interesting expression," the ambassador said, appearing entertained, "but, yes."

"What can you tell me about the Dusahn, Jorus?"

The ambassador leaned back in his chair. "The Dusahn were once the most powerful military caste in all the empire. More than half of the Jung's forces fell under their control, a fact that, at the time, worried the leadership caste greatly."

"What happened to them?"

"The leadership castes decided to disband them, to break them up into smaller ones, so no one military caste controlled enough firepower to overturn any other caste or group of castes."

"In order to protect the empire itself," the president surmised.

"In a manner of speaking. The proposal was made in secret, but the Dusahn learned of it and took action before the vote could be held. They attempted to seize control by force. Our history refers to it as the 'Day of Blood'."

"I take it they failed."

"Yes, but only by the narrowest of margins."

"What I don't understand is why they were allowed to leave," the president wondered. "No disrespect intended, but from what I've seen of the Jung, I would have expected a more severe punishment."

"The Dusahn caste did not *fail*, not in the sense that you might understand," the ambassador explained. "Rather, the battle reached an impasse. I believe you would call it a stalemate. It became obvious that no matter who might be victorious, the cost would be more than either side could possibly bear. The empire would be no more. And so, the Jung Leadership Council offered the Dusahn an out. They were allowed to disengage, and to keep what remained of their forces, on the promise that they would depart Jung space, never to return."

"Exile."

"Precisely."

"And the Jung never heard from the Dusahn again?"

"Directly, no. We did keep an eye on them as best we could, however. For centuries, they wandered the galaxy, feeding on small colonies formed by those who had escaped your bio-digital plague, but to our knowledge, they never found a civilization with sufficient industrial or technological capacity on which to build their *own* empire. At best, they were barely able to maintain the few dozen ships with which they had departed. Unfortunately, we lost track of them more than a hundred years ago."

"Is that all you know about them?" the president wondered.

"I know that they are not to be taken lightly. The Dusahn were once the greatest warriors in all the empire. Their Zen-Anor troops rival the Ghatazhak who helped you drive our forces from your world. They are ruthless, and they do not suffer defeat well. In fact, many Jung historians assert that, prior to their departure, the Dusahn swore they would someday return and conquer the Jung, once and for all."

"They *said* that, and your leaders *still* let them walk away?"

"Not directly, no. It was what you call a *veiled* threat. Of course, that was centuries ago, and probably a dozen or so generations of leaders, of both the Jung *and* the Dusahn, have come and gone since then."

"Then, your leaders are not concerned with the Dusahn's actions?"

"I doubt my leaders are even *aware* of the Dusahn's actions. My staff and I were taken into custody *before* we could send that information back to Nor-Patri."

"And if they knew about the Dusahn's actions in the Pentaurus cluster?"

Ambassador Loden took a long breath, letting it out slowly. "I honestly do not know. On the one hand, it might quell the anti-Alliance fervor that has been building within our population since the cease-fire began. On the other hand, there are still many who believe the Dusahn were right, that the leadership caste has gotten soft and no longer follows the original edicts of our founders."

"And what are those edicts?"

"That one must take what is needed to survive and use it to create order so that *all* may survive."

"And what does the current leadership believe?"

"Let's just say that our interpretation of the word 'take' is in question," the ambassador replied.

"I don't understand," the president admitted.

"The Jung language is really a conglomeration of many languages. The original edicts were not written in the same language that our people speak today. Hence, the translation can vary. Many believe that the word 'take' means 'to obtain', as in through barter, trade, purchase, or negotiation. Those who believe in the literal translation understand 'take' to mean 'to obtain by use of force'. *That* was the basic disagreement between the Jung leadership caste and the Dusahn. According to history, Lord Issias Dusahn believed it was the *responsibility* of the Jung to rebuild the human empire but to do so in an orderly fashion that would ensure the safety and well-being of *all* humanity. He believed untempered freedom inevitably led to anarchy, and that such was the cause of the bio-digital plague...the plague that nearly destroyed all of humanity." The ambassador smiled. "Ironically, the Dusahn once wanted to obliterate the Earth, and all the core worlds, in order to ensure the plague was *completely* erased from existence. It was the original Jung leadership caste, the very *same* caste that your Admiral Galiardi wants to destroy, who once saved all your worlds from destruction."

"And here we stand, on the verge of war," the president muttered.

"It is an unfortunate reality. Even more unfortunate is that it may be inevitable."

"How so?"

"Many of my people wish this war to occur, regardless of the cost."

"Surely they understand the level of destruction that would occur?" the president said. "The number of lives that would be lost would be *staggering*. We are talking *trillions* of lives, on *both* sides. The result could be worse than the plague itself."

"And the Jung Empire is better suited to rebuild after such a war," Ambassador Loden insisted.

"And your people would be willing to make such a sacrifice?"

"People do not always think clearly when threatened, Dayton."

"Quite true," the president replied.

"Is *this* why you came to speak with me today?" the ambassador wondered. "To learn about Jung history?"

President Scott stared off to one side, unsure of what to say.

This did not go unnoticed by Ambassador Loden. "Something troubles you, Dayton?"

"I appreciate how candid you are being with me now, Jorus. More so than you could possibly know."

"Yet, you do not feel able to do so in kind," the ambassador surmised.

"Your recounting of your 'Day of Blood' worries me, as I fear I face a similar threat."

"Michael Galiardi," the ambassador surmised.

"He very much wants to launch a first strike against your remaining battle platforms."

"And you oppose this?"

"I do," the president replied. "But he makes a convincing case, and I do not know how much longer I can control him."

"You fear a coup, then?"

"You are one of three people to whom I have admitted this fear," the president said. "You, my daughter, Miri, and the head of my protection detail."

"I am honored." Ambassador Loden thought for a moment. "I still do not understand *why* you are here."

"I suppose I was hoping to gain some insight... Something that I might be able to use."

"Let us pretend, for a moment, that I *truly* speak for the Jung leadership... That my promises to you would immediately result in actions throughout the empire. What would you say to me?"

President Scott sighed. "That I am truly sorry for retaliating against you fifty-three days ago, and that I suspect the only way we can defeat the Dusahn is if we join forces to stand against them."

"And how would you suggest we do such a thing?" the ambassador asked. "What would you have us do?"

"Stand down all your military forces, and promise not to attack us, so that we might send *our* forces to deal with the Dusahn."

"Then you believe you can defeat them?"

"They have only a few dozen ships," the president replied. "Jump-equipped, yes, but still not in numbers that we cannot overcome. But we cannot do so while we are protecting ourselves against *your* forces."

"So, if we promise to leave you alone, you will deal not only with a threat against *your* alliance, but also one against the Jung Empire, as well," the ambassador surmised.

"Precisely," the president replied.

"Not an unreasonable request. And were / the leader of the Jung Empire, it is one that I would be inclined to grant. However, given the current political environment, and what I suspect is a very pro-war public opinion on Nor-Patri at the moment, it is doubtful that the *leadership* caste would be so inclined."

"Even if I made the appeal in person?"

Ambassador Loden laughed. "No disrespect intended, but I'm afraid you would meet the same fate as your son."

President Scott held his head down as he sighed. "Then there is no hope."

"I am hardly qualified to tell you what to do, Dayton," Ambassador Loden said. "But I have been observing your world, and your people, for seven years now. There are many similarities between our worlds *and* our people. One of them is that what the *people* believe to be right usually is, regardless of whether it is, or is not."

President Scott laughed. "Could that *be* any more cryptic?"

"In politics, the truth is merely a matter of perception." Ambassador Loden could see the disappointment on the president's face. "I am sorry that I could not help you more."

President Scott looked up at the ambassador. "My father once told me that sometimes a politician must trust the public to come to the right conclusion on their own, when given the facts. He believed that it was his responsibility, *as* a public servant, to make sure the people *had* the facts so they could make the correct decision, even if that decision was *not* the one he hoped for."

At that moment, President Scott knew what he had to do.

* * *

"My lord," General Hesson said, announcing his presence to his leader, whose back was turned.

"General Hesson," Lord Dusahn replied without turning. He gazed out the window at the hills surrounding Answari, the capital of his new empire. "I trust you have seen the latest intelligence reports from Rakuen?"

"I have, my lord."

"Are you not troubled by the news?"

"*Concerned*, yes. If the Rakuens agree to join the Karuzari Alliance and are allowed to outfit all of their Gunyoki fighters with jump drives, it will make the Karuzari far more formidable."

"Five hundred fighters, alone, cannot defeat us," Lord Dusahn insisted.

"Alone, I would agree. However, if used smartly, and in conjunction with larger vessels, they could pose a threat to the stability of our fledgling empire."

Lord Dusahn turned around, the general's choice of words to describe the new Dusahn Empire caused him concern. "And when the Teyentah is completed, what then?"

"The Teyentah will be a valuable asset to the empire, my lord. However, if we truly wish to ensure our dominance over this sector of the galaxy, and guarantee the future of the empire, more ships will be needed. And the sooner we can build them, the better."

"And how can we accomplish this?" Lord Dusahn wondered.

"We will need a much greater workforce and industrial capacity, I'm afraid."

Lord Dusahn took his seat behind his desk, leaning back and staring at the ceiling, deep in thought. "We will offer greater salaries and benefits for those willing to build our ships. We will put out the call to all worlds within the cluster, and offer transportation and housing to all who answer that call."

"No disrespect, my lord, but how will we pay for this?"

"We will increase our shares of the noble houses" profits."

"The nobles will not be happy, my lord," General Hesson warned.

"I do not care about the happiness of the nobles," Lord Dusahn scowled.

"Their happiness is necessary to maintain stability, my lord."

Lord Dusahn sighed, rolling his eyes. "I so look forward to the day when their happiness is no longer required."

"As do I, my lord."

"We shall expand their access to markets outside of the Pentaurus cluster, by making more jump ships available for their use," Lord Dusahn pronounced. "That will replace the profits lost to our share increase and add to *our* revenue stream, as well."

"A wise decision, my lord."

Lord Dusahn sighed again. "Tell me truthfully, my dear general, am I the only one who misses being able to enslave entire populations and *force* them to serve us?" General Hesson smiled. "Your forefathers would be proud, my lord."

"How long until the Teyentah is completed?"

"Trials should begin in a few weeks," General Hesson replied.

"Offer bonuses to all who complete their work ahead of schedule," Lord Dusahn ordered. "We need that ship in service *now*."

"That may not be wise, my lord. Such bonuses can lead to substandard work."

"Which is exactly what *trials* are meant to uncover," Lord Dusahn reminded him. "Make the bonuses payable *after* the Teyentah completes her trials. I want her flying in two weeks' time, maximum."

"Even if she is not fully battle ready?" General Hesson wondered.

"A lap around the system, blowing up a few asteroids with her big guns, is all it will take to dissuade the Karuzari from venturing into this system," Lord Dusahn insisted. "Then we can send ships to deal with Rakuen."

"We might not need to wait that long to deal with the Rakuen threat," General Hesson said.

Lord Dusahn looked at his trusted advisor, one eyebrow raised. "What did you have in mind?"

"A change in strategy," General Hesson replied. "One not *worthy* of the Dusahn, yet effective, nonetheless."

"I'm listening," Lord Dusahn said.

* * *

Krispin had barely started his breakfast when Mister Dakota sat down across the booth from him.

"How's the food here?" Mister Dakota asked, placing a small sound-suppression field generator on the table between them and activating it. "It was fine, until ten seconds ago," Krispin replied.

"You worked in the restaurant business once, didn't you?" Mister Dakota said, picking up the order pad and tapping the screen to view the menu.

"As a teenager," Krispin replied. "For one summer, just before I enlisted."

"Then you shouldn't have a problem with your new mission."

Krispin stared directly at Mister Dakota while he took his first bite. "What mission?"

Mister Dakota placed an envelope on the table, to his left, sliding it closer to Krispin's side of the table. "You're going to work for a caterer as a server. Big event. Lots of bigwigs. You'll probably even make a few hundred in tips."

"What, now you're an employment agent?"

"It's the only way to get you inside."

Krispin looked at Mister Dakota again. "Inside where?"

"The Founders' Day celebration at the family estate of President Scott." Mister Dakota slid the envelope closer to Krispin. "IDs, shuttle tickets, new residence information... Everything you'll need to get in."

"And what do I do when I get in?"

"You know what to do," Mister Dakota insisted.

"With my bare hands?"

"A weapon will be provided," Mister Dakota promised. "You will not be our only operative at the event."

"Then, why do you need me?" Krispin wondered.

"You're the asset. You're the one with the proper motivation. They're just the support."

"What about the president's security fields?" Krispin asked. "They're active whenever he's outside the capitol building."

"Leave that to us," Mister Dakota promised.

"What happens afterwards?" Krispin asked as he continued with his breakfast.

"On the chip in the envelope," Mister Dakota explained. "Bio-printed, self-erasing, so memorize it before you deactivate it," he added as he rose.

"You're not eating?"

"I don't wish to spoil your appetite," Mister Dakota said as he turned to exit.

Krispin grabbed his handler's jacket sleeve, stopping him. "After this, she will be released."

"We'll talk."

"She *will* be released," Krispin repeated, more confidently than before. "Or I'll come for *you* first."

Mister Dakota smiled. "Finish the mission. Then you and Sara will get your 'happily ever after'."

"You had better hope so," Krispin warned, letting go of Mister Dakota's sleeve and returning his attention to his meal.

* * *

Suvan returned to his room, after his shift, somewhat later than usual. Most days, travel between the orbital shipyard and the surface was quick and efficient. Others, it took nearly as long as the shift itself. This had been one of those days.

Due to the delays, Suvan had chosen to skip his usual stop at the diner on his way home. Since the last time his return had been delayed, he had stocked up on mealreplacement bars and other snacks, just in case. Tonight, he would dine on acqai berry, walla nut bars, and jeran juice.

After kicking off his shoes and grabbing his dinner from the shelf, Suvan plopped down in his chair and unwrapped the first of the three bars he planned to eat. As he took his first bite, he looked around his tiny room, amused at how

much he had changed. Life as a common laborer had transformed him more than he would have expected. The first change he had noticed was the manner in which he spoke. This had been a conscious decision, necessitated by the need to blend into the crowd. The second, another conscious decision, had been his choice of attire. Suvan had worn either suits or uniforms most of his adult life. Even his casual wear would have been considered unnecessarily formal by those he associated with these days. Now, work clothes were the norm. He donned them in the morning and before his evening shower. Even removed them his sleepwear had changed. Gone were the expensive, silken pajamas, replaced by a plain t-shirt and underwear, making getting ready in the morning quick and easy. In the past, he would have started and ended each day with a shower. Now, he often fell asleep in his chair and didn't shower until the following evening.

Had the hotel not provided laundry service with his room, Suvan wondered if he would even bother changing into clean clothing every day. Long hours and hard work changed a man. It changed his priorities. Little things like sleep became immensely valuable, since it was not always available. Opportunities to take little breaks, a minute here, a minute there, added up more so than one might think. It almost made him feel guilty for all the times he had chastised underlings for not working dutifully every minute of the duty shift, while in command of the Avendahl. Life as a working man was different, even if he was only pretending to be one of them.

Suvan finished his first meal bar, deciding to check his messages before starting his second one. Being cooped up all day long, in a crawler in space, meant that messages didn't actually reach his comm-unit until he made it back to the surface. Hence, it had become routine to check them once he reached his room for the night.

Suvan picked up his comm-unit and began scrolling through the usual messages. Invitations from coworkers to hang out on their days off. A call from a friend of a coworker, looking to set him up with someone's sister, or niece, he couldn't remember which, but he was certain his wife would not approve.

Suvan put his comm-unit down for a moment, thinking about his wife. As expected, she had been vehemently opposed to his self-appointed mission. And she had not even known what he was planning to do; only that he was going to Takara to find a way to fight the Dusahn. If she had known the truth, she likely would have shot him, herself, just to keep him from leaving. But in the end, she had realized it was something he had to do. It was one of the reasons she had married him in the first place.

Suvan sighed, picked up his comm-unit again, and continued scrolling through his messages. One of them caught his attention. A confirmation that something he had ordered, from a manufacturer on Haven, had shipped.

Suvan sat up suddenly, immediately sending the message, via local-link, to the small device Terig had given him. The device quickly located the hidden message attached to the seemingly harmless shipping confirmation message. After a few seconds, the indicator light on the device flashed three times, signifying it had completed its task.

Suvan raised the device to view the decrypted, hidden message. His eyes widened, and his mouth fell open slightly. The Karuzari had devised a plan for stealing the Teyentah, and the further Suvan read, the more he realized that the plan might actually work. Dayton Scott stared out the window as his shuttle streaked across the continent, high above cities below.

"Have you decided what you're going to say in your Founders' Day speech?" Miri asked from the seat across the aisle of the presidential shuttle.

Dayton turned to look at his daughter. "The truth."

"Which truth?" she wondered.

"Everything," her father replied. "The Dusahn, their false-flag operation, that Galiardi knew all along the Jung were not involved, that Nathan is alive and leading the fight in the Pentaurus cluster... Hell, I was even thinking of admitting my part in keeping the jump drive project secret a decade ago."

Miri didn't respond at first, choosing instead to just study her father. He had aged tremendously over the past decade, and he was already one of the oldest presidents in recent history. Like all of the Scott men, he had been blessed with genes that refused to age at the same rate as most, a trait she hoped she had inherited. But the stress of leadership, combined with the loss of his wife and sons, had overcome his genetic advantage. But now, having said just those few words, he looked twenty years younger in the blink of an eye. "You're sure about this?"

"Quite sure," he told her with a smile.

"What do you think will happen?"

The president shook his head. "I honestly do not know," he admitted. "But whatever happens, it will be the will of the people, and not of one man who *believes* he knows what's best for all."

"And if they side with Galiardi and *want* to launch the strike against the Jung's battle platforms?"

"Then I will approve the strike, and we will go to war once again."

"And if they side with you and call for the admiral's head?"

"Then I will ask for his resignation," the president replied confidently.

"What if he refuses?" Miri asked, playing the role of devil's advocate.

"Then I will order his subordinate to place him under arrest."

"And if his subordinate..."

"Enough," the president interrupted. "I get your point. I refuse to believe that the man / entrusted with the defense of our world...of *all* our worlds—would disobey a direct and lawful order given to him by his superior." The president raised his hand, sensing another statement from his daughter. "And if I am mistaken, I will deal with *that* problem *if* and *when* it arises."

Miri sighed. "You're putting a lot of faith in both the people *and* the system."

"I have no other choice," the president admitted. "I have dedicated my entire life to our system of government. It is *supposed* to be based on truth and transparency. It is *supposed* to be by and for the people, with direct *involvement* from the people. If I am to go down in history as a fool, I would prefer to be deemed a fool for sticking to my beliefs. If doing so results in failure, then it will be the *system* that is flawed, not me. *That*, I can live with."

Miri reached over and took her father's hand. "Mom would be proud of your decision."

Dayton Scott smiled. "And then she would circle the wagons to prepare for our defense."

"Which is precisely what I plan on doing," Miri replied with a smile.

CHAPTER SEVEN

"This is a completely different form of combat," Commander Verbeek explained to the Gunyoki pilots gathered in the pilot briefing room. "Maneuvers to avoid target locks by your attackers are no longer necessary. Maneuvers to slip into firing position or to fool your opponent into flying through your field of fire are a waste of time. Jump fighting is about not being where you were expected to be and jumping into positions from which you can immediately fire on your opponent, while still maintaining a clear jump line."

"A clear jump line?" Alayna asked, unfamiliar with the concept.

"The jump drive does not allow you to jump *through* solid matter. Therefore, maintaining a clear jump line, or being able to quickly *turn* to one, is paramount to our survival. This, more than *any other aspect* of jump-fighter combat, must be remembered. It must *always* be on your mind, from the moment you close your canopy to the moment you open it again."

"How do we know if our jump line is clear?" Tariq wondered.

"The jump navigation computer is tied to your ship's sensors," Loki explained. "It will not allow you to execute a jump *through* anything it detects as being an obstacle. In other words, if you press the jump button while your jump line is obstructed, you will not jump." "What *will* happen?" Tham wondered. "Other than your attacker shooting you in the ass."

"When your jump line is not clear, you will have a red light at the top center of your console," Loki explained. "When it is green, your jump line is clear. If you need to jump, and your jump light is red, alter your course. Usually, a degree or two is more than enough, especially if the obstruction is further away."

"Another way to keep a clear jump line is to keep your jumps short. The more densely populated the airspace, the shorter your jumps should be," Commander Verbeek suggested. "I like to keep my emergency escape jump set to a single kilometer."

"That seems like an insufficient distance," Tariq said.

"Not really," the commander replied. "It's just far enough to get out of trouble, but close enough that you don't lose your target tracks completely. It only takes two seconds for your tactical sensors to update all your target tracks, when you only jump a kilometer away." Commander Verbeek could see that the four Gunyoki pilots were confused, which was not surprising. Jump-fighter combat was very different than standard dogfighting. "Imagine you're tracking a target from ten clicks out..."

"Clicks?" Tham wondered.

"Kilometers," the commander explained, continuing. "You've got a missile lock, and you're about to launch on the target, when a bogey jumps in behind you and is about to fire. If you turn to a clear line and jump five clicks, you've escaped your attacker's lock, but you've lost your lock on the target you were tracking, *and* you're now five clicks closer to it. Your targeting system will take five to eight seconds to determine both your location and that of your original target, by which time that target will probably have turned. So, you're basically starting from scratch. But if your escape jump was only one click, you'll get your track back in a second and can still launch on the target."

"Sounds confusing," Alayna admitted.

"At first, yes," the commander agreed. "But you quickly become accustomed to it. The first thing you have to do is stop thinking in terms of time. Every time you press that jump button, you're taking a shortcut through time. At a thousand clicks an hour, it will take you an hour to fly one thousand kilometers. But if you press the jump button, you fly it in two seconds." The commander pressed a button on his podium, causing a training vid to play on the view screen on the wall of the pilot briefing room. "The mission you see depicted in this vid will take approximately three hours to perform, from liftoff to touchdown. Two hours and thirtyseven minutes of that is spent flying in a straight line from one waypoint to the next. If you remove the time spent in straight-line flight, keeping only the time spent for liftoff, touchdown, turns, speed changes, and, of course, weapons launch, the total mission time is reduced to twenty-three minutes. All because you *jumped* from waypoint to waypoint, instead of getting there through traditional linear flight."

The commander paused, watching the room full of Gunyoki pilots as they began to see his point. "Another benefit in this mission scenario is that, since you are jumping from waypoint to waypoint, you don't have to carry as much propellant. This means you can either carry more ordnance, or you can enjoy better performance due to a reduced vessel mass."

"So, you see, there is more to jump-fighter combat than just pushing the jump button," Vol added. "Indeed," the commander agreed. "Another error that pilots, making the transition from traditional dogfighting to jump fighting, often make is failure to apply the advantages of the jump drive to all three axes. Just as a one or twodegree course change, followed by a jump of only a few kilometers, can move your jump exit point by hundreds of meters, a change in pitch, be it up or down relative, can create a similar change in the relative altitude of your jump exit point. Thinking in all three dimensions is crucial."

"So, should we start by simply replacing all straight-line flight with jumps?" Tariq asked.

beginning," Commander Verbeek "That's good а admitted, "but doing so can lead to bad habits. You have to think differently. Luckily, Gunyoki fighters are limited to space, so you don't ever have to worry about aerodynamics, lift, drag, and all that. The best advice I can give you is to think of your ship as a mobile weapons platform. The jump drive doesn't care which way your ship is facing when you jump. It jumps you along your line of flight, regardless of your attitude." Commander Verbeek pressed another button on the podium, activating the airborne drawing field. With touches of his fingers, he drew targets in the air in front of him as he spoke. "You have targets here, here, and here. You are over here. If you jump a straight-line to put yourself in cannon range of the first target, you will make the kill, but you will have to change course to jump to the second target and then the third. Each one of those jumps will take several seconds to calculate and execute, not to mention the few seconds you will need to fire on each target along the way. However, if you average the distances between each target and create a series jump with five-second intervals between jumps, you can take the first target with guns, the second with missiles, and the third with guns, again."

"Couldn't you also launch missiles on targets two and three before you jump in and take target one with guns?" Alayna suggested.

"You could, but target three would have several seconds to detect and evade the incoming missiles. Furthermore, each one of these targets is a full three light seconds apart, which means they'll only have two seconds of sensor contact with you before you jump to your next location. That's not enough time for the human brain to comprehend the threat and calculate a response. It takes half a minute to set it up and fifteen seconds to execute all three targets, and you didn't have to change course. All you had to do was lock your weapons on target and fire at each jump waypoint."

The commander looked around the room. He could sense the lights going on in the minds of the pilots assembled. "Or, imagine you're about to do a strafing run on a larger ship... say, a five-kilometer-long battleship. Without the jump drive, you'd be tracked by the battleship's point-defense turrets for ten to twenty seconds. On any one side, a Dusahn battleship has at least twenty point-defense turrets. If even half of them are tracking you, your shields will be down to twenty percent by the time you finish your run. You'll need to stay clear of all hostiles for at least three minutes to recharge your shields. If all twenty track you, you're not getting out alive. But using a series of variable-length jumps, each of them between three hundred and five hundred meters, with three seconds at each jump waypoint, you'll be able to get quite a few shots off, and the battleship's point-defense turrets will never get a track on you. Any hits your shields *do* take will be accidental."

Commander Verbeek activated another training vid before continuing. "Now, take a look at this. We call this a

variable-point, variable-interval, variable-range-to-target, single-point attack. Or, 'single point three V'. Our gunships use this pattern to take down a single shield section of larger ships, so they can then open the target up. It uses an algorithm that ensures no gunship's attack jump exit point is the same position, range, or track in relation to the target. It is nearly impossible to defend against and is why our gunships always hunt in four to six-element attack groups. This will be the first attack pattern the Gunyoki will learn. Once enough of your fighters are equipped with jump drives, and your pilots are trained to use them, you will be very effective at defending your world."

"Study this pattern carefully," Vol told his fellow Gunyoki. "Tariq, Tham, Alayna, and I will begin practicing this pattern today."

"The Gunyoki simulators can jump?" Tariq wondered, surprised.

"Yes, they can," Vol replied. "Thanks to Mister Sheehan, Miss Ta'Akar, and Commander Kamenetskiy. However, the four of us will be flying this pattern in actual, jump-enabled Gunyoki fighters." He paused as he watched the faces of Tariq, Tham, and Alayna light up. "That's right, *four* of our Gunyoki fighters are now jump equipped, and twelve more will be ready in a few days."

"Vol Kaguchi, Tariq Taira, Tham Kors, and Alayna Imai will report for their first training flight at fourteen thirty hours," Commander Verbeek stated. "Each of you will have an Eagle pilot riding second seat, to help you acclimate."

"What about our weapons officers?" Tariq wondered.

"I'll be working with them in the simulators," Loki announced.

"This is where you learn how to protect Rakuen, people," Commander Verbeek said. "Everyone is expected to review the flight footage and learn from the first group's mistakes... and there *will* be mistakes, trust me."

"This is a completely foreign way of piloting our ships and fighting with them," Vol Kaguchi, the most senior of the Gunyoki pilots assembled, said. "And we Gunyoki are set in our ways. This may take more time than you think."

Loki stepped forward, "If I may?" he asked the commander, who gestured for him to continue. "I did my commercial flight training on Rakuen. During that time, I watched every Gunyoki race there was. I know how you fly and how you use your ships. You already fly them in similar fashion. It is my belief that each and every one of you will become *expert* jump-fighter pilots in no time at all."

Vol Kaguchi smiled, nodding. "On behalf of the Gunyoki, we appreciate your vote of confidence, Mister Sheehan."

* * *

The first night in old man Willard's home had been difficult for all three of them. After determining that the antisensor nets were present throughout the attic, as expected, they had decided to use the two back bedrooms as their temporary residence. Despite the anti-sensor nets, Michael had insisted they restrict their movements as much as possible, just to be safe.

The second night had been easier, and all had gotten a decent amount of rest. By the third night, however, the smell from the old man's corpse was beginning to permeate every corner of the residence, forcing them to wear pieces of bed sheets over their faces in order to breathe. At least, it made it easier to stay awake while on watch.

"All quiet?" Michael asked as he joined Birk at the watch station.

"No movement since my shift started," Birk replied. "Not even a passing vehicle." "Not surprising," Michael replied, peering out the windows over Birk's shoulder. The front bedroom corner windows made the perfect watch station, as they had a view of the main road in both directions, as well as the connecting road to the east of the ranch. "Curfew and all." Michael sat down and poured himself some tea.

"That might not be hot," Birk warned.

"That's alright."

"It might not be any good, either."

Michael took a sip. "I've had worse." He sat back in his chair, holding his cup as he waited for the caffeinated beverage to works its magic. "Have you ever had coffee?"

"No. Too expensive for my budget, but I have heard of it."

"Yeah, I can't really afford it, either. But I used to drink quite a lot of it back on the Aurora."

"How long were you on her?" Birk wondered.

"The Aurora? A little over a Terran year."

"What did you do there? I mean, what was your job?"

"Well, at first, I was doing electronic countermeasures type stuff. They were shorthanded, and I had some experience with Takaran sensors and computer systems, so I was able to devise ways to interfere with the Takaran targeting sensors. Eventually, I served as executive officer under Captain Scott. I was even captain for a few months after he surrendered to the Jung."

"Why'd you leave?"

"Eventually, Captain Taylor took command, and I was XO again. A few months after that, Admiral Galiardi took command of all Sol Alliance forces, and he started replacing those of us who came from the Pentaurus cluster with people from the Sol sector, with an obvious preference for officers from Earth. Like everyone else from Corinair, I eventually came home."

"What did you do when you got back?"

"Enjoyed the fame for a few weeks and then fell into obscurity."

"I'm surprised you weren't able to turn your fame into something lucrative," Birk said.

"I probably could have, had I wished," Michael said.

"You didn't?"

"Not really. Instead, I took a nothing job...just enough to pay the bills, really. I kept to myself, mostly."

"For seven years?"

"More like six, really, but yes. I actually prefer to be alone, for the most part."

"What did you do?"

"Nothing," Michael admitted. "Went to work, went home... I did a lot of tinkering. You know that portable, handheld game, 'Chora'?"

"Yeah, I bought one for my sister's kid for his birthday. He loves that thing," Birk replied.

"I invented that."

"I thought Merenco Games owned that."

"They do. But they bought the idea from me. I get a percentage of every unit they sell. I quit my job after that. I was going to buy a place out in the hills and retire, but the Dusahn pretty much screwed that up for me."

"So, you're rich?"

"I *was*. The Dusahn seized everything from everyone who was earning more than they needed to survive. How do you think they're funding their operations?"

"That sucks."

"Yes, it does."

"Is that why you joined the resistance?" Birk wondered.

"No. I joined because fighting the Dusahn is the right thing to do. It's what every Corinairan *should* do."

"Not every Corinairan thinks that way," Birk reminded him.

"You and Cuddy do."

"We didn't, at first," Birk admitted. "We were just trying to sell some of the guns that Captain Scott dropped, to earn some extra credits. Ironically, to replace the credits I spent on that Chora game of yours."

Michael leaned forward, squinting, trying to focus on something outside in the darkness...something he thought he saw.

"What is it?" Birk asked, noticing Michael's change of focus and turning to look out the windows himself.

"I thought I saw something moving."

Birk looked out the window, straining to see in the darkness. "Probably a tanti. The area is crawling with them."

"It was bigger than a... *Crap*!" Michael jumped up from his seat, spilling his tea and reaching for his rifle, just as the window in front of them blew inward, spraying shards of plex-plate over them. Before either of them knew what was happening, the room filled with Dusahn troops. Cries of warning from Cuddy in the room down the hall sounded out but were immediately stifled as troops took him into custody.

Michael found himself pinned face down on the floor, his energy rifle stripped from his hands, with the weight of two fully armored Dusahn soldiers on his back. A second later, he felt a sharp pain in his leg, after which everything went black.

* * *

Krispin stepped out of the taxi at the gate to the Scott family compound outside of Vancouver. He walked up to the

line of six people still waiting to be cleared through the front gates by NAU security.

"Catering staff?" the man at the end of the line asked him.

"Yes," Krispin replied.

"Terrence," the man said, introducing himself.

"Martin," Krispin replied, shaking the man's hand.

"What do you do?"

"I don't know, they haven't told me."

"I'm a bartender. I'm excited I got this gig. The crowd will be full of rich bigwigs. Tips should be great."

"I wouldn't know," Krispin admitted. "This is my first time."

"And you got *this* gig?" Terrence laughed. "Man, you must *know* someone. That, or you're luckier than hell."

"I think I was just lucky," Krispin insisted. "Right place, right time, and all that."

"Pray that you get wait staff," Terrence said. "Busboys and food servers never get squat, but wait staff and bartenders clean up at parties like this."

"Really?" Krispin said, feigning interest. "How much do you think I could make?"

"I'll probably make at least a thousand," Terrence bragged. "But I've been at this a while. I wouldn't be surprised if you walked away with a few hundred, at least."

"That would be nice," Krispin lied. "I could use the money."

The latter wasn't really a lie. Although Mister Dakota had promised financial payment, in addition to freedom for himself and Sara, one could always use extra cash. He had been living on a company credit card; *whose* company he did not know. He was always worried that those who had hired him might suddenly change their minds, and he'd be on the run with no cash in his pocket. At least, if he had a little cash it would give him options, in case something went horribly wrong.

Krispin watched as, one by one, the people in line before him were scrutinized by the NAU security personnel. Their IDs were checked, their bio-scans were checked against the national and global registries, and they were questioned for several minutes before being allowed to advance to the next station further down the walkway.

When it was Krispin's turn, it was no different. IDs, bioscan, and the usual questions: Where are you from? Where are you staying? How did you get this job? Where were you born? Have you ever served in a military unit? Have you ever been convicted of a crime?

Once he cleared the first station, the same process was repeated at the second station. The same checks, and the same questions. Only this time, the interrogator was likely checking his answers against those given a few minutes ago. But Krispin had been mentally rehearsing his profile for the entire trip from Winnipeg, and his answers—although worded slightly differently so as not to *appear* rehearsed were the same.

"You made it," Terrence congratulated, waiting for him just past the second security checkpoint.

"Are we going to have to go through that every time we report for work?" Krispin asked for appearance's sake.

"To be honest, I have no idea. I've never worked anything *presidential*. It's pretty crazy, isn't it?"

"Yeah, crazy," Krispin agreed, following his new friend toward the main house. He felt a little bad for Terrence. He seemed like a genuinely nice fellow, and under different circumstances, they might actually have become friends. But, after this was all over, poor Terrence would likely find himself the subject of intense interrogation for having been friends with the man who assassinated the President of the North American Union, and the leader of the Earth *and* the Sol Alliance.

* * *

Only thirty minutes later, Birk, Cuddy, and Michael found themselves being escorted through the corridors of a local jail which had been turned into a Dusahn holding facility. As they passed the various cells, Michael recognized more faces than he cared to. In addition to ex-Corinari, the Dusahn had been busy rounding up as many resistance members as they could track down. One face, in particular, nearly caused Michael to do a double take, which would have clued the Dusahn that he knew the man.

The Dusahn guards shoved the three of them into the very next cell with enough force to nearly knock Birk to his knees in the process.

Michael took a seat on the side of the cell nearest the man he had recognized in the next cell over. He did not make eye contact, again not wanting to tip the Dusahn to his recognition of the man. But it was difficult not to look at his old friend, for he had obviously been beaten severely and quite recently.

"Hello, Michael," the man said.

Michael's eyes widened, darting around to see if the Dusahn had noticed.

"It's okay," the man said. "They already know who we are *and* that we know one another."

"Holy shit," Cuddy exclaimed. "You're Jonas Prechitt."

Michael cast a disapproving look at Cuddy.

"It's alright," Jonas assured Michael. "They know everything. Who we are, what we've been doing, what we've done..." "How?" Michael wondered.

"They have a device," Jonas explained. "It makes it impossible to lie. If you lie, you feel pain. *Incredible* pain. Pain like you've never imagined."

"When you say *they know everything*, do you mean..."

"Yes. They know the communication algorithm *and* the encryption codes," Jonas explained. "Like I said, *everything*."

"Then, it's over," Michael realized, slumping back against the wall. "We've failed."

"I'm afraid so."

"I don't understand," Cuddy said. "How did they find everyone?"

"Through the comm-links you created," Jonas explained.

"What? That's impossible," Cuddy insisted.

"That algorithm was hard-coded into the devices," Birk reminded them. "There's no way they got the encryption codes from the comm-units *we* made."

"You're right, they didn't," Jonas explained. "They used them to track down the users and then our cells."

"But…"

"It's not your fault," Jonas assured him, cutting Cuddy off mid-sentence. "They left the old nets open on purpose, to lure us into using them. If you hadn't come up with the idea, another of us would have, sooner or later. They have been monitoring *everything*. And they have far more satellites watching over all of Corinair than we were led to believe." Jonas Prechitt leaned his head back, closing his eyes. He was obviously still in considerable pain. "They've been playing us all the entire time. They're a lot smarter than we originally thought. Definitely smarter than the Jung ever were." Michael noticed the pain Jonas was experiencing. "If they can *make* you tell the truth, why did they beat you?"

"For fun, I guess."

"The sick bastards," Cuddy exclaimed.

"Be careful," Michael warned. "They could be listening."

"I doubt it," Jonas told him. "They have no need to." Jonas drew in a deep breath and then shouted, "The Dusahn are a bunch of esani beetles!" Jonas laughed, which immediately caused him pain. But the look on his face indicated that it had been worth it. "You see? Nothing."

"Aren't you afraid they'll beat you some more?" Cuddy wondered.

"Nope. They can't. Not without killing me. And they can't afford to do that; at least, not yet. They still have a lot of information they need to get out of me."

"What shall become of us?" Michael wondered.

"They will offer you a choice," Jonas replied. "Serve them or spend the rest of what will probably be a short life at hard labor."

Michael leaned his head back and sighed. "Sorry, guys," he told Birk and Cuddy.

Birk and Cuddy exchanged concerned looks but said nothing as they, too, leaned back against the wall in resignation.

* * *

"Mister Yokimah," Minister Sebaron welcomed as he came out from behind his desk to offer a proper greeting.

"Minister," Ito greeted in kind, bowing respectfully.

"I trust you are well," the minister said, after bowing in return.

"My recovery is progressing nicely, thanks to the nanite treatments given to me by the Aurora's medical staff." "Quite remarkable technology, those nanites," Minister Sebaron praised. He gestured to the two sitting chairs near the large picture window. "Please." The two men took their seats, with Ito pausing to allow the older minister to sit first, as Rakuen culture required.

"A stunning view," Ito remarked as he took his seat.

"The gardens are especially vibrant this time of year," the minister agreed. "But surely, you did not call on me to take advantage of my view of the gardens."

"I did not," Ito admitted. "Respectfully, Minister, I was wondering about your reluctance to join the Karuzari Alliance. I was hoping you could share your reasoning so that I might understand the situation better."

"Straight to the point, and with tact and respect," Minister Sebaron commented, his smile hiding his annoyance that the brash businessman felt his wealth and fame gave him the right to question a duly elected Minister of Rakuen. "I can see why you have excelled in your business endeavors."

"I assure you, I mean no disrespect, Minister. I would not normally presume such privileges; however, my sudden increase in celebrity has placed additional pressures upon me. People are asking for my opinion on the matter. They are asking if I agree with your reluctance to accept Captain Scott's invitation. As of yet, I have not responded, but I cannot do so forever. Eventually, I will be forced to comment, and I would prefer to do so intelligently. As an experienced statesman, I am certain you are considering various consequences, both long and short term, that I could not possibly anticipate. I would very much like to support you publicly; however, based on my current understandings, I find it difficult to do so." "I am happy to explain my position to any constituent," the minister responded, "regardless of their sociopolitical standings," he added, making sure that his guest knew he was well aware of the businessman's political aspirations. He folded his hands in his lap and began his speech. "As you are aware, the introduction of jump drive technology into the Pentaurus, Injin, and Rogen sectors has caused considerable change in Rakuen society. Systems which were once outside our sphere of influence have now become partners in our economy. Tourism, alone, has tripled in recent years. Your company is a prime example of the economic benefits of instant, interstellar transit, as your profits have grown exponentially, now that so many more markets are available."

"All of this is true," Mister Yokimah agreed, "but if you will excuse my ignorance, I fail to see the connection."

"While the boon to the economy of Rakuen is indeed welcome, it comes with its own dangers, one of which is the dilution of Rakuen culture and traditions. As you know, our world was founded by those who wished to prevent such dilution. I, myself, was elected by those traditionalists, as I share their same fears. While I cannot stop the interstellar connectivity caused by jump drive technology—nor should I wish to—I can, and I must, prevent associations that might damage our culture, our way of life, and our very world."

Mister Yokimah took a slow, deep breath while he assessed the minister's words and carefully formulated a response. "While I applaud your concerns for our culture and our world, I fear that such associations, despite their inherent risks, are unavoidable in *light* of our new interstellar connectivity."

"Perhaps," the minister acquiesced, "but would it not be prudent to avoid such risks for as long as possible? Especially risks that have already been demonstrated to be true?"

"But by avoiding a distant threat, are you not creating an equal one within our own system?" Ito reminded him. "Neramese has been our ally because they *needed* us to protect them after they were stripped of all military forces by their surrender. *Now*, they will be given the technology necessary to defend themselves. Technology that can be used offensively, as well, *against* Rakuen."

"Of this, I am well aware," Minister Sebaron assured his guest.

"Are you also aware that *should* the Dusahn attack the Rogen system again, the Karuzari Alliance, while defending Neramese, will *not* be obligated to defend *Rakuen*?"

"Legal obligations are not necessarily the same as ethical ones," Minister Sebaron explained. "Especially when you consider that many of our Gunyoki fighters will be in the service of the Karuzari Alliance. Do you really think they would stand by and witness the destruction of their homeworld? Do you really believe the Karuzari Alliance would risk losing the support of those Gunyoki fighters by refusing to protect Rakuen during an assault on this system?"

"So, you're attempting to obtain the protection of the Alliance, while not directly inviting the wrath of the Dusahn."

Minister Sebaron nodded.

"A dangerous gamble," Ito said. "A clever one, I grant you, but dangerous nonetheless. Again, I must raise the question about the Nerameseans. The balance of power within our system will be changed, and it will be in *their* favor." "I doubt the Karuzari Alliance will allow Neramese to attack Rakuen," Minister Sebaron said. "Such would not be in line with Captain Scott's moralities."

"Then you believe him to be a man of peace and honor."

"As much as I believe any man to be of such."

"Do men of honor not *stand* for something?" Ito asserted. "Do they not risk their *own* lives and fortunes for the good of all?"

"They do," Minister Sebaron agreed.

"And is this also not the way of the Gunyoki?" Ito reminded the minister.

"When given no alternative, yes. However, I have found what I believe to be a reasonable alternative; one that balances risk and reward far better than simply joining the brave young men and women in shiny uniforms, and standing against evil."

"But the Dusahn *are* evil," Ito argued. "Surely you see that."

"What I see is an entity that believes they are doing what is right for *their* people. It is quite possible, in fact, that they believe they are doing what is right for *all* people. After all, most leaders did not consider themselves to be wrong, nor did they consider themselves to be evil. Even those who knowingly committed atrocities against humanity usually believed that the ends justified the means."

"But equipping our Gunyoki fighters with jump drives will greatly increase our ability to defend ourselves against, not only the Dusahn but, all else who may wish to impose *their* will upon us," Ito argued.

"And we will get jump drives on our Gunyoki fighters, even *without* joining the Karuzari Alliance and declaring ourselves as enemies to the Dusahn." "And what about the jump missile batteries?" Ito asked. "Without them, our fighters will not be able to defeat a fullon Dusahn attack."

"We can build our own jump missiles, Mister Yokimah. Jump drive technology is already available to us. It has been since Ranni Enterprises filed for patent protection with our world."

"That would be a violation of their patents," Ito insisted.

"Need I remind you, that in a time of crisis, all such patents are available for use by the Rakuen government?"

"That might work for the jump drive," Ito agreed, "but how long will it take us to develop our own jump missile batteries?"

"Our spy network on Neramese is vast," Minister Sebaron replied. "And there is no shortage of Nerameseans who would willingly provide us the information we need, for the right payment. Just like the Dusahn, we shall acquire what we need to ensure our survival."

Ito stared at the minister for a moment. "And you see nothing wrong with that?"

"What I feel is right or wrong is of little consequence," Minister Sebaron replied. "My obligation is to ensure the well-being of the people of Rakuen, even if that means doing something that / consider to be legally, morally, or ethically wrong. *That* is what is required of a leader."

"What is *required* of a leader is to adhere to the laws, ethics, and moralities of those he or she represents," Ito argued. "With all due respect, Minister, whether or not Rakuen should join the Karuzari Alliance is not a matter for you, alone, to decide. It is a matter that the people of Rakuen should decide."

"In times of crisis and in times of war, Rakuen law grants the ministry considerable latitude in such matters," Minister Sebaron defended.

"I am well aware of the details of Rakuen law, Minister, and I do not believe the current situation meets the criteria to grant your office such latitudes."

"Mister Yokimah," the minister said, attempting to interrupt the younger businessman.

Ito chose to ignore protocol, refusing to yield to the elder statesman. "The intention of my visit this day was not to challenge you, Minister, but to understand you. Unfortunately, now that I do, I find that I have no choice but to oppose you, and to do so quite publicly. Furthermore, once the Karuzari Alliance is made aware of your plans, I'm sure they will take precautions to ensure that Rakuen will be unable to gain access to jump missile battery technology."

Minister Sebaron cast a menacing gaze at Ito. "I should warn you, Mister Yokimah, that your threats could be considered treasonous, and I would be well within my power to have you arrested this day."

"And I should warn you, Minister, that both my wealth and my sudden increase in popularity among the people of Rakuen would make me a difficult adversary, come the next elections."

"You threaten the inevitable, Mister Yokimah," the minister replied with a confident smile. "You represent the youth of Rakuen, those who look to the stars from whence we came, instead of keeping their eyes, and their hearts, on what we have and protecting it for future generations. You represent the very attitudes that forced our forefathers to leave their world behind and start anew. I shall oppose you, Ito Yokimah, with all of the resources available to me. *That* is why I was elected, and to those who elected me, I shall remain true." Ito leaned forward, his own menacing look adorning his face. "You spoke of leaders believing the wrongs they committed were for the good of all. You spoke of the ends justifying the means. Perhaps you were right, *Minister*. Perhaps *I—s*hould I choose to become a leader—should do *whatever* is necessary to see that old men such as yourself, men who refuse to face the inevitable changes that progress will always bring, are removed from power and not allowed to destroy the futures of our children for the sake of the memories of their own glorious pasts."

Despite his utter disdain for his guest, Minister Sebaron nodded respectfully. "I sense that you and I have reached an impasse, Mister Yokimah. As men of honor, and as men who both care deeply about Rakuen, we shall both do what we believe to be best for our world." Minister Sebaron stood. "I believe you know the way out, Mister Yokimah. Good day." With that, the minister cast one last insult to his guest and turned to walk away, without bowing.

Ito sighed as he stood. He had hoped to convince the old statesman to see the error of his ways, but his failure came as no surprise. The minister had opposed turning the Gunyoki into a competition, despite the dramatic increase in the number of combat-ready fighters that had resulted. Change was not something the elders of Rakuen took too lightly. Ito, himself, had been of their ilk only a few short weeks ago, and it had nearly gotten him killed and his world destroyed. Captain Scott had given him a second chance, and he would not make that mistake again. Even if it meant going up against all the elders of Rakuen.

After spending nearly the entire day sitting in the corner of the cell, Michael rose and came over to stand before Birk and Cuddy. "May I?" he asked. Birk and Cuddy both slid apart, making room for Michael. "How's he doing?" Cuddy asked.

"Jonas will be fine," Michael replied as he sat down between them. "He is strong. All Corinari are. Much stronger than I."

"You're not Corinari, are you," Cuddy surmised.

"I am not. I wish I could have been, but they were disbanded before I returned from the Sol sector. I like to think that I am of the same ilk, but I have not been through the same training, nor shared the bonds that make them unique among all of humanity's warriors." Michael gazed across the cell, as if looking at something far beyond the walls that imprisoned them. "I only hope that I have earned the respect of those Corinari with whom I have fought."

After a moment, Michael turned his attention back to the present. "The two of you remind me much of myself when I was your age. I, too, was left with a choice to serve or to suffer incarceration for what might remain of my young life." He looked at Cuddy. "There is no shame in choosing to survive." He then looked at Birk. "For one cannot know what good one might do, if given an opportunity." He looked forward again. "Sometimes, surviving is the only way we *can* fight. The time may come when you, too, are given an opportunity to make a difference. But if you're not alive to *seize* that opportunity, you might miss the only chance you ever had to truly make a difference."

"How can anyone know if such an opportunity will come?" Cuddy wondered.

"We cannot know," Michael admitted. "We can only survive and hope that such an opportunity comes to us, to give our lives meaning. I got my opportunity, and I took it. For that, I have no regrets, despite the fact that doing so led me here, to this day, and to the bleak future before me." "Then, you're planning to refuse to serve them," Cuddy realized.

"I have no choice."

"You're not Corinari," Birk reminded him. "You said so yourself. You won't be breaking any oaths if you agree to serve the Dusahn."

"What about all that talk about opportunities and staying alive to make a difference?" Cuddy argued.

"The Dusahn would never trust me to serve them," Michael pointed out. "As a soldier or a slave, they will make my life a living hell." Michael sighed. "I will stand by the Corinari and refuse to serve the Dusahn. But the two of you need not condemn yourselves to slavery. Neither of you has any record of military service, and you both were bullied into joining our ranks. If questioned, using this truth-device of theirs, you will likely pass, since the truth is that neither of you sought to join the resistance."

"Maybe not," Birk agreed, "but we could have refused to join."

"You are but young men," Michael told him. "Still naive and lacking in conviction. Your involvement with the Corinari resistance was not by choice."

"But..."

Michael looked Birk in the eyes. "Can you honestly tell me that had you *not* feared for your life that day, you would have *chosen* to join our ranks?"

"[…"

"Do not lie to me," Michael warned.

"No, I probably wouldn't have," Birk agreed. "But that doesn't mean I wouldn't have joined later."

"And you?" Michael asked, turning to look at Cuddy.

"I didn't want to try to sell the weapons to begin with," Cuddy admitted. "He talked me into it." "You're never going to let me forget that, are you," Birk moaned.

"Uh, jail cell?" Cuddy reminded his friend.

"So, you see, there is no need for you to face the same fate as the rest of us," Michael stated. "Your true purpose is still out there somewhere, waiting for you in the future. You both must live to find it, and fulfill whatever fate has planned for you."

Birk and Cuddy both thought for a moment.

"But how do we know that our *true purpose* isn't waiting for us as slaves with the rest of you?" Cuddy asked.

Michael smiled for the first time since their capture. "You don't. That uncertainty is what makes life interesting."

"For all you know, another opportunity could be waiting for you *as* a slave of the Dusahn," Birk told him.

Again, Michael smiled. "One can only hope."

The three of them sat in silence for several minutes.

"What do you think they will do with all of you?" Cuddy finally asked.

"Probably send us to some mining camp and force us to work in conditions that will lead to our early demise," Michael replied.

"What will they do with us?" Birk wondered, somewhat selfishly.

"You will likely be brainwashed into believing in those you serve. Then you will be given training that suits your aptitudes and assigned somewhere within the ranks of the Dusahn Empire. If you are lucky, you will climb in rank and possibly even carve out a nice little life for yourselves. At worst, you will become sacrificial pawns in some meaningless battle to further the empire."

"Some choice," Birk grumbled.

"We all die eventually," Michael told him. "Few of us get to choose *what* we die for. If you refuse service now, you will die for nothing."

"If we agree to serve, we might still die for nothing," Cuddy pointed out.

"True, but you may not. And that one chance of someday making a difference...that, too, is an honorable way to live. Try to remember that. For yourselves and for the people of Corinair."

Nathan sat silently as Vladimir put a plate of... *something*...on the table in front of him. "Uh..." was the only thing that came out of his mouth.

* * *

"What is wrong?"

"I'm afraid."

Vladimir squinted, confused. "Afraid of what?"

"What is what I'm trying to figure out." Nathan turned the plate of food around one hundred and eighty degrees, hoping that the other side might offer a hint of what *it* was. "What *is* this?"

"I call it *pasta ala Vladimir*."

"Okay, so it has a name," Nathan replied, still examining the pile of food in front of him. "And apparently, it has pasta in it...*somewhere*."

"Actually, the pasta turns to mush at some point and sort of mixes in with the sauce."

"What are these brown things? Some kind of meat?" Nathan wondered.

"Oksa meat."

"I never heard of it."

"It is a type of fish on Rakuen. It is very large and tastes sort of like beef." "It doesn't *smell* like beef, that's for sure," Nathan replied. "Why is it all mushy?" he asked, scooping up a spoonful of the pasty, lumpy goop.

"I came up with this recipe on accident," Vladimir explained. "I was attempting to make stroganoff, but then Cameron decided to hold one of her famous, poorly timed battle drills. I figured the drill would be over quickly, as usual, so instead of turning the stove off, I simply turned it down to a simmer. The drill went longer than expected, and by the time I got back, the pasta was like mush. I was so hungry by then that I just stirred in some meat and ate it. And it was good. Not as good as *this*, though. *This* took several more attempts to perfect. Now, it is creamy, meaty goodness."

Nathan continued to stare at the creamy goop on the plate before him, picking at it with his spoon, hesitant to dig in. He watched as Vladimir attacked his plate of food without restraint, shoveling the goop into his mouth. Finally, Nathan took a deep breath and said, "I guess if I can face the Dusahn, I can face pasta ala Vladimir." He took a spoonful and put it into his mouth, swallowing it without chewing. "Huh," he said, a surprised look on his face. He scooped up another spoonful and ate it. "It's not as bad as it looks." After a third spoonful, he added, "This isn't half bad. Weird but tasty."

"I told you."

The accent lighting in the captain's mess suddenly turned red, and an alarm klaxon sounded in the corridor.

"General quarters, general quarters. All hands report to stations..."

"Unbelievable," Vladimir exclaimed, slamming his spoon down on the table. "If this is another one of her drills..."

"...This is not a drill..."

Both Nathan's and Vladimir's eyes widened.

"I guess not," Nathan said as he and Vladimir rose from their seats and headed for the exit. "*Captain, XO*," Cameron's voice called over Nathan's comm-set.

"Sit rep?" Nathan replied, tapping his comm-set.

"Jump comm-drone from Rakuen. They are under attack by Dusahn gunships," Cameron explained over his commset as he moved quickly down the corridor and entered the outer entrance to the Aurora's bridge. "I've ordered all Strikers to remain to cover the fleet..." she continued as Nathan entered the bridge.

"Captain on the bridge!" the guard announced as Nathan passed by him and headed to the center of the bridge.

"...We're changing course for Rakuen now," Cameron continued, rising from the command chair and stepping to starboard, to make room for Nathan.

"First jump plotted and ready, sir," the Aurora's navigator reported.

"I'm headed for combat," Cameron stated as she turned toward the starboard exit.

"Weapons are coming online now," Jessica reported, having just entered the bridge and stepping in to replace the junior officer at the tactical station directly behind Nathan's command chair.

"Helm, get us to Rakuen," Nathan ordered.

"Best speed to Rakuen, aye," Lieutenant Dinev confirmed as she completed the Aurora's change in course and speed.

"Jumping in three..." the navigator began.

"All stations report general quarters," the communications officer announced.

"....Two...."

"Very well," Nathan replied.

"....One...."

"All weapons are charged and ready," Jessica reported.

"...jumping..."

"Shields?" Nathan asked as the subdued jump flash filled the bridge.

"All shields at maximum," Jessica assured him.

"First jump complete," the navigator reported.

"Turning to one four seven, two down," Lieutenant Dinev announced as she altered course for the next jump.

"How much juice are we going to have left over, Mister Bickle?"

"Fifty percent in each, sir," the navigator replied. "More than enough."

"Good to hear."

"On course and speed for second jump," the helmsman reported.

"Very well, Lieutenant."

"Jumping in three seconds..."

"XO is in combat," the communications officer reported.

"Tactical, weapons free," Nathan ordered.

"...one..."

"...weapons free, aye," Jessica acknowledged.

"...jumping."

The subdued blue-white jump flash again washed over the Aurora's bridge as she jumped into the Rogen system, near Rakuen.

"Jump complete," Ensign Bickle reported.

"Multiple targets," Lieutenant Commander Kono reported from the sensor station. "Six Dusahn gunships and two frigates."

"Targeting the frigates with jump missiles," Jessica reported. "Two each...launching."

"Jump flashes," the lieutenant commander added. "Four Dusahn octo-fighters directly astern. Locking onto our aft shields."

"Jump missiles away," Jessica reported. "Combat is dealing with the octo-fighters."

"All gunships and frigates just jumped," the sensor officer reported.

"Find them," Nathan ordered. "Comms, get a report from Rakuen Defense Command. I need to know what they're targeting, if anything."

"Aye, sir."

"Tactical, launch all fighters," Nathan continued. "Helm, let's not stay in any one place for too long, I don't want to get a Dusahn jump missile up our ass."

"Eight Super Eagles are away," Jessica reported. "Two Raptors are clearing the port deck now."

"Helm, hard to starboard. Bring us to a jump line low across Rakuen," Nathan ordered. "Mister Bickle, ready a jump to the far side of Rakuen."

"Hard to starboard, ten down to skim low orbit," Lieutenant Dinev confirmed as she steered the ship to the right and slightly down, relative to the system ecliptic.

"Captain?" Jessica questioned, wondering why Nathan was moving the ship to the other side of the planet.

"Jump ready," the navigator reported.

"I have Rakuen Defense Command, Captain," the comms officer announced. "They report four gunships attacking the Ranni plant from orbit."

"On the far side of Rakuen," Jessica realized.

"I had a hunch," Nathan told her.

"The plant has lost shields and is taking damage."

"Jump us to the far side, Mister Bickle," Nathan ordered.

"Tactical, jump missiles for the gunships, if you please."

"RDC also reports twenty Gunyoki have been dispatched from the race platform," the comms officer continued. "ETA, two minutes."

"I've got the Gunyoki," the sensor officer reported.

"Jumping," the navigator reported as the jump flash washed over the bridge again.

"There will be nothing left of that plant in two minutes," Nathan said under his breath.

"Jump complete," Mister Bickle reported.

"Locking jump missiles on targets," Jessica reported.

"Double-check all targets," Nathan advised, "we don't want to take out any Gunyoki by mistake."

"Not a chance," Jessica assured him. "Launching jump missiles."

"Helm, turn us into those gunships and accelerate to max intercept speed. Take up station above the Ranni plant," Nathan ordered.

"Turning in and accelerating, aye," Lieutenant Dinev acknowledged.

"Missiles away," Jessica reported from the tactical station.

"Where the hell are those frigates?" Nathan demanded as the planet slid into view from the lower right of the main view screen that wrapped around the forward half of the bridge.

"Nothing in close, Captain," Lieutenant Commander Kono replied from the sensor station. "I'm expanding my search perimeter."

Four jump flashes appeared in the distance directly ahead of them, one of which immediately changed from blue-white to reddish-orange. "Ours or theirs?" Nathan asked. "Both," Jessica replied. "One kill, the other three jumped away just as our missiles jumped in."

"Caught one sleeping," Nathan commented.

"Eight more Super Eagles are away," Jessica added. "Two more Raptors are launching now, starboard side."

"Captain!" Lieutenant Commander Kono reported with alarm. "I've got one of the frigates! Attacking the race platform!"

"Helm, get us to the race platform, best speed," Nathan ordered.

"Changing course for the race platform," Lieutenant Dinev acknowledged from the helm.

"Plotting jump," Mister Bickle added.

"Tactical, lock a pair of jump missiles on that frigate and launch. She needs something to think about other than that race platform," Nathan continued.

"You got it," Jessica replied.

"Jump plotted and ready."

"Comms, tell RDC to keep all Gunyoki headed toward low orbit above the Ranni plant. We'll deal with the frigates. And if they've got more Gunyokis available at the platform, tell them to launch now while they still can."

"Coming onto new intercept course now," Lieutenant Dinev announced.

"Missiles away," Jessica reported.

"There's something wrong with that contact," Lieutenant Commander Kono warned as she studied her sensor readings more carefully. "The energy signature is way too high."

"Jumping," Mister Bickle announced as the jump flash washed over the bridge again.

When the flash subsided, there were suddenly *two* Dusahn frigates in front of them. One of them was facing

away from the Aurora and was firing on the race platform. The other was *facing* them.

Nathan's eyes widened. "Helm, hard to starboard!" he ordered.

The view screen filled with splashes of red-orange as incoming plasma cannon fire slammed into the Aurora's forward shields. The ship shook violently as four more explosions pounded them, as missiles that had been launched from the attacking frigate, even before the Aurora had jumped in, impacted their shields, weakening them further.

"Forward shields down to twenty percent!" the systems officer warned.

"Combat has all port cannons firing on the frigate," Jessica announced as the Aurora turned hard to starboard to escape the attacking frigate and get to a clear jump line.

The Aurora continued to shake violently as both missiles and plasma cannon fire slammed into the forward-most port shields, working their way aft to the midship shields and then the aft shields.

"Jump line is clear!" Mister Bickle reported, expecting the order to jump away from the incoming fire.

"Continue your turn," Nathan ordered. "We're not going anywhere."

"Holding my turn, aye," Lieutenant Dinev replied confidently.

"Jump missiles on the frigate attacking the platform, Jess," Nathan ordered.

"Already locked," Jessica replied. "Launching missiles."

"They'll jump away again," Lieutenant Commander Kono warned.

"Port shields all down fifty percent," the systems officer warned.

"Missiles away!" Jessica announced.

"No, they won't," Nathan assured her. "Not if they have a chance to take *us* out. Be they Jung or Dusahn, *pride* is their weakness."

"Direct impacts on frigate one," Jessica exclaimed.

"Frigate one's starboard shields are down, and she's lost half her starboard emitter array!" Lieutenant Commander Kono reported. "She's not jumping anywhere!"

"Helm, continue your turn," Nathan ordered. "Bring our starboard broadside cannons to bear."

"Aye, sir," Lieutenant Dinev replied.

"I'm picking up eight more Gunyoki leaving the race platform," Lieutenant Commander Kono announced.

"Comms, contact those fighters. Tell them to target frigate one, starboard side, and finish her off. We'll deal with frigate two."

"Aye, sir," the comms officer replied.

"Three enemy gunships have returned to their attack position above the Ranni plant," Lieutenant Commander Kono reported. "Gunyokis are still thirty seconds out."

"Tactical..." Nathan began but was cut short.

"Jump missiles locked on the gunships," Jessica announced, reading her captain's mind. "Launching four."

"Broadsides coming to bear," Lieutenant Dinev reported. "Shall I decelerate, Captain?"

"Missiles away," Jessica announced.

"Affirmative," Nathan replied as he tapped his headset. "Combat, Captain. Broadsides on frigate two. Fire at will."

"Broadsides, frigate two, firing," Cameron replied.

Nathan tapped the control panel on the side of his command chair, calling up the starboard cameras onto the main view screen. Four staccato lines of red-orange plasma streaked away, from just below the camera, toward the distant black and crimson frigate a few hundred meters away from them. The enemy frigate's shields flashed repeatedly as they absorbed the energy of the incoming fire, but with each impact, their flash became less distinct.

"Target is losing her starboard shields," Lieutenant Commander Kono reported.

"Jump missile impact!" Jessica reported.

"One more gunship down!" Lieutenant Commander Kono added. "The other two jumped away just before missile impact."

"Losing the angle on the broadsides," Lieutenant Dinev warned from the helm.

"Captain, flight reports all birds are engaged with Dusahn octo-fighters in the vicinity of the platform *and* over the Ranni plant," the comms officer reported.

"Combat, Captain. Cease fire." Nathan ordered over his comm-set. "Helm, yaw to starboard, bring our mains onto the frigate."

"Target is turning to get a clear jump line," Lieutenant Commander Kono warned.

"Yawing to starboard," Lieutenant Dinev reported.

"Gunyoki are unable to engage frigate one," the comms officer added.

"They're too busy defending themselves against those octos," Jessica commented.

"Launch another eight Super Eagles," Nathan ordered.

"Aye, sir," the comms officer acknowledged.

"Frigate two has a clear jump line," Lieutenant Commander Kono warned. "She's spooling up her jump drive."

"Let them go," Nathan decided. "Helm, adjust attitude to bring all forward tubes onto frigate one." "Adjusting attitude to fire on frigate one, aye," Lieutenant Dinev replied as she continued to bring the Aurora's nose around while the ship drifted away from the targets.

"Frigate two has jumped," Lieutenant Commander Kono reported.

"Range to frigate one is increasing," Jessica warned. "Max effective range in twenty seconds."

"You should have a firing solution in ten," Lieutenant Dinev assured Jessica.

"Eight more Super Eagles are away," the comms officer reported.

"Forward tubes, max power, triplets," Nathan instructed. "Fire when ready."

"Forward tubes, max power, triplets," Jessica repeated. "Firing."

A barrage of red-orange balls of plasma streaked away from the Aurora, slamming into the unshielded frigate three seconds later. The target broke in half and erupted in multiple explosions, sending debris flying in all directions.

"Frigate one is destroyed," Jessica stated with obvious satisfaction.

"I've got the second frigate," Lieutenant Commander Kono reported. "Two light seconds out, coming about a bit slowly."

"They're turning to jump back into the platform," Jessica surmised. "Recommend we leave something behind for them."

"Comms, warn all ships that we're dropping mines at position one four seven by one five. Five by five spread," Nathan ordered.

"Aye, sir," the comms officer replied.

"Deploying smart mines," Jessica acknowledged, a small smile on her face.

"Helm, turn into that frigate. Jump us just to her starboard side so she thinks we're preparing to attack her."

"Aye, sir," Lieutenant Dinev replied.

"Nice," Jessica commented, appreciating the captain's tactics.

"On course, as ordered," Lieutenant Dinev reported.

"Jump us to that frigate," Nathan ordered.

"Jumping, aye," Mister Bickle replied as the jump flash washed over the bridge. "Jump complete."

Nathan turned toward his sensor officer to his left, waiting.

"Locking jump missiles on the frigate," Jessica reported, "just to sell it a bit."

"Target is jumping, sir," Lieutenant Commander Kono reported, a hint of pleasure in her tone.

The bridge suddenly became quiet as everyone waited to see if the captain's ploy had worked. Three seconds later, they found out.

"Multiple explosions!" Lieutenant Commander Kono reported. "Frigate two jumped right into the minefield, Captain. They've lost main power, and all her shields are down!"

"Shall I come about to jump in and finish her off, sir?" Lieutenant Dinev wondered.

"Negative," Nathan replied. "Get us back to a position halfway between the platform and Rakuen. Comms, tell the Gunyokis near the race platform to finish off that frigate while our Super Eagles keep those octo-fighters occupied."

"Aye, sir," the comms officer acknowledged.

"On course and ready to jump," Lieutenant Dinev announced.

"Jump us over," Nathan ordered.

"Jumping," the navigator announced as the jump flash washed over the bridge, yet again. "Jump complete."

"Any sign of those gunships over the Ranni plant?" Nathan asked.

"Negative, sir," Lieutenant Commander Kono replied.

"Captain, Rakuen Defense Command reports the Dusahn octo-fighters over the Ranni plant have jumped away and have yet to return."

"Very well."

"The Gunyokis are tearing up frigate two," Lieutenant Commander Kono reported. "The remaining octos around the platform are jumping away, as well."

"Comms, have flight maintain patrols over both engagement areas," Nathan ordered. "And send the Raptors on system perimeter patrols to check for any other Dusahn ships that might be lurking on the fringes of the system."

"Yes, sir," the comms officer replied.

"Frigate two is coming apart," Lieutenant Commander Kono reported. "Frigate two is destroyed."

"We could have finished off that frigate with a pair of jump missiles," Jessica commented, "even from all the way out here."

"Yeah, but then the Gunyoki wouldn't have gotten their first big kill," Nathan replied, a small grin on his face.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The guests began arriving at the Scott family's Vancouver estate, just before sundown, in a never-ending stream of black limousines. To the untrained observer, security appeared almost nonexistent; with no more than polite men and women wearing appropriate dress attire, checking guests through the main gates and helping them find their dining tables in the vast south lawn of the sprawling compound.

Krispin Bornet saw something entirely different. Security was everywhere, as were sound and weapons-suppression fields. More than half of the service staff were armed members of the NAU security detail, assigned to protect not only the president, but numerous dignitaries in attendance. In addition, many of those dignitaries had their own bodyguards. There were ushers everywhere, most of whom were standing on the sidelines, offering the occasional courteous directions to confused guests. In addition, there were trained snipers on the rooftops of not only the Scott estate, but the two estates to the south and east, both of which had a clear line of sight into the event.

As Krispin moved slowly through the crowd, offering hors d'oeuvres to guests, he kept his eyes peeled for anything out of the ordinary. He had yet to be contacted by the 'operative' Mister Dakota had mentioned. The event was now in full swing, and soon the president would be giving his customary Founders' Day speech. It would be the one moment the president would be in the open, assuming his handler's promise that the target's shields would be deactivated was true.

His tray emptied, Krispin returned to the catering tent on the side of the south lawn to pick up another one. As he had already done a dozen times this night, he placed his empty tray on the table as he entered and moved toward the table containing freshly stocked trays waiting to be taken out.

"Martin!" one of the wait staff supervisors barked.

Krispin responded immediately upon hearing his cover name called. "Yes, sir," he replied, stepping over to the man who had called him.

"Take that tray to the guard stationed on the third floor, southeast bedroom," the supervisor instructed as he scanned Krispin's ID badge.

Krispin looked at the handheld scanner, purposefully appearing puzzled. "What's that for?"

"So the guards don't shoot you," the supervisor joked. "Deliver the food, then wait outside the door until he is finished so you can bring back his tray."

"But, that could take a while," Krispin said.

"You got a problem taking a break?"

"I've barely earned a hundred credits in tips," Krispin complained, trying to appear eager to earn tips like everyone else.

"Don't worry," the supervisor told him. "The real money starts flowing *after* the president's speech. That's when everyone starts drinking and the party *really* gets rolling."

"Yes, sir," Krispin replied, picking up the tray of food. "How do I get to the...?"

"Third floor, southeast bedroom," the supervisor repeated. "Out the back of the tent, through the kitchen,

and down the hallway. Elevator up to the third floor. The guard on the third floor will direct you from there."

Krispin was about to depart with the tray of food when something dawned on him. "How will I know when the guard is finished?"

"Keep your ears open," the supervisor said with a wink. His expression suddenly turned deadly serious. "You will know when he is down."

It wasn't a slip of the tongue. Krispin had just met the other 'operative'.

* * *

President Scott stood at the picture window in his study, staring at the sea of lights in the city beyond his family estate. He had gazed out this window countless times in his eighty-one years of life. He remembered when he would look out this window with his father, and his father before him, when the lights below were far more sparse. Even five years ago, the lights had been sparse. Earth's recovery had taken time, but now, seven years after the cease-fire, his hard work had finally paid off. The recovery of his beloved Earth was nearly complete. Once again, the lights below were a blazing symbol of prosperity, accomplishment, and anticipation of things still to come.

So much had changed over the last nine years. So much had been lost. He remembered the words of his grandfather. 'A generation must die for its successor to come into its own.' He wondered how many of those who had died had made way for their successors. His wife, his eldest son, his youngest daughter's husband; all of their deaths had forced others to step up. His youngest son had become the leader Dayton had always known he would be. His daughter had stepped up and become an indispensable member of his administration. And their stories were not unique. He knew of countless individuals who had been forced to step up to fill the voids left by the untimely passing of others. Millions had perished so that trillions more could survive and thrive.

Dayton Scott's earliest childhood memories were those of his world's first ventures into orbit since the bio-digital plague had sent them back to the horse and buggy age. Now, his youngest son was leading an interstellar rebellion a thousand light years away.

His father had been correct. Times had indeed changed.

"What are you doing hiding in here?" Miri asked as she entered the room.

"Just looking out the window and thinking," her father responded.

"About what?"

"Hope," he mused. He looked at her and smiled. "You remind me so much of your mother."

"Are you ready for this?" she asked.

"Of course not," he admitted with a sigh. "You know, every year I make a Founders' Day speech, and every year I think it's the most important speech I will ever make. For once, it may actually be."

"Are you sure you want to do this?" Miri wondered, sensing her father's apprehension. "No one would blame you if you played it safe. Like you said, you can do more for the people of Earth by *staying* in office."

"Miri, through the course of my life, I have had to do many things I was not proud of. Every time, I convinced myself that I was doing them for the greater good. Yet, every single one of them, even the ones that turned out the way I'd hoped, still haunt me to this day."

"But…"

"Whether I am to succeed or fail, if I do either one using the truth, my conscience will be clear." Miri leaned forward and kissed her father on the cheek. "Have I ever told you how proud I am to be your daughter?"

"Not as proud as I am to be your father," he replied, wrapping his arms around her.

The door opened, and a man in a black tuxedo stepped inside. "It's time, Mister President."

Dayton took a deep breath and sighed. "Time to make some enemies," he said, heading for the door.

* * *

The guard on the third floor gave Krispin far more attention than any guard thus far. Unlike the plainclothes guards in the public areas, these men were in uniform, including flak vests, helmets, and heavy assault-style plasma rifles. In short, they were dressed for war.

After several minutes of checking his ID, performing bioscans, and checking in with his unit commander, the guard allowed him to pass. Krispin offered the man a biscuit, but he was not interested.

Krispin followed the guard's directions to the end of the corridor and around the corner. He found the door to the southeast bedroom and knocked three times, then twice, then three more times, just as the guard at the elevator had instructed. The door opened, and he was met by a squarejawed marine in full body armor, the same type Krispin had worn, himself, during his time in the service. "Where would you like this?" Krispin asked.

"Over there, on the desk," the marine instructed, turning back to his duties at the window.

Krispin glanced about as he placed the tray of food on the table. There were two marines in the room, both of whom had assault rifles. The guard who had answered the door was the spotter and was actively scanning the crowd below for any suspicious behavior. The second marine had a sniper rifle trained on the crowd, as well as the stage, and was constantly checking his range to various locations. These men were safeties, usually referred to as 'over watch', since their primary functions were to 'watch' the scene they were assigned to protect. If a shooter were to suddenly start firing from the crowd, from another building, or from anywhere within their line of fire, their job was to take that shooter out as quickly as possible, without concern for collateral damage.

"*Highboy Four, check in*," the encrypted comm-box on the nightstand next to the spotter squawked.

"Highboy Four, all clear," the spotter replied. "How much time before Delta Sierra?"

"Why? You need to piss, or something?"

"Food's here."

"*Ten minutes,*" the voice on the comm-box replied. "*Eat quick*."

"Will there be anything else?" Krispin asked.

"We're good, thanks," the spotter replied without taking his eyes off the crowd.

Krispin took one last look around the room, as well as a peek out the window. The shooter had a perfect shot at the stage, from high right, giving him a one-quarter profile of the target. For Krispin, it would be an easy shot, as long as the president's shields were disabled as promised. The big question would be how to escape once the target was eliminated.

* * *

As with every Founders' Day celebration before, tonight's was under a clear, star-filled summer's night. The air was crisp, with a slight breeze which caused the decorations to sway seductively as the orchestra played a mixture of selections designed to cater to all ages. When the current selection finished, the orchestra began the presidential anthem, and the spotlights snapped to life, focused on the stairs leading from the Scott house to the south lawn where the partygoers were assembled. President Scott stepped out of the doors at the very moment the overture ended, and the first verse began to play. He was met with the usual respectful applause given to the elected leader of the Union, the world, and the Alliance. The intensity of the applause increased as the president walked down the steps, waving as he made his way to the main stage where his daughters and their husbands all stood waiting, applauding their father, as well.

The president moved across the stage, shaking the hands of the dignitaries chosen to share it with him this night. He paused by his five daughters, giving each of them a kiss on the cheek.

Finally, he arrived at the podium where he spent several minutes waving to the crowd, even after the music had stopped, waiting for the applause to die down before beginning the most important speech of his career.

"Thank you!" he said, repeating himself several times while he waited for their cheers to fade. "Happy Founders' Day!" he yelled, whipping them back into a thunderous applause. He continued waving at the crowd another full minute before their cheers finally died down enough for him to be heard, once again.

"I'm happy you're all enjoying yourselves. It's an important day in the history of our world, and it should be celebrated." The president looked around the crowd as the last of the applause fell silent. "In fact, it's an important day for the entire core. Without the founders of the Ark Institute, the Earth and her core worlds would not be enjoying the very freedoms we celebrate this night." The crowd erupted in applause, once again, forcing the president to wait before launching into the main body of his speech.

Krispin sat patiently on the settee in the hallway outside the southeast bedroom, the tray in his lap, waiting for some signal to enter the room. The operative who gave him the tray of food had offered little in the way of instructions. However, at the time, there were plenty of people within earshot.

The entire exchange still bothered him. Were *he* the operative, Krispin would have taken the time to ensure that proper instructions were given to the asset. Poor communication can kill the best-laid plans...he was taught that in basic. Yet, the assignment details had been unclear from day one. From his handler to this operative, Krispin had been left guessing more than necessary.

Something suddenly occurred to him. The tray on his lap seemed heavy in comparison to those he had carried all evening. Not by much, but definitely heavier. He had originally attributed it to the tray likely being of a different maker. Perhaps the metal was thicker, or the tray was slightly larger. But upon closer examination, neither was true. The tray was exactly the same, except for one thing. It was not made of metal. At least, the face of it was not. That's when he noticed something else. The face of the tray was removable.

After checking to ensure that no cameras were trained on him, Krispin removed the white glove from his right hand, worked his fingernail under the edge of the tray face, and lifted it up. The tray face was light, probably made of some type of carbon fiber or nano-tube structure. After putting his glove back on, he lifted the face, peeking underneath. The

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space between the tray face and the tray bottom was filled with a lightweight material, with a small cutout on one side. Krispin recognized the material as the same type used to protect comms gear from detection or electronic countermeasures. Within the cutout was a small electronic device.

Krispin removed the device, immediately recognizing it as a comms jammer. Its miniature size meant its range and battery life were likely limited. Furthermore, its very presence was troubling.

Why didn't the operative tell me about this?

Krispin quickly analyzed the situation. Things weren't adding up, and the only reasons he could come up with bothered him. But it was too late now. He was in too deep. He had to act.

Krispin activated the comms jammer and put it in his pocket. He then rose and knocked on the door. When it opened, the guard before him looked confused. Not confused by Krispin's knocking, but rather by his own wooziness and inability to focus.

"What do you want?" the guard asked.

"You don't look so good," Krispin said, easing the man back a few steps so he could enter the room and close the door behind him.

"Mike," the guard called to his cohort.

Krispin glanced at the shooter who was slumped over his weapon.

"Mike!" the guard repeated. He grabbed his comm-box from the table, calling into it. "Control! Highboy Four! My shooter is down, and something is wrong with me!" The guard looked at Krispin. "You. What did you do?" Just as he began to put two and two together, Krispin's food tray smacked him in the face, knocking him backward onto the bed. Krispin pulled the man's sidearm and placed it into his belt, under his white jacket, then checked the guard's pulse. The man was alive. Whatever had been put into the food had obviously been designed to incapacitate but not kill. Although Krispin did not care to kill a fellow marine, this too seemed suspicious. A hit as monumental as this called for extreme measures. The effect of incapacitating drugs could not be accurately predicted. An instantly lethal poison would have made more sense.

If Galiardi is willing to kill the president, surely he's willing to sacrifice a few marines along the way.

Krispin had no time to debate the issue. He had one chance at freedom for himself and his beloved Sara, and that chance was slipping away with each passing second. The president was already halfway through his speech, and once completed, he would be on the move, surrounded by guests, making a decent shot improbable.

Krispin checked the shooter next. He too had a pulse. Krispin pulled him away from the window, taking the soldier's sniper rifle in his left hand as he shoved the unconscious shooter onto the floor and out of his way. While he moved into position, he reached into his pocket and deactivated the comms jammer. If anybody called for Highboy Four, he would have to answer, or the guard at the third-floor elevator would come busting through the door a minute later.

Krispin raised the sniper rifle and took aim, immediately focusing on the president at the podium. A touch of the sensor display control pad on the side of the weapon told him that Mister Dakota had kept his promise. The president's weapons shield, although active, was at minimal power and would not stop a high-powered needle-beam from his sniper rifle. As he took aim and prepared to fire, he noticed movement on the stage to the right of the president. A woman had moved to the side, as if attempting to exit the stage for some reason.

Krispin breathed in and out, slow and steady. He could feel his heart beating in his chest and could hear the air moving through his nostrils. He was about to kill the leader of the Earth and of the Alliance. He was about to go down in history in a way that no sane man would ever want.

He was doing it for Sara.

Krispin's finger moved smoothly from the trigger guard to the trigger itself. But as he tensed his finger, something happened.

A blinding flash of light filled his targeting scope, and a loud boom shook the windows and the building itself. Krispin's eyes widened. He lowered his sniper rifle to look at the stage below with naked eyes, but it was gone. More accurately, it was veiled behind a wall of smoke.

What the fuck? A bomb? Someone set off a bomb?

Krispin suddenly realized he wasn't the only asset in play. In fact, he might even be the decoy.

"Shit!" Krispin exclaimed in frustration. The comm-box was ablaze with comms traffic. Screams of panic from the crowd below filled the air. Krispin raised his weapon again, using his target scope to scan the area where the stage had been. As the evening breeze pushed the smoke aside, he began to catch small glimpses of the scene. The stage was a mess. Most of it had collapsed, and there was a smoking hole where the president had been a moment ago. To the right were the mutilated bodies of the president's daughters and their husbands. To the left, what little remained of those dignitaries unlucky enough to have been invited to share the stage with the president that night. Rescue personnel and presidential security were already swarming over the bodies, trying to determine if the president...if *anyone*...was still alive.

The door burst open behind him. Krispin spun around and opened fire as the guard from the elevator fired on him. Three bolts of energy streaked by Krispin's head, slamming into the wall behind him. Krispin rolled to his left, coming to his feet and swinging his rifle at the guard, whose body armor had protected him from Krispin's return fire. The butt of Krispin's sniper rifle found the guards head, knocking him to one side. In one smooth motion, Krispin let go of his sniper rifle and pulled the sidearm from under his jacket, firing multiple times. His shots walked across the tumbling guard's chest and would have caused no injury at all, had the guard not lost his balance and fallen into the path of the energy blasts. The last two blasts caught the guard in the face, killing him instantly.

Krispin tossed the gun aside and picked up his tray, wasting no time departing the area. He had no idea why the guard had come to their room. No shots had been fired, and he had heard no unanswered calls for Highboy Four over the comm-box.

Once inside the elevator, Krispin quickly placed the comms jammer back into its hiding place under the tray face, then left the tray on the floor of the elevator.

The plainclothes guard at the first-floor elevator doors turned to face the doors as they opened and was met with a man's fist. He then disappeared, pulled into the elevator itself by his attacker, after which the doors closed. A minute later, the doors opened, and Krispin stepped out, moving quickly back to the catering area where he knew he would be expected to report during a crisis. All he had to do was keep his cool and play his part. There would be interrogations. He, and everyone who had worked or attended the party, would likely be detained well into the night. But there was no evidence that Krispin, or *Martin Reynolds*, which was the name on his ID badge, had any involvement in the tragic event. He had not seen any cameras inside the house, nor the third-floor hallway, and he had worn gloves the entire time. Luckily, although a little wrinkled and dirty, his white server's jacket showed no signs of his scuffle with the elevator guard.

Miraculously, Krispin actually had a chance of escaping.

* * *

Admiral Galiardi was whisked away by a squad of marines who plowed their way through the panicked crowd, breaking through to the east, toward the temporary airfield where the admiral's shuttle was already spun up and ready for liftoff. Within three minutes of detonation, the admiral was being shoved into his shuttle.

"Reports are coming in from all over Alliance space," the duty officer told the admiral as the shuttle began to lift off. "Kohara, Sorenson, Kent, Copora, Pylius, Weldon...there have been assassination attempts on nearly every industrialized world within the Sol Alliance."

"How many are dead?" Admiral Galiardi asked as the shuttle jumped to orbit.

"Nothing is confirmed yet, but so far, reports indicate twelve out of twenty alliance world leaders have been assassinated. Sir, we're also getting intel that indicates this may be a coordinated attack by Jung deep-cover operatives...possibly sleeper agents. General, I strongly recommend..."

"Put all forces on maximum alert," Admiral Galiardi ordered.

"Already done, sir."

"What about President Scott?" the admiral asked, already knowing the answer.

"I'm afraid everyone on the stage was killed, sir," the officer replied. "Nothing is confirmed...it's chaos down there."

"Sir," the pilot called back. "We're getting reports that four persons from the stage are being airlifted to the hospital."

"Are any of them the president?" the admiral asked.

"Unknown, sir."

"Well, fucking find out," the admiral barked. "Colonel," he said, speaking directly to the duty officer again. "I'm declaring global martial law."

"Sir?"

"You heard me."

"Yes, sir."

"And send word to all Alliance worlds; I am taking control of Earth until further notice."

"Admiral, there is a chain of succession..."

"There were at least a dozen members of that chain of succession on the stage when it blew the fuck up, Colonel!" the admiral yelled. "For all we know, someone further down that chain of succession is in collusion *with* the Jung. Did you ever think of *that*, Colonel?"

"No, sir... I mean, yes, sir."

"Make it happen, Colonel," the admiral concluded.

"Yes, sir."

* * *

"I did everything short of threatening his life, Captain," Ito Yokimah explained to Nathan over the vid-comm link displayed on the view screen on the wall of the captain's ready room. "He is determined to prevent Rakuen from *joining the Karuzari Alliance. He is a staunch traditionalist, blind to the demands of changing times.*"

"How much influence does he have over the population?" Nathan wondered.

"Enough to hold the line for some time, I'm afraid. I must say, though, that your recent defense of Rakuen will likely convince some of his constituents that Rakuen should join. It might have had even more impact if you had dispatched the second frigate yourself, instead of allowing the Gunyoki to do so."

"The Gunyoki needed to taste victory, even a small one."

"I understand," Ito said. *"I'm afraid that it may take longer than anticipated to change Minister Sebaron's mind."*

"Is there any way to force the issue to be voted on by the people of Rakuen?" Nathan asked.

"That would be extremely unlikely," Ito explained. "Rakuens only vote once every ten years to elect our government officials. We trust those officials to make such decisions on our behalf. Calling for a people's vote on such a thing would require the support of an overwhelming majority of the Rakuen Congress. That's at least eightyseven votes, and that's just to initiate a popular vote on the matter."

"You make it sound difficult."

"That's because it is," Ito assured him. "I have only seen it happen once before, and that was when I pushed to turn the Gunyoki training flights into a competition for profit."

"Then, you at least know how it's done," Nathan realized.

"I do. But it is not something I care to repeat."

"I don't think you have much choice, Mister Yokimah," Nathan reminded him.

Ito sighed, obviously displeased by the hold Nathan now had on him. "I will attempt to get the process started,

Captain. But I warn you, it will take time."

"Are we talking months or years?"

"As this is a matter of importance, I would guess months."

"How long did it take you to get the vote on turning the Gunyoki into a competition?" Nathan wondered.

"Three and a half years, I'm afraid."

"Let's hope it doesn't take *that* long," Nathan replied. "Good luck, Mister Yokimah." Nathan pressed the button to deactivate the vid-com link. He looked at Jessica, sitting on the couch under the view screen. "You know, it would help if you didn't make faces at me while I'm on a call."

"A girl's got to have some fun," Jessica defended.

"Did you get the damage reports on the Ranni plant?"

"Yup," she replied, sitting upright again. "The power plant is toast. They're running on portable reactors on loan from one of Yokimah's plants. But it's going to slow them down somewhat. The bastards knew where to hit them, which means they had good intel."

"I don't like the sound of that."

"Me either. Fortunately, they had just shipped a load of emitters and jump field generators to the race platform, only *two hours* before the Dusahn attacked."

"Then their intel *isn't* inside the Ranni plant," Nathan surmised.

"That would be my guess, yes."

"How many units?"

"Enough to outfit another twenty Gunyoki fighters," Jessica replied.

"That'll make twenty Gunyoki pilots happy," Nathan commented. "They were a bit frustrated after trying to fight those octo-fighters. The damn things jump about every ten seconds. What about the race platform?" "A hangar bay is out of service, and the observation deck is opened to space, but other than that, not much. I'm pretty sure it wasn't their primary target. I think they were just trying to split our defenses."

"And it almost worked," Nathan agreed.

"Almost doesn't count." Jessica changed her position, leaning forward, her forearms resting on her knees as she looked down at the deck.

Nathan recognized her body language. "What is it?"

"We got some sig-int less than an hour ago," she explained. "From one of our stealth recon drones. It's about the Corinari."

"The Corinari? I thought they had disbanded years ago."

"Okay, the ex-Corinari," Jessica admitted. "They've been rounded up by the Dusahn. Apparently, they had all gone into hiding after the Dusahn began capturing every Corinairan who had ever served in *any* military organization, Corinairan, Takaran, even in the Alliance. Some of them had even formed a loose resistance of sorts. The Dusahn have rounded them all up, or at least most of them. The only intel we have to go on are the news reports, and for all we know, they're all propaganda."

"What are they going to do with them?"

"The Dusahn assimilate manpower into their forces," Jessica told him. "They're going to give them a choice. Serve the Dusahn, or spend the rest of their lives at hard, and likely dangerous, labor."

"Slave soldiers or slave laborers," Nathan sighed. "Nice choice."

"You know damn well not a *single* Corinari will choose to serve the Dusahn," Jessica said.

"I know."

"We have to find a way to rescue them, Nathan."

"I know."

"So, how are we going to do it?"

"You're the tactical officer *and* a Ghatazhak," Nathan reminded her. "Don't you have any ideas?"

"Yup, but you're not going to like it," Jessica warned.

"Try me," Nathan insisted.

Jessica rose from the couch. "After I run it past Telles," she insisted. "I suspect he'll suggest a few changes."

* * *

After being interrogated several times and being held for hours at the Scott estate, Krispin and the rest of the catering staff were released, but warned to remain in the area for the next few days. Krispin was surprised that no one had asked him about his time on the third floor. Especially considering that two guards had been killed, and the guards who Krispin had delivered food to had been found unconscious. The only thing Krispin could figure was that someone—most likely the operative who had given him the assignment to deliver the food—had somehow removed Krispin's alias from the movement logs.

One thing Krispin was sure of: eventually, they would figure things out. And when they did, they would come for him. He had no intention of waiting for them to do so.

Once Krispin arrived at his hotel room, he immediately changed clothes and IDs, and then left, taking the bus to the train station and the train to the next city over. Once there, he took several buses to the far side of that town before renting a vehicle to drive to, yet, another city.

Twelve hours, four different IDs, and more than a dozen checkpoints later, Krispin had made it all the way to Seattle. His only hope was to make it onto a flight to a remote part of the world, someplace where the local government was still stable enough to resist Admiral Galiardi's imposition of global martial law.

* * *

"You will stand!" the guard yelled to the occupants of the cell where Jonas Prechitt was being held.

Jonas and the five other prisoners stood as instructed. Michael watched from his cell, knowing they would be next. One of the guards opened the cell door, and two more guards stepped inside, followed by a Dusahn officer.

"The choice is simple," the officer said, obviously not wanting to waste any more time than necessary on a task he felt beneath him. "Serve the Dusahn, and you will live meaningful and productive lives. Refuse, and you will spend the remainder of your days at hard labor, in deplorable conditions."

The prisoners stood at attention, as best their tired, beaten bodies would allow, staring straight ahead.

The Dusahn officer walked the length of the line of men, stopping at the end, opposite from Jonas. He looked at the last man in line. "What say you?"

"I speak for these men," Jonas stated confidently from the other end of the line.

The Dusahn officer turned back toward Jonas, tilting his head in curiosity. After stepping back, he scanned the line of men. "Is this true?"

"CORINARI!" Jonas barked sharply.

"HUP! HUP! HUP!" the line of men replied proudly and in unison.

"As you wish," the officer agreed. He turned and walked over to Jonas, taking a moment to study his face. "So, Mister Prechitt, how say you?"

"That's *Major* Prechitt," Jonas corrected.

The officer smiled, amused by the man's pride. "Do not test me, *Major*," the officer warned. "I will ask one last time," he said, his voice seething. "How...say...you?"

"The Corinari serve the people of Corinair and no other." Jonas shifted his gaze to look directly into the Dusahn officer's eyes. "On behalf of myself and my men, we respectfully decline your offer to serve the Dusahn Empire."

"Too bad," the officer replied calmly. "You would have made fine additions. Men like you are hard to come by." The officer walked to the cell door, then turned back around to address the six prisoners one last time. "Ironically, you will serve the empire, regardless of your decision. I do, however, respect your decision to stand by your principles. You would be surprised how few we have conquered have been willing to do the same." The Dusahn officer turned and walked out of the cell, barking orders in his native language as he headed for the next one.

The guards immediately herded Jonas and his men out of the cell and down the corridor, presumably to meet their fate as slave laborers.

"Remember what I said," Michael whispered to Birk and Cuddy as the guards came to their cell door.

"On your feet!" the guard ordered as he unlocked their cell door.

Michael, Birk, Cuddy, and the other three prisoners in the cell rose to their feet, forming a line just as Jonas and his men had done. Michael moved casually away from Birk and Cuddy, taking his place at the end of the line. They, too, stood at attention, as best their weary bodies would allow.

Two guards entered the cell, taking up positions at the front corners, their weapons ready. The Dusahn officer followed a moment later, entering the cell and coming to stand a meter before the door. "The choice is simple," the officer said as before. "Serve the Dusahn, and you will live meaningful and productive lives. Refuse, and you will spend the remainder of your miserable existence at hard labor, in conditions unbefitting a snarda beast." The officer walked the line, just as before, inspecting the group of men assembled before him, coming to a stop at the end of the line in front of Michael. "Michael Willard," the officer said, disdain in his voice. "This offer does not extend to you. This offer is for *men*, not *mutineers*."

"It matters not," Michael replied proudly. "I may not be Corinari, but I, too, refuse to serve your *pathetic* little empire."

"You are not *worthy* of the Corinari," the officer said, stepping to the left, in front of the next man. Without even looking at Michael, in one smooth motion, the officer pulled his sidearm, placed it against Michael's right cheek, and fired.

Cuddy gasped, and Birk turned away as Michael fell to the ground, gasping for breath through the gaping hole in his face.

"How say you?" the officer asked the next man in line.

"I respectfully decline to serve the Dusahn Empire," the man stated proudly.

The officer said nothing to the second man, moving to the next.

Cuddy tried not to look at Michael's near-lifeless body as blood pooled around his face and neck. By now, Michael's breathing was almost nonexistent, and his gaze had become completely vacant, staring at someplace only he could see.

Birk had his eyes closed, afraid to open them as the officer moved down the line, accepting the polite refusals from each man.

The officer finally reached Cuddy, noticing the effect Michael's now-dead body was having on the young man. "He was a friend of yours?"

"Sort of," Cuddy admitted. "Not really, I guess."

"You are not Corinari," the officer surmised.

Cuddy's expression suddenly changed, becoming full of rage. "No, I'm not," he replied, his anger growing. "But I, too..."

"No!" Birk yelled, interrupting his friend. "Don't do it, Cuddy!" Birk looked at the officer. "It's all my fault! The guns fell into our yard! It was my idea to sell them! I just wanted some extra money! We aren't Corinari. We're just a couple of college students. We were scared, and we agreed to join the resistance because we were afraid they were going to kill us! I'll serve the Dusahn!"

"Birk, no!" Cuddy argued.

"Shut up, Cuddy!" Birk insisted. "And so will he! We don't want to die! We'll serve you, I swear it!"

The officer studied Birk for a moment, then Cuddy. "Neither of you will make good soldiers," he decided. "However, there are many roles in which you can serve." The officer smiled. "Cook's assistant, laundry, housekeeping." He looked at Cuddy. "How say you?"

"Please," Birk whispered to his friend.

Cuddy looked at Birk, then back at the Dusahn officer before him. "I will serve the empire," he finally said begrudgingly.

The officer smiled and then turned to look at Birk. "Your friend is a far braver man than you, I'm afraid." The officer stepped over in front of Birk. "I'm pretty sure I already know *your* answer. However, protocol requires that I ask. So, how say you?"

"I choose to serve the empire," Birk sobbed, embarrassed by his own weakness.

The guard turned sharply around, barking more orders in his native tongue as he walked out of the cell, turning to go to the next.

The guards herded the three men who had refused service toward the exit. The last man looked at Birk and Cuddy as he left, nodding respectfully as he departed.

A moment later, two more guards stepped in to herd Birk and Cuddy out, as well, taking them down a different corridor than the others, presumably to their new lives as members of the Dusahn Empire.

Neither of them looked back at Michael's dead body. They couldn't.

* * *

"We are now getting reports from multiple sources, all of which are confirming that the assassination attempts on leaders of Alliance worlds are believed to be a coordinated attempt by the Jung Empire to destabilize the Alliance and its military forces, possibly as the first step in a coordinated attack on not only the Earth, but all of the Sol-Pentaurus Alliance. NAU investigators have confirmed that President Scott and his family were killed by an explosive device that was set by a Jung sleeper agent by the name of Sara Jassa, who died in the blast. Authorities are still searching for Miss Jassa's accomplice, Krispin Bornet, who somehow managed to get hired on, at the last moment, as a server for the event at the late president's estate. Mister Bornet is an exmarine with special operations training and is considered armed and dangerous. Anyone spotting Mister Bornet is strongly advised to stay clear of him and report his location to authorities as quickly as possible."

Krispin stood in the Sydney Airport, staring at the view screen in disbelief, his heart sinking at the news of the death of his beloved Sara. Now it was all beginning to make sense. Both of them had been played by Galiardi; if, in fact, that was who had hired him in the first place.

But it had to be Galiardi, Krispin thought. He had the most to gain from the death of President Scott, and he would be the only one with the power and reach to coordinate similar assassinations on other Alliance worlds.

Krispin's mind was reeling. He looked around, suddenly feeling as if every person in the terminal was staring at him. He felt his pulse racing, his breath quickening. He had to control himself; he had to think.

He quickly headed to the exit, making his way to the public transit station outside. Within minutes, he was on a train headed for the city.

Krispin moved to the back of the train car, taking a seat and pulling his cap down over his face, pretending to be taking a nap. He quickly took inventory of his situation. The picture of him on the news was recent but not too recent. He had two days' growth on his face and had already changed his hair color from blond to black. It was a start, but it would not be enough. If he could lie low somewhere for a week or two, his facial hair would thicken, offering him additional concealment.

Still, it would not be enough. If he remained on Earth, he would eventually be apprehended. If Admiral Galiardi was making a play for the control of the Earth *and* the entire Alliance, he could not afford any loose ends. Krispin would not be arrested, he would be killed. Of that, he was certain.

Unfortunately, Krispin had very little money on him, definitely not enough to keep him fed and clothed for more than a few days. He needed help...help from someone he could trust. But very few people met that criteria. In fact, he could think of only one person who even came close, and he had not spoken to her in several years.

* * *

Admiral Galiardi entered the Alliance Fleet Command press room, moving quickly to the podium at the front of the room. There were no pleasantries, no greetings, no friendly exchanges with familiar reporters waiting to hear what the admiral had to say. Michael Galiardi was there on business. Deadly serious business.

"There will be no questions," the admiral began. "I am here to make a statement only." The admiral took a pause, reviewing his notes on the data pad before him. "Two days ago, sleeper agents of the Jung Empire executed a carefully planned, well-coordinated attack directly against the leaders of the twelve most powerful worlds within the Sol Alliance. I am saddened to report that ten of those assassinations were successful, including that of our own president, Dayton Scott. The intricacies of this plan would require years, if not decades, of preparation. The logistics of interstellar communication, alone, tells us that these plans have been in motion since at least as far back as the cease-fire agreement between the Jung Empire and the Sol Alliance. Such actions constitute a violation of the cease-fire agreement, meaning that a state of war now exists between us. As you are all aware, since returning to command, I have insisted the lung could not be trusted and that someday, we would have to face them again. I take no satisfaction in being right in this instance. However, I do take comfort in the knowledge that *this* time, we are prepared to defeat our enemy with relatively few losses in Alliance lives. Unfortunately, a declaration of war requires a vote of the Alliance Council, which is now impossible due to the attack by the Jung Empire. This was undoubtedly their goal all along, to cripple our government, to create panic and chaos among our peoples, to sow discord within our political parties and institutions...all so we would fail to take action when action is the only thing that can save us."

The admiral took a breath, glancing down at his notes again, before continuing. He paused, as if he suddenly did not want to say what was on his data pad. He looked at the faces of the press, every pair of eyes locked on him, hanging on his every word. He leaned on one arm just enough to appear a bit informal, then took a deep breath and continued. "When I took my oath of service—both times -I swore to do everything within my power to protect and serve the people of Earth and of all those worlds aligned with her. It is an oath that I, and every man and woman under my command, take seriously. Being a leader sometimes means you have to make terrible decisions. It sometimes means you have to break the very rules you have sworn to uphold, in order to protect those entrusted to you. All too often, it means having to send brave men and women to their deaths, and in too great of numbers. The worst thing a leader can do is to fail to act. Therefore, I am taking action, and I am doing what I, as commander of all Alliance forces, believe is necessary to protect *all* the people of the Alliance."

Admiral Galiardi squared up to the cameras at the back of the room, again taking a more official posture. "In the wake of the assassinations of ten world leaders, and the imminent threat of attack by the Jung Empire, I am declaring interstellar martial law throughout all Alliance space. Furthermore, I am assuming control of all Alliance worlds that have suffered a loss of leadership, until such time as those worlds can conduct lawful elections to replace them. In addition, at this very moment, a first strike against every Jung battle platform whose location is currently known to us is being carried out. I intend to continue these strikes until such time as the Jung Empire's ability to wage war against the Sol Alliance, or any other world, is no more. As of this moment, the Sol Alliance is at war with the Jung Empire. It is a war that we *shall* win, and we shall do so most decidedly. That is all."

Admiral Galiardi kept his promise and left the podium without answering any of the questions being shouted at him as he departed the press room.

"Jesus, that took balls," Commander Macklay said as he walked alongside the admiral down the corridors of Fleet Command.

"It was just a speech, Commander."

"You just took control of twenty-eight worlds, sir."

"Ten, actually," the admiral corrected.

"You mean *technically*," the commander replied. "The other eighteen will do whatever you say because they need our protection."

"What's the status of the attack?" the admiral asked, ignoring the commander's comments.

"Six of eight strike platforms have confirmed launches as instructed. That's sixty super JKKVs on the way to their targets."

"Do we have recon assets standing by to assess the results?" the admiral inquired.

"Yes, sir. All known battle platforms are being tracked by stealth jump recon drones, and manned scout ships are standing by to perform additional recon once the drones confirm the strikes," the commander assured his superior. "In addition, I have destroyers and more than a hundred gunships ready to attack any battle platforms that might somehow escape destruction."

"I assume all our defenses are on full-alert?" the admiral wondered.

"If there were an alert level higher than condition one, we'd be at it now, Admiral." The commander looked at the admiral. "You don't really think there are Jung ships out there waiting to attack us, do you?"

"No, I don't," the admiral admitted. "But only a fool believes that he couldn't be wrong."

CHAPTER NINE

Kaylah Yosef was unemployed for the first time in her life, having resigned from her dream job nearly a week ago. For days after resigning, she had been unsure of her decision, but recent events had convinced her otherwise. Like many, she had never fully trusted Admiral Galiardi and had found solace in the knowledge that there were people like Dayton Scott to keep him in check. Now, with the president and his family dead, and Galiardi having seized command of all the industrialized Alliance worlds, especially Earth, war appeared inevitable. If she had to go to war again, she wanted to be sure she was following leaders she believed in; leaders she could trust.

During her entire career in the service, only one person had truly inspired her and made her *believe* in what she was doing. When he died, she had lost her way for several years. She had become an automaton, of sorts, going to work each day simply to fulfill her obligations to her employers and collect enough compensation to pay her bills. It was an endless cycle she had expected to continue until the day she, too, passed, and it had depressed her to no end.

The job at the institute had breathed new hope and purpose into her life. Finally, she was able to do cuttingedge work; science that might actually *help* society, instead of adding to the military's arsenal of weapons that were meant to protect it and keep it from destroying itself. But would it have been enough, given the current events?

She doubted it. Most likely, she would have been recalled by Fleet to work on another top-secret project touted to crush their enemies. She would have found herself back in the same grind.

Her comm-unit buzzed, derailing her contemplations. She picked it up and checked the display screen, recognizing the caller. "It's about time," she said, answering the call.

"Sorry," Captain Hunt replied. "Everyone's at full alert. We were boarded upon arrival in the system and then escorted to orbit. We just started loading an hour ago."

"Where are you?"

"In Earth orbit. Transfer station four. Are you ready to go?"

"Me, and about forty others," Kaylah replied.

"Forty? How did you find forty people willing to chuck it all and leave Earth?"

"All I had to do was tell them who they'd be fighting for," Kaylah said. "It worked on me, remember?"

Captain Hunt chuckled. "It worked on all of us, Kaylah."

"How are we going to get that many people up to your ship without raising suspicion?" Kaylah asked. "*Especially* with everyone on alert."

"I've got that all worked out," Captain Hunt assured her. "Just get everyone to Arenson's warehouse in the Branbury district as quickly as possible. Go in by yourself, and ask for Evard Bertel. He knows what to do."

"Ooh," Kaylah cooed. "It sounds very cloak-and-dagger."

"Listen, Kaylah," Captain Hunt said, his voice becoming serious, "something has come up. Something I need your help with." "What is it?"

"A piece of cargo will be arriving at Arenson's. A very special piece of cargo. About the size of a small car. It requires very special handling and has very specific power requirements. It even has its own mini-fusion reactor."

"What is it?" Kaylah wondered.

"To be honest, they wouldn't tell me. All I was told is that it is of the utmost importance that this cargo makes it to the Karuzari."

"And you're willing to take it on board?"

"I wasn't, at first," he admitted. "But they assured me that if I knew what the cargo was, I'd be willing to accept it."

"Are you sure you can believe them?" Kaylah wondered. "I mean, considering everything that's happened the last few days..."

"Which is why I need you to check it out. If you think it should come on board, I'm good with it."

"I understand," Kaylah replied. "I'll take care of it, Chris." "Thanks, Kaylah. See you soon."

Kaylah ended the call and immediately placed one herself.

"*Hello?*" A man answered, his voice unsure.

"It's me. It's time."

"Thank God," the man replied, relieved.

"Arenson's warehouse in the Branbury district. Two hours. Call everyone," she instructed as she used her comm-unit to search a map of the district in question. "There's a bar about two blocks west of the warehouse. Have everyone assemble there until I call."

"Forty people walking into a bar? No, that's not going to look suspicious."

"Pretend you're a softball team after a game, or something. It's the weekend, after all." "This is Australia, Kaylah."

"A rugby team, then."

"*There's forty of us,*" he reminded her.

"Two teams then," Kaylah exclaimed. "Use your imagination."

"What are you going to be doing?"

"I'll be getting things set up. I'll call you with further instructions."

"Got it," the man replied. "Be careful."

"You, too," she said, hanging up. Kaylah immediately rose from her seat, grabbing the bag she had kept packed and ready to go since she had arrived a week ago. On her way to the door, she grabbed her purse but stopped dead in her tracks when someone knocked.

Kaylah stood frozen, unsure of what to do. The knock repeated. She quietly set her bags on the floor and pulled a stunner from one of them. She pressed the arming button on the side of the stunner and stepped carefully toward the door, holding the device at the ready. Once at the door, she peeked through the peephole, but it was blocked.

Shit, she thought. A moment later, she spoke. "Who is it?"

"Room service."

It was a man's voice with an Australian accent. "I didn't order anything," she replied.

"I have an order of strawberry shortcake for room three one four," the man explained. "For a 'K Yosef'."

The explanation caught her by surprise. Strawberry shortcake was one of her favorite desserts, but she hadn't had one for as long as she could remember. "Why can't I see you?" she demanded.

"I don't know, ma'am. Perhaps your peephole is broken?" "Leave it beside the door," she insisted. "As you wish, ma'am," the man promised. "Good day."

Kaylah waited for the man to leave. After a few minutes, she decided that she had no choice; she had to open the door. It would take her nearly an hour to get to the Branbury district and get everything ready with this *Evard Bertel* person.

Kaylah took a deep breath, then slowly and quietly opened the door, her stunner held ready. Once open, she peered outside, looking for the dessert the man had promised. She spotted a silver service tray on the floor, with a dome that was likely covering the food. But before she could reach down to pull the tray inside, someone grabbed her hand, stripped away her stunner, and pushed her inside, immediately covering her mouth with his hand, preventing her from screaming.

Kaylah found herself pinned against the wall of her hotel room, a muscular young man holding her captive, standing only centimeters from her face. She looked into his eyes and noticed something familiar.

"Kaylah, it's me, Krispin."

Kaylah suddenly recognized the man. It had been many years, and he was at least twelve to fifteen years older than what she remembered, but his eyes were the same.

Krispin slowly removed his hand from her mouth. "Please don't scream. I won't hurt you."

"Krispin? Little Krispin Bornet?"

"That's me," he replied, easing his grip on her slightly but not letting go entirely. "Not so little anymore, though."

"Oh, my God. What are you..." The realization suddenly hit her. The news. The president. That was why his name sounded so familiar when she heard the reports. It was him. It was the same Krispin Bornet. "I didn't do it," Krispin assured her, noticing the change in her expression.

Kaylah didn't say anything.

"I was there, yes. And I was tasked with killing him, but I didn't, I swear it. We were set up." Krispin looked at her for a moment. "You believe me, don't you?"

"Why should I?" Kaylah asked.

"Believe the little boy you used to babysit," Krispin suggested, in an almost pleading voice. Krispin stepped back, releasing her. "If you don't, I don't know who else will," he added, offering her back her stunner.

Kaylah took the stunner from him, checking that it was still operative. "How the hell did you find me?"

"I'm spec-ops," Krispin replied. "I've got skills. And, you've been using the same comm-unit number for the last twenty years." Krispin held up his own comm-unit, her number on the display screen. "It was my mother's," he explained. "I've been carrying it since she died."

"I was sorry to hear about that, Krispin."

"Past history," Krispin assured her. "But, thanks."

"You said you were *tasked* with killing President Scott?" "Yes."

"By who?"

"I don't know that I should say," he replied. "Knowing could put you in danger."

"Oh, I'm already in danger."

"Not like this."

"Trust me, I am."

Krispin looked confused.

"What is it you want from me?"

"I need help. I need to get off this world."

"You're wanted for killing the President of the Earth, the leader of the Alliance, Krispin. Where the hell do you think you're going to be able to hide?"

"I thought maybe one of the smaller worlds...the ones no one really cares about."

Kaylah thought for a moment. "Who *tasked* you?" she asked, realizing the implications in his choice of verbs. When he didn't answer, she pressed. "If it's who I think it is, I may be able to help you."

Krispin was hesitant.

"You came to me, Krispin. If you want my help, you're going to have to tell me the truth."

"Galiardi," he finally admitted.

"Oh, my God," she exclaimed, her hand covering her mouth.

"Who did *you* think it was?" he asked, surprised by her reaction.

"That *is* who I thought," she replied.

"Then why did you react that way?"

"I don't know," she admitted. "It's still a shock, I guess. Are you *sure* about this? Are you *sure* it was Galiardi?"

"I was *told* the order came from him, by my handler. And for it to work as well as it did, there had to be someone at the top pulling strings. I mean, his weapons shield was down and everything."

"I thought he was killed by an explosion?" Kaylah said.

"He was," Krispin explained. "Just before I was going to take the shot, the entire stage blew up. It's a long story, Kaylah."

"One that you're going to tell me on the way," Kaylah assured him as she picked up her bags.

"Where are we going?"

"This is your lucky day, kid," Kaylah told him as she grabbed his hand and led him to the door. "I'm taking you further away from this world than you could possibly hope for."

"But we have to *do* something," Krispin insisted. "We have to *tell* someone. We can't just let Galiardi get away with this. I mean, he's taking over the entire Alliance, Kaylah."

"I know, and that's what we're going to do. We're going to tell someone what's really going on here. But we have to tell the *right* person. And that person *isn't* on this planet. Now move your ass, Krispy."

* * *

"The key to winning, in any type of combat, is to always be thinking ten to twenty seconds ahead," General Telles explained as he watched Nathan and Vladimir sparring in the Aurora's gym.

"Like trying to anticipate your opponent's next move," Nathan surmised as he blocked Vladimir's punch.

"It is much more than that," the general replied, smiling. "No one can guess an opponent's next move, repeatedly, with any degree of accuracy. Even those who are lucky will, eventually, find that their luck runs out. What I am talking about is analyzing what the most probable moves are, deciding how best to deal with each of them, and doing this *before* they take place."

The general moved toward the two men. "If you please, Captain."

Nathan stepped aside, making room for General Telles to take his place against Vladimir. "He's all yours, General."

"What are the most likely forms of attack that Commander Kamenetskiy will use next?" the general asked.

"He likes to jab with his left three to four times, and then follow with a right cross or a right uppercut," Nathan replied. "The jabs are of little consequence, as he is simply trying to distract you with them so he can sneak his right hand in. But, you should already have decided how you will respond to his right-handed attacks. If he attacks with a cross, I would use the opposite hand in a sweeping motion to add to his momentum, which will carry his arm across and cause him to over rotate. This will leave his side unprotected, and my left arm will be free to strike."

"So, you'll punch him in the ribs with your left," Nathan surmised.

"Actually, I would stiffen my fingers and cause the fingertips of my combat gloves to form edges, allowing me to penetrate between his ribs and into his lungs."

"Ouch," Nathan exclaimed.

"Remind me never to box with you," Vladimir added.

"And if he threw an uppercut?" Nathan asked.

"I would lean back and allow him to miss, and then perform the same penetration move but from further aside, as it would be easier for him to get his arm back down to block if I came in at the same forty-five-degree angle as with his cross," the general explained. "But, allow me to further elaborate. Let us assume that he has a cohort a few paces behind him, who is raising his weapon to fire in my direction. In such a case, when I perform the penetration, I would curl my fingers and grab hold of his ribs, twist him around and step behind him, using him as a shield. When he takes the friendly fire intended for me, my right hand is free to draw my sidearm and fire at the other man."

"And if the second man charged for a hand-to-hand attack?" Nathan asked.

"After the penetration, I would use my right hand to push my victim into the second man while I stepped to the left, out of the second man's path. When he tumbles into the body of the first man, I can pull my sidearm and shoot him as I advance past him. It is about looking at the *entire* environment, every combatant, every non-combatant, every object, the air pressure, gravity levels, humidity, winds, amount of static electricity in the air, the level of training my combatants are demonstrating, the reaction of noncombatants when witnessing the horrors of deadly combat... All of these things influence every possible action and outcome of any given situation."

"But how can you possibly analyze all of these elements at once?" Vladimir wondered.

"It does take considerable training," the general admitted. "Although *all* Ghatazhak are trained to think in this manner, some are more adept at this than others. That is why there are leaders, and there are followers."

"How did you become so adept at it?" Nathan wondered.

"I realized early on that it required a greater understanding of all things, not just combat tactics. Human psychology, economics, cultures, societies, weather patterns, physics...these, and many more, must be thoroughly understood, in order to excel at what we call 'predictive combat strategies and tactics'."

"In a way, I believe I already do this," Nathan said. "In the past, it was more on a subconscious level. I didn't *realize* I was doing it. But ever since my *rebirth*, I have been seeing things more clearly."

"Can you elaborate?" General Telles asked, as if trying to force Nathan to think deeper.

Nathan crossed his arms, taking in a deep breath as he looked at the gym floor, thinking. "Well, it's like I'm seeing everything in slow motion. The more intense, the more complex, the more dangerous the situation is, the slower it seems to go. Or, should I say, the faster my brain is at processing and making decisions. For example, when defending Rakuen the other day, the moment we received the distress call, I started analyzing all the possible attack strategies. I analyzed the situation from the Dusahn's point of view. I decided they would do one of two things. If their egos drove their decision-making, then they would want to punish the people of Rakuen. That would mean shock and awe, and targeting infrastructure. But if they were being smart, and trying to minimize the Gunyoki threat, then they would target the Ranni plant *first* and the race platform second."

"Why not the race platform first?" Vladimir wondered. "That's where the majority of the fighters are located, and that's where the initial defensive response would come from."

"Only a handful of Gunyoki fighters can jump, and those pilots barely have any training in jump-fighter combat tactics," Nathan explained. "They are not yet a threat to any Dusahn forces attacking the Rogen system. The threat is when *many* of them are equipped with jump drives. *That* means you hit the Ranni plant first and take out their ability to create mini-jump drives. Neutralize the threat *before* it is created."

"So, when you jumped to Rakuen, you already knew what you were going to do," Vladimir surmised.

"Not quite," Nathan admitted.

"He knew what he was going to do in either situation," General Telles corrected.

"I did," Nathan agreed. "However, I *expected* the attack to be on the Ranni plant. And here's the scary part. It was all in the math."

"In the math?" Vladimir wondered.

"You calculated the probabilities, didn't you," the general realized, smiling.

"Not exactly," Nathan corrected. "First, I analyzed the probable gains and losses of each. Second, I calculated the odds, based on the Dusahn's past behavior to date. Specifically, whether their leader would make an ego-driven decision versus a logic-driven one. I determined that, given a limited number of ships, resources, and the area that he needed to hold on to in order to grow his forces, he could not afford to make ego-driven decisions, at least not in this instance."

"You did all this, in mere seconds?" Vladimir asked in disbelief.

"To be honest, it felt like a lot longer than a few seconds," Nathan admitted. "But yeah, I suppose so." He looked at General Telles. "Is *that* the type of thinking you're talking about?"

"Yes," the general agreed, "but you're taking it a step further. You're looking at the big picture, the long-term effects of each potential move by your enemy, weighing the risks against the rewards, and then predicting which course of action your enemy would take, based on past history."

"But I had a plan in my head for *both* possibilities," Nathan pointed out.

"Which means you were prepared for either outcome," the general replied. "*That* is the essence of predictive combat strategies and tactics. Knowing what your enemy will do, and how they will react to what *you* do. *That* is what wins battles, and *that* is what wins *wars*. Not jump drives, plasma torpedoes, or jump KKVs."

Vladimir looked at Nathan. "Did you do this before you surrendered to the Jung? Did you analyze all possible

actions and outcomes, and decide that surrendering was the best course of action?"

"I'm not sure," Nathan admitted. "I do remember that, at the time, I felt it was the course of action that offered the Earth the best chance of surviving over the long run. But I don't remember analyzing any other options."

"I did," General Telles told him. "After your surrender, I ran every possible scenario. Your surrender was the *only* option that gave the Earth a chance of survival."

"And jumping into a Jung ocean, scanning his brain, and cloning him?" Vladimir asked. "Did you analyze *that* plan, as well?"

"I did," General Telles admitted. "I concluded that it was too risky, and the potential of it leading to future conflicts was too high to risk."

"Then why did you do it?" Nathan wondered.

"It was my job to protect you, Captain. I failed at that job. In case you have not noticed, my inability to accept failure is my one true fault."

"You're going to have to do better than that," Nathan insisted.

"Sometimes actions, no matter the risk, are necessary in order to achieve greater things," General Telles stated.

"Kto ne riskooyet..." Vladimir began, waxing philosophic.

"...Drinks not champagne," Nathan finished.

Vladimir looked surprised. "You're speaking Russian now?"

"I've picked a little up lately," Nathan admitted.

"I have not," General Telles reminded them.

"Who takes no risk, drinks not champagne," Vladimir stated. "An old Russian proverb."

"Actually, most cultures have similar proverbs," Nathan pointed out.

"What is the English version? No pain no gain?" Vladimir joked, rolling his eyes.

Nathan ignored his friend's jest, turning to the general. "Speaking of risk, I have been thinking about the plan to steal the Teyentah. I've also been thinking about how we're going to rescue the Corinari."

"The two are not related," the general reminded him.

"Actually, I think they are," Nathan argued. "What both plans are lacking are diversions. They are both frontal attacks against established defenses, and in both cases, we're outnumbered by at least four to one, and that number goes up exponentially with each minute of battle that passes. Those are risks; very serious risks. However, we need that battleship, and we need those men. More importantly, we *owe* those men, *and* Captain Navarro, our support. Our willingness to *take* that risk, especially to rescue our own, is what makes people willing to fight for us. Because they know that we will fight for them. So, this is a case where, although the risks far outweigh the rewards, the risk must still be taken."

"We are in complete agreement, Captain," General Telles assured him. "You spoke of the need for diversions, for both plans."

"If we create a diversion for the attack on the Teyentah, then that same tactic might not work as well when we try to use it to rescue the Corinari. The same is true in reverse."

"Unless we allow time to pass between the two events," the general suggested.

"The problem with that is neither mission can wait. We need to steal the Teyentah *before* she goes into service, and we have to rescue the Corinari while they are all still being held in the same place. So, why not do them at the same time?" "We don't have the resources," Vladimir reminded him. "We only have one real warship, remember?"

"When we fight, we strike, jump out of range, come about, and jump back in to attack again, right?" Nathan explained. "Instead of jumping out a few light seconds or a few light minutes, why not jump out a few light years? More precisely, four point four one light years."

"You want to fight two battles, in two entirely different systems, at the same time?" Vladimir asked. He looked at Telles. "Is that even possible?"

"Actually, it is," General Telles admitted. "It is also an interesting idea."

"Each battle would act as a diversion for the other. If we time it right, we'll be pulling Dusahn ships back and forth between systems, a few times, before they realize we're playing them. Each time we do, we'll have nearly a full minute during which the defenses we'll have to deal with will be minimal."

"It is a bold plan," the general agreed. "If the Dusahn take three or four cycles to figure it out, that *could* give us the time we need to accomplish *both* goals. However, if they do *not* fall for it, you will be fighting two battles in which you will be *severely* outnumbered."

"I figure it's all in how we sell it," Nathan insisted. "Every time we jump, we have to convince the Dusahn that *that* is where the battle is *really* taking place."

Vladimir looked at them both. "You two do realize how crazy this sounds, don't you?"

"Kto nyet riskooyet..." Nathan said, a wry smile on his face.

"Please," Vladimir protested. "You don't even say it right."

Kaylah and Krispin entered the run-down front office of the Arenson warehouse, both of them wearing caps and sunglasses she had picked up at a nearby convenience store.

"Where is everyone?" Krispin wondered.

"It's Sunday," she replied, keeping her voice low. "I'm pretty sure they're normally closed."

After a minute, a burly, middle-aged man came into the office. He paused a moment, taking in the pair in caps and sunglasses, smiling. "Nice hats," the man finally commented as he continued into the office. "Hunt send you?"

"Yes," Kaylah replied, taking off her sunglasses. "Are you Bertel?"

"The one and only," the man grumbled. "I was told to meet with a woman. Hunt said nothing about a man."

"You think a lady's going to walk into a place like this unescorted?" Krispin said.

"Your eyes sensitive to light, or something?" Bertel asked, challenging Krispin.

Krispin smiled. "How'd you guess?"

Bertel rolled his eyes and then headed back into the warehouse. "Follow me."

Kaylah and Krispin went around the counter and followed Bertel through the door into the warehouse. They walked through rows of unevenly stacked cargo containers, making their way to the back of the building. Near the roll-up loading doors were a row of thirty containers, each of them about two meters in length and a meter in both width and height. "These are yours," Bertel instructed. "Put whatever you want in them."

"The seals have been removed," Krispin noted.

"Yeah, smart guy. How the hell else would you put your people in them?"

"Then you already *know* what we're smuggling?" Kaylah realized, sounding uneasy.

"Yeah, and I don't much care, either," Bertel replied. "All I know is I get to keep thirty of the sixty fusion reactors that were in those containers. That's gonna bring me a tidy profit on the black market. Why your people wanna stow away aboard a cargo ship going nowhere is none of my business, lady. So, how about you get your people into these containers, so I can seal them up, ship them out, and go home and enjoy what's left of my only day off."

"You can replace the seals so they will pass inspection?" Kaylah asked.

"Why do you think your friend hired me?" Bertel replied, sounding annoyed.

"What about the inspection scanners?" Krispin asked.

"Fusion reactors are always on," Bertel explained. "Even in an idle state, they'll screw up the sensors. Dial the remaining up a few percent, and the port inspectors will assume there are two mini-reactors at idle, just like the manifest says. Trust me, those guys ain't gonna blink twice at these things. Now, can we get this over with, or what?"

"What about the other cargo?" Kaylah asked. "The one that was just added."

"Over there," Bertel replied, pointing to the container at the end of the row. "I'll be in the office. Call me when you're ready to seal everything up and ship them out."

Kaylah and Krispin headed for the far end of the row, while Bertel headed back to the front office. The container was larger than the others; similar in length but taller and wider by a full meter.

"What the hell is in here?" Krispin wondered as he examined the manifest on the side of the container. "It says fusion reactors, just like the others, but six instead of two." "I don't know," Kaylah replied as she began unlocking the container.

"Are you sure we should open it?" Krispin wondered.

"I was told to inspect the contents, to make sure it isn't something that would endanger the ship," Kaylah explained. She unlocked the doors and swung them open. The container was large enough to walk inside, although they both had to bend over slightly.

"This is double-walled," Kaylah realized. "Probably to help scatter the inspection scanners."

"Won't that raise suspicion?" Krispin wondered.

"Not if Bertel can replace the seals, like he said. Lots of things get shipped in scanner-proof containers, so the contents don't get damaged by the scanners themselves. The seals will indicate that the contents were visually inspected, *if* he does them correctly."

Krispin followed Kaylah inside the container, stooping over to fit inside the low ceiling.

"There are two containers in here," Kaylah realized. "This one is a fusion reactor," she said, scanning it with her data pad. "It's running at nearly twenty-five percent."

"Is that to make it look like six reactors?" Krispin wondered.

"But why? This container is scanner shielded."

Krispin moved around the opposite side of the first container, wiggling into the tight confines. "There's a power cable coming from this container to the next," he realized.

"It must be powering whatever is inside this one," Kaylah decided. "Help me remove this access panel."

Krispin wiggled back out and came around to Kaylah's side, moving deeper into the main container as she unlatched the access plate. The two of them carefully removed the access plate, and Krispin slid it toward the entrance, just enough for her to see inside.

"Oh, my God," she exclaimed, looking into the second container.

Krispin moved deeper into the container to stand next to her, inspecting the contents for himself. "Shit."

* * *

"This mission has two targets," General Telles told the group of command officers and unit leaders assembled in the large briefing room on board the Aurora. "The rescue of the Corinari and the capture of the Takaran battleship, Teyentah."

"Holy shit," Josh said under his breath.

"You aren't kidding," Loki replied in a similar tone.

General Telles paused for a moment, waiting for the initial information to sink in and for the images to appear on the wall behind him. "The Darvano and Takar systems are four point four one light years apart," he began. "There are two battleships in the Takar system, one in an orbit over Takara, paralleling that of the orbital shipyard where the Teyentah is being assembled, the other maintaining position further out among the outer, re-engineered worlds of Takar. In addition, they have two heavy cruisers and two missile frigates stationed in the system. There are also an everchanging number of gunships, octo-fighters, and various assault shuttles and utility ships in the system, along with dozens of cargo and passenger ships coming and going on a regular basis. In short, your tactical displays will be full of contacts, many of which are not warships, but should still be suspect at all times. In the Darvano system, the Dusahn maintain a single battleship, one heavy cruiser, two frigates, and a handful of gunships and octo-fighters. Also, their two remaining troop ships are stationed in orbit over Corinair,

since the majority of their troops, including most of the Zen-Anor, are stationed there, using the abandoned Corinari bases as their own. The Darvano system also has significant non-military traffic. That leaves one battleship, three heavy cruisers, and two frigates unaccounted for. Our recon drones have had intermittent contact with a few of these ships, at various points, all over the Pentaurus cluster. So, it is reasonable to assume that some, or all, of these ships are patrolling the cluster in order to enforce the Dusahn's control over the region. It is *these* ships that cause us the most concern. We must assume that the Dusahn maintain contact with these patrol ships and can order them to any point within the cluster, at a moment's notice. We must also assume these ships are able to jump the breadth of the cluster at will, and multiple times, before requiring time to recharge."

General Telles paused, taking a breath. "Our primary strategy is to attack Dusahn assets in multiple locations, in order to force them to *guess* as to our true objectives."

"Pardon me, sir," Commander Verbeek, the commander of the Aurora's air group, said. "Given the known values of every possible target, wouldn't it be reasonable to assume that the Dusahn would simply prioritize their assets, and assign ships to protect them, according to that value?"

"Logically, yes," General Telles agreed. "We are hoping that they will first attempt to defend *all* assets and not begin prioritizing them until well into the attack."

"Why would they do that?" the commander asked.

"Because the Dusahn are still Jung at heart," Nathan said, adding his voice to the discussion. "They *need* to show those they have conquered that they are in *complete* control. They need to demonstrate that they cannot be challenged successfully." "More importantly," General Telles added, "the Dusahn are stretched thin, and they cannot afford to lose *any* of the assets that we will be attacking. The loss of any one of them negatively affects the one thing they hope to achieve above all else. To grow their fleet."

"Then why don't we just throw a bunch of jump missiles at their shipyards?" Commander Verbeek suggested.

"The shipyards are protected by a multi-layered defense system. First, they have jump scrambling fields which prevent jump weapons from arriving any closer than fifty kilometers. This affords their second layer, their pointdefense turrets, ample time to deal with the incoming missiles. Lastly, they use electronic countermeasure fields that interfere with our missiles' ability to lock onto targets and make last-minute course corrections. This also means that our missiles cannot take evasive action to avoid pointdefense fire, and then steer onto the target after breaching the point-defense perimeter. In essence, it reduces them to simple projectiles with warheads. As you know, we have a limited supply of jump missiles, which is why we have adopted a policy of recovering those used in battle that fail to find their targets. We need those jump missiles to engage Dusahn warships. We cannot afford to waste them on such a well-protected target, regardless of that target's value. Even after its destruction, there will still be many more targets to deal with in the future."

"Understood," Commander Verbeek said.

"The strike group will be divided into sub-groups. The command group will be located within the Pentaurus cluster and will be using the Glendanon as its operational platform. Despite the fact that she has been fitted with plasma turrets and point-defenses in recent weeks, her primary method of survival will be to jump away from any attackers. The command group will be under the command of Captain Taylor, who will be coordinating all attacks and communications using jump comm-drones and commbuoys."

Cameron stood to address the room "We will be deploying multiple jump-equipped comm-buoys in every engagement area. Every time a combat element jumps into a new engagement area, they are to check the comm-buoys in that area for updated instructions from combat command, as well as battle status updates. The buoys, themselves, will jump about the system in order to avoid attack, but will always be in a position that allows data exchange within a minute or two of entry into the area. If you must depart the area prior to completing your data exchange, your escape jump should be directly to the last known location of combat command. If the Glendanon is *not* there when you arrive, a comm-buoy will be there for two full algorithm cycles, after which it will jump back to the post-battle rally point."

"Thank you, Captain," General Telles said as Cameron took her seat. "The second group will be the Aurora, whose primary responsibility will be to attack Dusahn warships in every system in the cluster. Captain Scott will be following an attack schedule, which will be updated as needed by combat command. Within that schedule, the Aurora will conduct harassment and diversion strikes as her captain sees fit. However, the Aurora *will* be at her scheduled location to support each mission-critical event."

"This is insane," Vladimir whispered to Jessica.

"Yeah, pretty cool, huh?"

Vladimir just looked at her in dismay.

"The third sub-group will be the rescue group. This group will be composed of Raptors, cargo shuttles, and boxcars, commanded by Mister Sheehan aboard the Seiiki. Their primary mission will be to insert Ghatazhak strike teams onto the surface of Corinair, where they will free the Corinari, and extract them using boxcars."

General Telles again paused as he prepared to discuss the final group. "The fourth sub-group will be tasked with capturing the Teyentah and escaping with her for later rendezvous at a predetermined location. *This* will likely be the greatest challenge of the entire mission. Were it not for the presence of an operative *inside* the Teyentah, it would not even be considered."

"Who's inside the Teyentah?" Josh wondered out loud. When everyone looked at him, he apologized. "Sorry, jeez."

Nathan looked at Telles, nodding.

"That's quite alright, Mister Hayes. The operative inside the Teyentah is Suvan Navarro, captain of the ill-fated Avendahl."

Murmurs of surprise and disbelief filled the room.

"I thought he went down with the Avendahl," Josh said.

"As did we," General Telles agreed. "We later learned that he was not aboard the Avendahl when she was destroyed by the Dusahn, and he somehow made his way to Takara, where, using a fake identity, he secured a job as a crawler operator on the Teyentah's assembly crew. This mission is based on ideas and data communicated to us by Captain Navarro."

"And how does he suggest we steal a battleship?" Josh wondered. Again, he felt the eyes of everyone in the room on him. "Like you aren't all wondering the same thing."

"That's what we are here to discuss, Mister Hayes," the general replied. "There are many details to work out, and we only have three days to prepare."

"What happens in three days?" Josh asked.

"The Teyentah will go into service and will be impossible to capture, and the Corinari will be moved to their various work camps, making them far more difficult to rescue."

"And if we figure out that we can't pull off both objectives?" Commander Verbeek questioned.

"Then we concentrate on rescuing the Corinari," Nathan insisted. "They would do the same for us."

General Telles waited for any dissenting voices. As expected, there were none. "Let us begin."

* * *

"Get those containers open as soon as possible!" Captain Hunt barked as he slid down the gangway rails, from the catwalk above, into the cargo hold. "And get a medical team ready, just in case!"

The cargo handlers immediately began laser-cutting the seals on the containers and unlatching them. With each case that opened, two persons would come falling out, shivering from the cold and weak from being cramped up for hours inside the small containers. Crewmen helped them out, moving them to the sides where others brought blankets, water, and in many cases, oxygen.

"This one!" Captain Hunt ordered, "The big one! Denny! Sakhof! Give me a hand!" he added as he made his way to the large cargo pod at the aft end of the bay.

Denny went to work with the laser, carefully cutting through the sealing strips, designed to prevent tampering with the cargo during transport. Within a minute, he had unsealed the doors at one end of the large pod, and Crewman Sakhof began unlatching them. Once opened, the two crewmen began moving into the container, but Captain Hunt stopped them.

"Wait!" Captain Hunt ordered. The two crewmen stepped back, and Captain Hunt ducked down, entering the container. "Kaylah! You in here?"

"Back here!" Kaylah yelled from deeper within.

Captain Hunt moved inside, working his way around to the access hatch of the larger container, which was stored in the back of the container they had just opened. He looked inside and spotted Kaylah and a man he did not recognize. "Are you alright?" he asked Kaylah.

"Yes, I'm fine."

"Who the hell is this?" Chris asked.

"My name is Krispin Bornet," Krispin replied.

Captain Hunt's eyes grew wide as he recognized the name. He quickly drew his sidearm, activating its power pack as he brought it up to take aim at the man.

"WAIT!" Kaylah yelled. "HE'S A FRIEND!"

"The hell he is!" Chris argued. "I've been watching the news, Kaylah. This bastard killed Nathan's whole fucking family!"

"He didn't do it!" Kaylah insisted. "He was set up!"

"How the hell can you be sure?"

"He told me the whole thing," she replied, "and I believe him."

"You're just going to take his word for it?" Chris questioned, surprised by her gullibility.

"I've known him since I was young! You've got to trust me on this, Chris. He knows things. Things that *Nathan* is going to want to know."

"What?...Wait," Krispin said, confused.

"Oh, I'm sure Nathan's going to want to ask him a few questions," Chris agreed, looking at Kaylah.

Krispin took advantage of the captain's diverted attention and snapped the weapon from his hands, immediately training it back on the captain. "She's telling the truth," Krispin said. "And so am I." The two men stared at each other for several seconds, sizing one another up. "I didn't kill them," Krispin finally said, "but I'm pretty sure I know who did." With that, he powered off the weapon, turned it around, and handed it butt-first back to Captain Hunt. "Your call, Captain."

"You have to see what's in here, Chris," Kaylah insisted. "They weren't kidding when they said this cargo was important."

Chris glared at Krispin as he took his weapon back. "Security! Full arms!" he bellowed to the crewmen outside. He looked back at Krispin. "This is far from over, Mister."

"Understood, Captain."

Chris handed his weapon to Crewman Sakhof, who had come into the container when his captain called for security. He then climbed inside the container, moved over next to Kaylah, and looked at the contents inside. "Holy fuck."

"Exactly," Kaylah said.

Captain Hunt stood there, squatting for a full minute, saying nothing as the weight of his new responsibilities hit him.

Finally, Krispin spoke up. "Am I to understand that Nathan Scott is alive?"

CHAPTER TEN

Jessica opened the hatch to the captain's ready room but stopped short when she found the room dark.

"Yes?" Nathan called from the darkness.

"What the hell?" she said, stepping into the darkened room, closing the hatch behind her. "Why are you sitting in the dark?"

"I was taking a catnap," he said as Jessica turned the lights up to a soft glow.

"We're about to attack every Dusahn asset in the cluster. How the hell can you sleep?"

"A catnap isn't sleeping, Jess. It's closing your eyes and sitting still. It's restful. You should try it."

Jessica laughed as she plopped down on the sofa. "I don't even like sleeping. Takes too much time."

"I try to take a catnap at least twice a day."

"How long do you zone out for?"

"Twenty to thirty minutes, max," Nathan replied. "But it's not *zoning out*. I'm thinking the whole time."

"What were you thinking just now?" she asked.

"That this plan is insane."

"Most of your plans are."

"Perhaps."

"What are you worried about?" Jessica wondered.

"You want the entire list?"

"Not really. What I *do* want to know is why you're suddenly worrying so much. You didn't used to, or at least,

you didn't show it much."

"I did, and yeah, I tried not to show it. But now, for some reason, it's worse," Nathan explained. "I'm able to see the risks more clearly. I'm able to analyze and predict all the things that could go wrong in a greater number of possible scenarios and in much more detail."

"That sounds like a *good* skill to have, not a bad one," Jessica commented.

"It's a double-edged sword, to be honest. Yes, it's good to be able to anticipate so many different variations and outcomes, but when you do so, you realize not only how many ways things can go south, but also how many people you might lose if they do. It can make it very hard to commit to a plan, at times."

"Have you tried taking a different perspective?"

"What do you mean?" Nathan asked.

"The fact that you can more easily predict all the ways things *can* go wrong means you can also develop contingency plans *should* things go wrong. In other words, when the shit hits the fan, you already know which way it's gonna fly, so you can *duck*."

"Yeah, I thought of that," Nathan admitted. "Not exactly in those terms, mind you."

"So, you should be more confident in your plans and decisions."

Nathan sighed, thinking about her words.

"Look, Nathan, one of the things that make you a good captain is your ability to follow your instincts. Maybe you *shouldn't* think things through so much."

"I don't think you understand what *instinct* is, Jess," Nathan countered. "It's not making decisions on a hunch or a gut feeling. It's the ability to process information at a subconscious level. You're still going through the same decision-making process, you just aren't consciously *aware* of it. That's what repetitive training is all about. When I was going through flight training, we spent hours on end in the simulator doing the same tasks over and over, until we got to a point where we were doing things automatically, without thinking about them. You do the same thing when you train to fight. You repeat moves over and over until you can execute them without even thinking about it. That's what I *used* to do. I made decisions without *thinking* about things. Now, my mind moves much more quickly than before. At times, I feel like I'm *waiting* for the real world to *catch up*." Nathan sighed again. "It can be quite disconcerting."

"So, what's the solution?"

"I don't think there is a solution," Nathan admitted. "I guess I'll just get used to it."

Jessica leaned forward, her elbows resting on her knees. "Nathan, you're looking at it all wrong. You've been given a *gift*. You're able to analyze things in the *blink of an eye* that most of us would take *hours* to process. Is it a burden? Yes. But that's *why* we risked everything to save you. You've *always* had this gift. The whole cloning process simply *enhanced* it. There is *so much* you can do with these gifts; we simply could *not* allow you to die. Humanity *needs* people like you."

"And here I thought you saved me because you love me," Nathan quipped.

Jessica leaned back again, rolling her eyes. "Love is such a strong word. *Like*, maybe. But *love*?"

"How long until we're recharged and ready to jump?" Nathan asked, changing the subject.

"We're ready," Jessica replied. "That's what I came in to report. But we still have twenty minutes to zero hour." "Just enough time for another catnap," Nathan joked.

"How about you use that super-brain of yours to figure out how to get us out of the shit when it *does* fly," she suggested as she rose to depart. "After all, that's a pretty big fan we're about to hit."

* * *

Cameron studied the holo-map of the Pentaurus cluster at the plotting table in the middle of the makeshift command center, aboard the Glendanon. It was the second time she had run a complex operation such as this, from a command post that had been slapped together at the last minute, and the last time her command post had been in the back of a jump shuttle. At least this time, she would be inside a much larger ship, larger even than the Aurora. In fact, she felt a little guilty that she was likely to be safer than anyone else on this mission.

"Surely, you have every detail of that map memorized by now," Captain Gullen commented as he entered the command center.

"I can't help it," Cameron admitted. "I'm always worried that I missed some tiny detail that will screw everything up."

"And staring at that map for hours on end helps?"

"Honestly, no," Cameron admitted. She sighed, then turned off the holo-map. "What's up?"

"I just came to see your command center." Captain Gullen looked around the compartment. There were four stations on each side, with room for supervisors to walk behind the controllers. The plotting table, at which they both stood, was slightly higher, allowing them to see over the shoulders of the controllers, giving them a clear view of all their display screens. "Seems like a lot of work for a single mission." "This war has just started, Captain," Cameron reminded him. "I suspect this command center will get used more than once. Besides, during normal operations, it will act as a communications and coordination facility for the fleet, taking some of that workload off your bridge, so your people can worry about their own ship."

"So, that responsibility won't be on the Aurora?"

"Eventually, the Aurora is going to have to spend more time away from the fleet, engaged in hit-and-run operations. There's only so much we can do with gunships and fighters."

"Perhaps we should be concentrating on outfitting some of the cargo ships with weapons, ones that could do some serious damage."

"That is a possibility," Cameron admitted. "However, if we are successful at capturing the Teyentah, that may not be necessary."

"But the Teyentah is only one ship. Together, with the Aurora, that is only two ships against thirty."

"Sometimes, it's not the number of ships, but how you use them," Cameron pointed out.

"I hope you're right," Captain Gullen agreed. "Especially considering what we're about to attempt."

* * *

"Took you long enough," Loki commented as Josh climbed back up the access ladder into the Seiiki's cockpit. "You couldn't have waited until *after* the mission?"

"Gotta have my pre-flight dump, my friend," Josh joked as he climbed into the pilot's seat. "Besides, what was I supposed to do? Hold it?"

"The mission is only supposed to take twenty minutes. Surely you could have waited." "*Supposed* to," Josh pointed out. "Nope. Can't do my best flyin' with my weapons bay full of poo."

Loki just shook his head. "Please, Josh. This is my first command."

"Yeah, pretty cool, huh?" He glanced at Loki, noticing he looked worried. "You good?"

"I'm so fucking nervous," Loki admitted. "I can't stop thinking about all the things that could go wrong."

"Relax, Lok. You got this. Besides, we've got the easy part of the mission. Be glad we're not in the Teyentah group. *Those* guys are *screwed*."

"You're not helping."

Josh laughed. "Stop worrying. After all, you've got the best pilot in the galaxy on stick. No matter how screwed up things get, I'll get us out alive. You've got my word."

"Still not helping," Loki mumbled.

Josh adjusted himself in his seat. "I'm ready to fly the fuck out of this thing!" he declared. "Command me, Master!"

"Don't call me master," Loki replied.

"Well, I'm sure as hell not calling you 'sir'."

* * *

It took considerable concentration for Suvan to go about his workday rituals in a manner that would not raise suspicion, but so far, everything had gone just as usual.

Until now.

"Ops, Four Four Two, I'm having a problem here," Suvan reported over comms. "I've got a stuck anchor latch."

"We're not showing any problems on your status board, Four Four Two," the operations controller replied.

"Well, trust me, the thing is stuck. I'm gonna reorient to get my hands on it," he said as he bent the crawler over so his arms could reach the bulkhead in front of him. "Understood. Would you like us to start a rescue crawler?"

"Negative," Suvan replied. "I've only been out here two hours, so I've got plenty of time before I'll need extraction."

"Maintenance suggests you do a full reboot if you can't free yourself."

"I'll save that as a last resort. I'd prefer not to free-float for five minutes, bouncing around off the inside of this flight deck, if I can avoid it." As he spoke, Suvan reached under his console and rerouted several power feeds. After a few minutes of tampering, he called back. "Ops, Four Four Two. No joy. I'm going to reboot. I've rerouted power to the magplates in my secondary arms, so I won't float away during reboot. If everything is good after the reboot, I'll keep working."

"Good thinking, Four Four Two. Rescue will be standing by, just in case. Pop a rescue strobe if your crawler fails to restart."

"Understood," Suvan replied. "Four Four Two is rebooting. Talk to you in five." Suvan reached under his panel again and pulled the circuit breaker for his crawler's communications and data transceiver, breaking off all voice communications, as well as the data telemetry from his crawler. Then, he shut down the power to his crawler.

Suvan inserted his arms into the flexible, extruded arms, pushing his fingers into the gloves at the ends. He now had four minutes to complete his task.

* * *

General Telles watched from the front of the Aurora's main hangar bay as one hundred of his men boarded the collection of Reapers, Ranni shuttles, and the Aurora's only cargo shuttle. Once again, he would be taking his forces deep into enemy territory. He knew there would be losses, both on Corinair *and* on the Teyentah. Such was the nature of battle. But with each engagement, his forces were reduced, and there were no reinforcements. These men, and the hundred or so who were staying behind, were the last of the Ghatazhak. Once they were gone...

It saddened him to imagine an end to the Ghatazhak. Although it was unfortunate that humanity *needed* such men, need them they did, and now, more than ever. He only hoped that when this war was over, there would be enough of them left to train new generations of Ghatazhak.

"Our forces are nearly loaded, General," Corporal Eliason reported.

"Very well," the general replied. He glanced at the time display on the starboard bulkhead as the corporal turned to board himself. There were still fifteen minutes until the battle would begin. "Eliason," he called before the soldier got out of earshot.

"Yes, sir?"

"Anyone in your fire team worthy of a promotion?"

"Mitchell, sir. Calm under fire, clear thinker, always has your back. I think he's due. Why?"

"Because you're a sergeant now," the general replied, "and you're out of uniform," he added, tossing a small packet of stripes for the corporal to add to his body armor.

Sergeant Eliason caught the packet, looked at it, and smiled. "Yes, sir," he replied, clenching his fist around the packet of stripes.

"Take Parkett from technical to replace you on team three, and take command of fire teams three and four."

"Yes, sir," the sergeant replied.

"Get the Corinari out of there, Sergeant," General Telles stated firmly.

"Do or die, sir," the sergeant replied, snapping a salute to the general.

General Telles returned the salute, wondering if the newly minted sergeant would be one of those who would not return this day.

The general took a breath, looked around one last time, then headed for the Ranni shuttle that would take him and his team to the Teyentah.

* * *

"Those lines aren't rated for that much instant energy transfer, Commander," the engineering tech warned Vladimir.

"That's why we have doubled up all the runs," Vladimir insisted.

"They still won't take a full, instant transfer load, sir. You *know* that."

Vladimir put his arm around the young technician, leading him over to one side of the auxiliary engineering space, which was now stuffed full of additional energy banks taken from several cargo ships just a day ago. "Of course, I know this. That is why we are *not* going to use them to *directly* power a jump. We will trickle their power over to the main banks after each jump, at a rate that will not exceed their safe energy transfer levels. I have been doing this for many years, Mister Hayden. You must trust me."

"Uh, of course, I trust you, sir," Mister Hayden assured Vladimir, embarrassed that his superior had assumed otherwise.

"Very well," Vladimir replied, patting the young man on the shoulder. "Now, go check the secondary banks on the other side of the compartment. Make sure those connections are secure. I expect we are in for quite a shaking." "Yes, sir," the young man replied, departing as instructed.

Vladimir waited until the young man disappeared behind the stack of energy cells, then turned and walked quickly in the opposite direction, tapping his comm-set. "Jump Control, Cheng. Make certain you do *not* use the additional energy banks to *directly* power any jumps. Only use them to trickle charge to the main banks. I do not want the transfer lines overheating in the middle of battle. Understood?"

"Yes, sir."

Vladimir breathed a sigh of relief as he glanced at his watch and headed for main engineering. Only ten minutes before the attack would begin, and there were still a hundred things he wanted to double-check, yet again.

* * *

"Only *you* would actually be excited about the prospect of jumping into the middle of an enemy-held system and attacking a heavily guarded shipyard," Kenji commented as he double-checked his instruments.

"Come on," Aiden insisted. "They're going to be talking about this battle all over the galaxy for decades to come. How can you *not* be excited about being part of it?"

"Oh, I don't know. Maybe it's because there's a very high probability that we'll all get killed. But I'm funny that way."

"We're not even jumping in that deep," Aiden argued. "You worry too much."

"Not that deep? We're jumping in less than a kilometer from the shipyard, Aiden. How much deeper can you go?"

"The Gunyoki get to fly *through* that thing," Aiden reminded. "Lucky bastards."

"You should be flying with Hayes," Kenji insisted. "You're both crazy."

"How much time left?" Aiden asked, ignoring his copilot's comment.

"Five minutes," Kenji groaned.

Aiden tried to contain himself but failed. "This is gonna be awesome!" he burst.

"Batshit crazy," Kenji said.

* * *

Boxcar Four coasted along its course from a position well outside the Takar system, on an intercept trajectory with the Dusahn shipyard orbiting high above Takara. Inside her massive cargo pod waited six crawlers, taken from the Glendanon and the Mystic, and repainted with the same yellow coating used on the shipyard's crawlers.

There were only two differences between these crawlers and the ones used in the shipyards. The first difference was that *these* crawlers were fitted with single-use jump drives, taken from several of the Aurora's jump missiles. The second difference was that each crawler carried a Ghatazhak soldier instead of an assembly technician.

The massive door to the boxcar's cargo bay opened, lowering slowly until it was level with the bay's deck, forming a platform beyond the gaping bay door. Once fully opened, the six crawlers executed their ungainly march out the door and onto the platform, in preparation for deployment.

* * *

Nathan splashed cold water on his face several times, then stood there, hunched over the sink as the water dripped from his nose and chin. After a moment, he reached for a towel and dried himself off. He looked in the mirror. He really did look noticeably younger than he had been as Conner Tuplo. So young, and so much responsibility. How can anyone look at this face and take me seriously?

The intercom beeped. "*Captain, Tactical,*" Jessica called. "*Three minutes.*"

Nathan took a deep breath and sighed, pressing the talk button on the wall-mounted intercom. "On my way."

Nathan stepped out of the head and walked through his bedroom, picking up his uniform jacket and donning it on his way out. The captain's quarters were only a few steps from the bridge, on the port side.

"Captain on the bridge!" the guard barked.

"Time to mission zero?" Nathan asked as he entered.

"*Two* minutes, now, Captain," Jessica replied from the tactical station.

"Cheng, Captain," Nathan called over his comm-set as he continued forward. "How are the new auxiliary energy banks looking?"

"They are ready," Vladimir replied. "They will be trickling energy over to the main banks as we go. I believe we can squeeze an extra eight to ten light years total jump energy out of them. But our single-jump range will still be limited to twenty light years."

"Just make sure we keep at least three to four light years' worth of energy in them," Nathan insisted. "I don't want to get stuck behind enemy lines without any jump juice left."

"Understood."

"One minute," Jessica warned.

"Sound general quarters," he ordered as he sat down in his command chair at the center of the bridge.

"General quarters, aye," Ensign deBanco replied from the comm-station at the back of the bridge. The trim lighting all around the bridge changed from blue to red as the alert klaxon sounded.

Nathan turned in his seat to look at Jessica, a worried look on his face. "We never got to hold our pre-battle ritual, you know."

"I'd rather hold a victory party," Jessica replied with a reassuring wink. She glanced down at her tactical display. "All departments report general quarters. Lieutenant Commander Vidmar is in combat, and the chief of the boat is in damage control. All weapons are armed and ready. Shields at maximum."

"Ten seconds to the initial jump point," Ensign Bickle announced from the navigator's chair.

"Clear to jump," Nathan ordered.

"Clear to jump, aye," the navigator replied. "Jumping in three..."

"Time to go to work, people," Nathan said, half to himself.

"....Two...."

An impish grin formed at the corner of Jessica's mouth as she armed the Aurora's plasma torpedo cannons, setting them for full power triplet shots.

"....One...."

A million things flashed through Nathan's mind in that last second. The distance they were about to jump, the trajectory at which they would appear in relation to their prospective targets, how many seconds it would take to complete their initial firing pattern before jumping to the next target, and more importantly, the various things that could go wrong and how he would deal with each of them. So many thoughts and calculations; they would surely overwhelm most people. A small, nearly imperceptible, smile formed at the corner of Nathan's mouth as a swell of confidence washed over him. He wasn't most people. He was Na-Tan.

"...Jumping..."

The blue-white jump flash translated through the semispherical main view screen that wrapped around the forward half of the Aurora's bridge and, subdued by her filters, quickly washed over the bridge, causing Nathan to squint ever so slightly. When the flash faded away a second later, the stars before them had shifted. Most would not have noticed the change, especially when jumping only two light years. But to Nathan, the change was obvious, especially along the sides of the view screen, where their movement was more pronounced.

The most obvious change, which everyone *did* notice, was the sudden appearance of a Dusahn battleship directly ahead of them, filling half the view screen.

"Jump to Darvano, complete," the navigator announced, restraining his enthusiasm.

"Super Eagles are launching," the systems officer reported.

"Multiple contacts," Lieutenant Commander Kono reported from the sensor station to his left. "Battleship, two frigates, four gunships."

"Firing solution on the battleship," Jessica reported from the tactical station behind Nathan.

"Weapons free," Nathan instructed.

"First wave of Super Eagles is away."

"Firing plasma torpedoes," Jessica announced. "Combat is locking jump missiles onto the frigates."

Red-orange flashes of light filled the bridge as plasma torpedoes streaked away from under the Aurora's bow.

"Missiles away," Jessica added.

Nathan glanced at the mission clock. Their first shots had been fired a mere five seconds after jumping, and their first wave of missiles had been launched at eight seconds in.

"Turning to next jump line," Lieutenant Dinev announced as the ship rolled slightly to the right and began a threedegree turn to starboard.

Nathan watched the main view screen as the first round of plasma torpedoes slammed into the unshielded battleship.

"Second wave of jump missiles is away," Jessica announced. "Headed for the battleship."

"Frigates are changing course and raising shields," Lieutenant Commander Kono warned. "They're locking their missiles onto us."

"Jumping in three..." Ensign Bickle began.

"Direct hits with all plasma torpedoes," the lieutenant commander added.

"....Two...."

"...Heavy damage to her number four main engine and her aft, dorsal shield array..."

"...One..."

"...Multiple hull breaches, as well."

Down but not out, Nathan thought, mentally cataloging the damage to their first target.

"...Jumping..."

"No damage data on the frigates," the sensor officer stated as the jump flash washed over the bridge.

"Jump complete," the ship's status officer announced from the front of the makeshift command center on board the Glendanon. "We are now in the Pentaurus cluster."

"Launch the Gunyoki," she ordered.

"Command to all Gunyoki," the comms officer called. "Launch, launch, launch."

"Start the algorithm clock," Cameron ordered.

"Clock is running, aye."

"Gunyoki are away."

"Very well." Cameron glanced at the mission clock, which read zero plus fifteen seconds. "The Aurora has already attacked," she realized. "We're behind the clock," she warned her second officer.

"This old bird takes a little longer to spool up and execute a jump, Captain," he admitted. "It's my fault, sir. I should've given the order a bit sooner. It won't happen again."

"Thankfully, we're not a combat element in this mission," Cameron said, only half meaning it. The truth was, she wished she was in the thick of it, along with Nathan, Jessica, and Vladimir.

Robert didn't bother to look out his windows when his Cobra gunship jumped into the Darvano system only seconds after the Aurora. He didn't care what was out there, at least not visually. Instead, his eyes were glued to his console. His flight displays, his tactical screen, his target and weapons systems; those were what he fought with, not the view outside.

Two seconds after they arrived, his targeting display began to plot a firing solution on the Dusahn cruiser three kilometers directly ahead of them. The aiming computers adjusted the angles on the plasma torpedo cannons, and the lock-status light turned green. Captain Nash pressed the firing button on his flight control stick, sending three waves of plasma torpedoes, four red-orange balls of plasma in each wave, streaking toward the distant target. A split second after the third wave of torpedoes left his cannons, he turned two degrees to starboard, pressing his jump button as the torpedoes he had just unleashed slammed into the unshielded cruiser. Although his twelve plasma torpedoes would not be enough to bring it down, he took solace in the knowledge that the torpedoes about to be fired by the next gunship, and the ones after that, likely would.

And all in the first twenty seconds of the battle.

"Jump complete," Loki announced as the Seiiki's cockpit windows cleared.

"Holy shit," Josh exclaimed, looking out the forward windows. To his left, a Dusahn battleship was experiencing secondary explosions in its number three and four engines, its aft shields flickering on and off as the warship desperately attempted to stabilize the protective layer of energy around its stern. "Talk about a black eye."

"Multiple jump flashes," Loki reported as he stared at the Seiiki's tactical display. "Reapers, Super Eagles, and... octos!" Loki's voice changed. "Six Dusahn octo-fighters, starboard side, ten clicks, opposite direction, just below us. They're headed for the Reapers."

"Turning into them," Josh announced as he started a turn to starboard.

"Plotting an intercept jump," Loki replied. "Gunners! Be ready!"

"*No shit,*" Marcus grumbled over comms.

"Reapers, Seiiki!" Loki continued over comms. "Six octos headed your way. Ten clicks, to your star... They jumped! They're on your six! Reapers! Evasive!"

"Jumping," Josh announced as his windows turned opaque. Josh looked out the windows as they cleared, immediately spotting the Dusahn octo-fighters as they opened fire on the flight of eight Reapers. Two of the Reapers took hits on their shields, but all eight of them successfully jumped away. "Let'em have it!" Josh instructed as both Marcus and Dalen opened up on the enemy fighters with the Seiiki's topside plasma cannon turrets. Josh tapped his firing button, as well, sending wave after wave of plasma torpedoes into the group of octo-fighters as they, too, jumped away. "Fuck!"

"I got a piece of one of them," Dalen insisted.

"No, you didn't," Marcus corrected.

"Where'd the Reapers go?" Josh wondered.

"They jumped to the surface," Loki replied.

"So quickly?" Josh wondered. "Damn, those boys are better on the stick than I gave them credit."

"Turn us in and down toward the deck, Josh," Loki instructed. "We have to provide cover for them until they get their shields up."

"Can't the Super Eagles do that?"

"Not yet," Loki explained. "They're busy chasing down those octos, remember?"

"Tell me you wouldn't rather be in a Super Falcon right now," Josh challenged his friend.

"Not the way you fly it."

Falcon One's cockpit windows cleared, revealing two frigates, one of which was heavily damaged by missile impacts.

"Two targets," Ensign Lassen announced. "Port target is about to come apart. Starboard target has no starboard or aft shields."

"I'm taking the starboard target," Lieutenant Teison replied. "Take the port one with seekers." "Seekers coming up," Sergeant Nama replied from just behind them.

Lieutenant Teison rolled the Falcon slightly to starboard and pitched its nose down, bringing his plasma cannons onto the target and firing a split second later. His plasma bolts walked across the aft end of the Dusahn frigate as it attempted to return fire with its meager point-defenses. Frigates were designed to fire missiles and then jump out of harm's way, not battle it out with an attacker. But the surprise attack by the Aurora had caught them off guard, and now they were paying the price.

Multiple secondary explosions went off all across the aft end of the frigate, separating its drive section from the ship.

"Seekers away," Sergeant Nama announced.

"You tore her up, but she ain't out," Ensign Lassen advised. "You want to go back and finish her?"

"Oh, yeah!" the sergeant exclaimed. "Four seekers! Direct impacts! Target destroyed."

"Negative," the lieutenant told his copilot. "We've got a schedule to keep. Riko!" he called back to his weapons and systems officer. "Drop a comm-buoy with a message for the Gunyoki. The second frigate is all theirs."

"You got it, LT," the sergeant replied.

"Next stop, Savoy," the lieutenant stated as he glanced at the mission clock. The time was zero plus twenty-three seconds.

Eight jump flashes appeared in the breaking dawn around the perimeter of the old Corinari base outside of Aitkenna, the capital of Corinair. Behind those flashes, the Aurora's Reapers, their sweep-wings already deployed, dropped nearly straight down from their jump arrival points only a hundred meters above the surface. The Reapers set down in near unison, their landing gear becoming fully deployed only a fraction of a second before touchdown. Dust swirled from the ground beneath them as their downward-deflected thruster ducts blasted the surface.

As each ship touched down, three Ghatazhak soldiers jumped out on each side and ran away from their Reapers. They were immediately met with incoming energy weapons fire from nearby guard towers, until several Super Eagles jumped in and silenced them.

As the Reapers throttled their engines back up and climbed skyward once more, one man on either side of each ascending Reaper jammed a tall stake, with an emitter node on its tip, into the ground in a vertical position. Each stake was equally spaced around the insertion area, resulting in a three-hundred-meter-diameter circle of sixteen stakes.

Vol Kaguchi still wasn't quite used to suddenly being someplace he wasn't a moment ago. Nevertheless, he did like it, especially the multitude of combat tactics it opened up for him. Unfortunately, it also opened a host of combat tactics against which he would have to defend, and his opponents would have far more training with those tactics than he.

"Shenza One, attacking," Vol announced as he came out of his jump and found himself closing rapidly on a pair of Dusahn octo-fighters that were chasing one of the Aurora's Super Eagles. He pressed his firing trigger, unleashing his turrets and sending a barrage of energy bolts spewing toward the enemy targets.

"Shenza Two, I have your six, One."

"Just make sure you stick close," Vol replied as he maneuvered to get a clean shot. The Super Eagle jumped, and the pair of Dusahn octo-fighters turned in opposite directions, also jumping two seconds later. "Damn!" Vol cursed. "Tariq! One one five by two seven five, plus ten. Jumping."

"Got it, Vol. Right beh..."

Vol's wingman's transmission was cut short as Vol jumped before it had been completely received. When his canopy cleared, a Dusahn gunship was coming straight for him, firing away. Vol's shields lit up, flashing the octagonal patterns formed by its emitter matrix with each impact of the enemy's weapons.

"Shields down twenty percent, Vol," his weapons officer warned.

"Shenza Two, Shenza One; are you there Tariq?"

"I'm here! Break left twenty and jump one light minute. I'll put a spread of shield busters in this guy's face and follow."

Vol didn't reply, instead just following his wingman's recommendations, rolling his ship into a twenty-degree turn to port and jumping ahead a single light minute.

Tariq glanced out the front of his canopy as Vol's Gunyoki fighter rolled out to the left and was enveloped by a subtle glow of blue-white light, before vanishing without the usual jump flash. Now with a clear line of fire, Tariq launched a spread of twelve shield-busting missiles. The stubby, little missiles streaked ahead of him, slamming into the incoming gunship.

"That did it!" Jova declared from the back seat. "His shields are down."

"Hey, somebody take this guy out for me, will you?" Tariq called as he turned to follow Vol to the post-escape-jump rally point. *"Shenza Three and Four are on it,"* Tham Kors called over comms from somewhere behind them.

Tariq could hear Alayna Imai in Shenza Four letting out a Rakuen battle cry as he jumped away to find Vol in Shenza One.

"I'm coming back around now," Josh declared.

"Keep that as.....ole off of until get this damned sh..... up!" Sergeant Eliason ordered over comms from the surface of Corinair.

Josh twisted his flight control stick, snap rolling the Seiiki as his gunners fired away at the pursuing octo-fighters directly behind them.

"Eagles Five and Six, Seiiki," Loki called over comms. "We could use some help here."

"Ten seconds, Seiiki."

The gunship Josh was trying to get a firing angle on suddenly jumped away, just as he was about to get a target lock. "Son of a bitch! These guys fly their gunships like you guys fly your Super Eagles!"

Energy bolts streamed past the Seiiki's cockpit on either side, narrowly missing them. Then, the barrage suddenly ended, and the ship was rocked by an explosion, then two seconds later, another.

"That good, huh?" the Super Eagle pilot joked. "Your six is clear, Josh."

"Thanks, Jonesy," Josh replied. "Gimme another target, Loki."

"Right twelve and down five. Then jump twenty clicks. Another gunship is about to open up on the Ghatazhak down below."

"Not if I can help it," Josh declared as he turned the ship slightly right, pitched down a touch, and tapped his jump button.

A brilliant, blue-white flash filled the sky above the battle at the Corinari base-turned-prison-camp just outside of Aitkenna. From behind the flash, one of the ungainly looking cargo haulers, commonly referred to as a 'boxcar', came riding down on four fiery tails of thrust. The boxcar descended rapidly, slowing at the last minute and coming to a hover less than a meter above the surface, directly in the middle of the ring of emitter poles the Ghatazhak had planted less than a minute and a half ago.

The boxcar released its cargo pod, allowing it to drop the last half meter to the ground, landing with a ground-shaking thud. The abrupt lightening of its load caused the hauler to suddenly surge upward, giving it just enough forward momentum to jump away, disappearing behind another brilliant flash of blue-white light.

Once on the ground, sixteen emitters popped up along the edges of the cargo pod. A few seconds later, they began to glow, growing in intensity over several seconds, until a wave of energy spewed outward in all directions. The energy reached the emitter poles the Ghatazhak had placed around a three-hundred-meter-diameter circle two minutes ago, and suddenly the entire area—including the prison entrance and the Ghatazhak, themselves—was covered with an invisible shield that flashed yellow and red every time Dusahn weapons fire struck its surface.

Sergeant Eliason flinched with each incoming heavy plasma fire that rained down from orbit. But to his relief, the shield proved its worth, and the sergeant flinched less and less. He turned to look at his men, yelling, "We're in business, boys!" Lord Dusahn lay naked on the table as two sturdy, yet attractive, young, Takaran women vigorously rubbed his body with healing herbs and oils native to the area. Such a treatment had become a regular part of his daily routine soon after conquering the Pentaurus cluster. It was one of the many perks of his position, one which he enjoyed immensely.

The doors to the private chamber connected to his office burst open, and General Hesson came charging in, causing the young women to shy away from their duties and cover up their scantily covered bodies.

"What is the meaning of this?" Lord Dusahn barked, enraged at the intrusion. "How dare you..."

"A million pardons, my lord. We are under attack."

"What?" Lord Dusahn jumped from the table, grabbing his robe. "Where?"

"Corinair, my lord," the general explained with urgency. "By the Aurora, four gunships, and various other ships, including a handful of Gunyoki fighters from Rakuen, equipped with a jump drive that does not reveal their position upon entry."

"What is their objective?" Lord Dusahn demanded to know as he pulled his trousers on.

"They have landed nearly one hundred soldiers at the prison facility where the Corinari are being held, pending transfer to their work assignments. They have somehow erected a shield over their point of insertion, which also encompasses the entrance to the underground holding facility. This shield protects them from attack, even from bombardment by our gunships in orbit."

"What about the Jar-Jeffon? How many frigates are in the system?" Lord Dusahn inquired as he continued dressing.

He glanced at the two girls cowering to the side. "Be gone!" he barked, sending them scurrying toward the exit.

"The Jeffon is damaged and is having trouble maneuvering; however, she can still defend herself. She is moving away from the planet to avoid being pulled in by its gravity, should its propulsion systems degrade further."

"And the frigates? What about the frigates?" Lord Dusahn demanded as he pulled on his boots.

"They have both been destroyed, my lord," General Hesson replied. "I believe they intend to attempt a rescue of the Corinari."

Lord Dusahn smiled as he donned his uniform jacket. "I knew it. I *knew* that idiot child would try to rescue his friends. They *must* be desperate for manpower, which means that Rakuen has not yet pledged their support."

"But the Gunyoki are attacking, as well," General Hesson reminded his lord.

"The Gunyoki do what they want, without need for approval by their own government. You read the intelligence reports. Their presence means nothing, and the fact that Scott is trying to rescue trained warriors is *quite* telling." Lord Dusahn shook his finger in the air, thinking. "As is that shield. They expect difficulty extracting such numbers." Lord Dusahn headed for the door to his office, and General Hesson fell in behind him. "Send the Jar-Inta and the Jar-Belaron to Corinair," he ordered as he passed through his private chamber to his main office. "Send all Zen-Anor on Corinair to the prison. We will squash them; all hundred of denying them the additional manpower them: and weakening them, further still, in the process!" Lord Dusahn turned to the general. "Not a single Ghatazhak gets off the surface alive, understood?"

"Yes, my lord," General Hesson replied. "And what of the Aurora?"

"What of her? Destroy her, of course!"

"She has proven a formidable opponent in the past, my lord," General Hesson warned.

"That is why I am sending *two* battleships," Lord Dusahn reminded him, annoyed at the general's inference.

"Might I suggest that we order our older ships that are still in port to begin spooling up their reactors, in case we need them?"

"Nonsense," Lord Dusahn laughed.

"With all due respect, my lord, we cannot afford to lose three battleships."

"I think you are giving the boy-who-would-be-captain too much credit, my old friend." Lord Dusahn thought for a moment. "However, if you must, you may also pull additional ships out of nearby systems, such as Rama or Hayden, for example."

"A wise decision, my lord," the general said with a respectful nod.

"I suggest you tell Captain Monton and Captain Joreeza that they had *better* destroy the Aurora, *if* they wish to keep their commands."

* * *

"Jump to Savoy, complete," the Aurora's navigator announced.

"Multiple contacts," Lieutenant Commander Kono reported from the sensor station. "Four gunships, a cruiser, and multiple cargo ships, all in orbit over Ancot."

"Helm, bear on the cruiser and prepare to jump in close under her," Nathan ordered. "Tactical, missiles for the gunships, and ready plasma cannons for any survivors when we jump in." "Bearing on the cruiser, aye," Lieutenant Dinev acknowledged.

"Locking missiles on the gunships," Jessica followed.

"Mister Bickle, we'll jump in below and half a click aft of the target," Nathan continued. "Lieutenant, pitch up fortyfive degrees as we jump."

"Missiles away," Jessica reported.

"Plotting jump," the navigator replied.

"Forty-five up as we jump, aye."

"Cruiser is raising shields," Lieutenant Commander Kono warned. "She knows we're here, sir."

Four jump flashes appeared on the main view screen as the missiles Jessica had just launched jumped toward their targets.

"Gunships are jumping," the lieutenant commander announced.

"Damn it," Jessica cursed.

"No problem," Nathan reminded her. "Safety those birds and jump them to the recovery zone, so we can pick them up later."

"Already on it," Jessica assured him.

"On course, and pitching up," Lieutenant Dinev reported.

"Cruiser is launching missiles," Lieutenant Commander Kono warned. "They're jump missiles!"

"Full power, hard to port and upward," Nathan ordered.

Lieutenant Dinev didn't wait to acknowledge or respond, immediately bringing the Aurora's main engines to full power, and altering her course to port and upward. A split second later, four jump missiles appeared from behind flashes of blue-white light just to their right side, streaking past them harmlessly.

"Return the favor, Jess," Nathan ordered.

"I'm on it," she replied.

"Escape jump after the missiles are away," Nathan continued.

"Escape jump, aye," Mister Bickle replied. "Jump line is clear."

"Missiles away."

"Escape jump!" Nathan ordered, the blue-white jump flash appearing as the words crossed his lips.

Robert flinched as four missiles struck the Dusahn cruiser's shields, moments after he jumped in near the enemy warship. Without thinking, he pressed and held his firing button. "Gunners! Pound their aft shields!" he ordered as he sent plasma torpedoes streaking toward the cruiser. A moment later, bolts of energy from his port and starboard gun turrets were added to the barrage.

"You can't continue firing torpedoes like that, sir," Lieutenant Kraska warned. "You'll overheat the plasma generators."

Robert ignored his copilot's warnings and continued firing. "Striker Two, Striker One. You there, Gil?"

"One, Two. Just arrived," Gil replied. "Any girls left to dance with?"

"A hot one, right in front of me. Keep up the onslaught on her aft shields for me, will ya?" Robert suggested. "My tubes are about to melt!"

"You got it!" Gil replied. "Peel right, and bug out..... now!"

Robert immediately rolled his gunship into a tight right turn, tapping his jump button as soon as he got a clear jump line.

Gil Roselle squinted from the blue-white flash as the gunship before him jumped away. Without waiting for his

targeting computers to calculate a firing solution, he too pressed his firing trigger and held it down, sending a constant stream of plasma torpedoes slamming into the Dusahn cruiser's weakening aft shields. "Gunners, join the party," Gil suggested. "Robey, just as soon as those kids jump in behind us, tell them to cut in on my dance partner here."

"Understood, sir," his sensor officer replied.

"Damn! This sure beats the hell out of sitting in a command chair and barking out orders while everyone else has all the fun!"

"Reaper Two, circle north. Target the north and east towers," Loki instructed from the Seiiki's cockpit as Josh brought the ship around to jump toward the gunships still pounding the Ghatazhak's shield on the surface of Corinair. "Reaper Five, target the south and west towers."

"*Reaper Two circling north,*" the Reaper's copilot responded. "*Target north and east towers.*"

"Reaper Five, taking south and west."

"You got your jump line?" Loki asked Josh.

"You just keep everyone else on their game. I'll handle harassing those damned gunships."

"Thanks," Loki replied. "But don't forget to keep us alive while you're at it, okay?"

"All part of the plan," Josh said as he put the Seiiki into a tight roll and pressed the jump button. As soon as they came out of the jump, Josh spotted his next target and turned towards it, firing away.

"Jump to Rama is complete." By now, the Aurora's navigator was getting a little more comfortable with the

fast-paced battle and the constantly changing locations in which they were fighting.

In addition, Nathan had noticed that his entire bridge crew was developing a routine, taking turns acknowledging orders whenever possible, and giving their captain exactly the information he needed, when it was needed.

"No cruisers," Lieutenant Commander Kono reported. "Six gunships, three in low orbit around Peridino, the other three at the planet's L-three point. Range to nearest, three light minutes."

"I got'em," Jessica replied. "Locking two missiles on... Wait, you got something coming around Peridino's third moon, Layla?"

"Yup, it's a cruiser, and she's a heavy. Range is two and a half light minutes."

"Helm, turn toward the cruiser," Nathan instructed. "Roll us over and jump us in above her."

"Recommend a two-part jump, torpedoes then big guns," Jessica suggested.

"Correction, Lieutenant," Nathan followed. "Jump us in two clicks in front of the target as she comes around that moon to bear on us. Two clicks down, as well. We'll jump in pitched up to fire on her. Then pitch back level as you jump forward, sliding in directly under her bow. And give us just enough pitch to one side, so we can get our topside guns and our broadside guns on that cruiser, as well."

"Aye, sir," Lieutenant Dinev replied.

"Missiles are away," Jessica reported.

Twelve small flashes of blue-white light appeared before them as their missiles jumped away toward their distant targets. In orbit above Rama's third planet, six blue-white flashes of light momentarily hid the arrival of six instruments of destruction, appearing less than a kilometer from their targets and closing at blinding speeds. Two seconds later, before any of the three gunships could raise their shields, spin up their point-defenses, or jump to safety, the missiles slammed into them, penetrating their unprotected hulls and detonating deep within them. The result was complete destruction of all three gunships. At the same time, more than five hundred thousand kilometers away, three more gunships met identical fates.

"Jump complete," Mister Bickle reported as the Aurora's jump flash faded.

"Firing all tubes," Jessica announced.

"Rolling to port," Lieutenant Dinev added.

Nathan watched as the image of the Dusahn heavy cruiser rotated forty-five degrees on the main view screen, while a stream of plasma torpedoes leapt from the Aurora's tubes and slammed into the cruiser's shields, causing them to flash red-orange with each impact.

"Target somehow managed to get her shields up," Lieutenant Commander Kono reported in disbelief.

"We might have been two light minutes out," Nathan said.

"But that cruiser was only twenty light seconds from the gunships at L-three," Jessica finished for him. "But you expected that, didn't you?"

Nathan didn't respond. He was too busy calculating all the different ways the cruiser's captain could defend against their attack and possibly even retaliate.

"Losing my angle on the tubes," Jessica reported. "Switching to topside cannons." "Cruiser is painting us," Lieutenant Commander Kono warned. "Guns and missiles."

"Laying down point-defense fire between us and the target," Jessica assured him. "Broadside cannons in ten seconds."

"Target is firing rail guns and plasma cannons," Lieutenant Commander Kono reported.

A moment later, the Aurora's shields began to light up as plasma charges and heavy rail gun rounds slammed into them. The ship rocked with each impact, but their shields held, even against an onslaught from such close range.

"Broadsides are firing!" Jessica reported.

"Target is launching missiles!"

The Aurora pitched down slowly as she passed under the Dusahn heavy cruiser. Her topside plasma and heavy rail gun cannons exchanged like-kind fire with the enemy vessel, each of them pounding away at the other's defensive shields, hoping to bring the other's down before their own collapsed. Missiles leapt from the cruiser's side launch tubes but were intercepted by the dense layer of fragmenting rail gun rounds being created by the Aurora's point-defense cannons. The result of the exchange was a fiery display of destructive force, as each tried to destroy the other as they passed one another in the cold vacuum of space.

"Target's shields are down to thirty percent," Lieutenant Commander Kono reported.

"Our shields are down to forty percent," the systems officer warned.

"I'm losing angle on the broadside cannons," Jessica warned. "Gimme some yaw, Lieutenant."

"I'm on it," Lieutenant Dinev replied from the helm.

"Twenty percent," Lieutenant Commander Kono reported. "Keep on them, people."

"Thirty percent," the Aurora's systems officer warned.

"Target is channeling emergency power into her shields," Lieutenant Commander Kono warned. "They're trying to outlast us!"

"Throw everything we've got at them, Jess!" Nathan urged as the ship shook violently.

"I am!"

"Ten percent and almost holding," Lieutenant Commander Kono reported.

"Our shields are down to fifteen percent, Captain!"

"All available power to shields!" Nathan barked.

"Nine percent and holding!" Layla reported, concern creeping into her tone.

"Escape jump ready, Captain," Mister Bickle announced, hoping that his captain would take the hint.

"Not yet, Mister Bickle. Not yet," Nathan insisted.

"Ten percent," the Aurora's system's officer warned, barely containing his panic, "and falling!"

"Not yet," Nathan instructed calmly, glancing at the mission clock.

"Jump flashes!" the lieutenant commander announced.

"Five percent!" the system's officer yelled.

"Cobra gunships directly astern! Two clicks! They're firing!"

A dozen red-orange balls of plasma streaked past the Aurora's semispherical main view screen, slamming into the Dusahn heavy cruiser's nearly depleted shields, draining the last of its energy from them, and causing emitters all over the underside of the warship's hull to overheat and explode in jets of showering sparks. The shield flashes ceased, and all the plasma energy and rail gun rounds from all three Alliance ships slammed into the Dusahn cruiser's hull, tearing it open.

Nathan watched without emotion or expression as a warship more than twice the Aurora's size split open and then broke into several more pieces, ripped to shreds by a never-ending series of secondary explosions. "Anything left to kill here?" Nathan asked his sensor officer calmly.

"Negative, sir," Lieutenant Commander Kono replied with satisfaction.

"Very nice," Jessica mumbled.

"Comms, pop a comm-drone and update command," Nathan instructed.

"Aye, sir."

"Lieutenant Dinev, set course for the Takar system."

"Takar system, aye," Lieutenant Dinev replied from the Aurora's helm.

Nathan fought back the urge to smile. So far, things were going better than expected. But there was still plenty of time for their fortunes to change. Like Jessica had said, they were about to jump into an awfully big fan.

* * *

"Status report!" Lord Dusahn barked as he and General Hesson walked into the command center on Takara.

"My lord," the officer of the watch began. "We are receiving word of attacks on Savoy and Rama, as well."

"How bad?" General Hesson asked.

"We have lost several gunships in the Savoy system, and Rama is now undefended."

"My lord," General Hesson said, turning to Lord Dusahn. "We must send one of our battleships to the Savoy system to protect Ancot." "There is nothing but farmers on Ancot," Lord Dusahn replied.

"Farmers who supply seventy percent of the food the people of this system consume," General Hesson reminded his leader. "Including our own."

"Now I am to send *battleships* to defend *grain silos*?" Lord Dusahn said in disgust. "General Hesson, you scramble every ship we have, do you understand me? I want the boy captain and his precious little ship out of my hair, permanently, even if I have to do it myself. Do I make myself clear?"

"Unmistakably, my lord," General Hesson replied, his voice curt. "Shall I summon your shuttle, my lord?"

Lord Dusahn looked quizzically at his general.

"In case you choose to lead the attack against the Aurora yourself, my lord."

Lord Dusahn stared at the general, displeased with his tone. "Do not think, because our fathers were friends, that I will tolerate your disrespect, General."

"No disrespect intended, my lord," General Hesson assured him. "I merely wish to provide you with all the options which you might desire."

Lord Dusahn said nothing, but simply glared at the elder general.

"Now, if you'll excuse me, my lord, I'd like to carry out your orders."

Lord Dusahn watched as General Hesson began barking out orders to the men in the command center. As he watched, he looked to his personal aide, who stepped closer, sensing his lord's need to speak with him. "See to my shuttle. Contact my flagship, and tell them to be ready to get under way," he instructed in hushed tones so the general would not hear him. "As you wish, my lord."

Lord Dusahn touched his aide's sleeve, causing the man to pause before departing. "And bring me my sidearm."

* * *

"Charlie Leader, Boxcar Four. Thirty seconds to release."

"Understood." Lieutenant Rezhik scanned the console on his crawler, checking that all systems were operating normally. Then he checked the data pad that had been added to control the single-use, fixed-distance jump drive which had been installed on all six of Charlie Team's crawlers. "Charlie Team, Leader. Jump sequencers to auto, prepare for release."

"Once again, the mighty Ghatazhak are about to go down in history for another daring act of bravery," Corporal Chodan announced over comms.

"Stow it, Chodan," the lieutenant ordered as he activated the jump drive auto-sequencer on his data pad.

"Ten seconds."

The lieutenant monitored his console as the controller from Boxcar Four counted down the last few seconds. At 'zero', the mag-locks on the pads of the crawler arms deactivated, and the artificial gravity, generated by the platform on which they stood, dropped to nothing, allowing them to float freely.

"*Thrusting downward and away*," the boxcar's pilot announced over comms.

Despite the fact that they were moving through space at one meter per second greater than the orbital velocity of the shipyard orbiting above Takara, all six crawlers appeared motionless as the boxcar descended down and away from them. The boxcar continued to fire its thrusters in tiny bursts, causing the distance between the crawlers and the boxcar to grow at an ever-increasing rate. A minute after releasing the crawlers, the boxcar was far enough away to safely depart.

"Safe jump range," the pilot of the boxcar called. "Good luck, gentlemen."

Lieutenant Rezhik's crawler filled momentarily with the blue-white light from the boxcar's jump flash as it departed, leaving him and his men coasting toward their target just under two light years away.

"Gentlemen?" Corporal Chodan wondered. "Why'd he call us gentlemen? We're dangerous killers, we are."

"Dangerous killers who talk too much," the lieutenant mumbled. "Heads up, *gentlemen.* Jumping in three...... two.....one.....jumping."

Six yellow and black crawlers disappeared in unison *without* jump flashes, leaving no evidence that they had ever been floating freely in that part of space.

"Jump complete," Mister Bickle announced as the jump flash faded from the Aurora's bridge.

"Open fire," Nathan ordered as the bridge flashed redorange.

On the semispherical view screen, a black and crimson Dusahn cruiser moved from left to right across their screen, obviously under way on a departure course from the Takaran orbital shipyards, which lay directly to their port side. Groups of four plasma torpedoes streaked forth from under their nose, along with a steady stream of plasma cannon fire from all six of their forward dorsal and ventral gun turrets. The energy charges slammed into the cruiser's shields, which were already raised as expected, causing no damage to the maneuvering warship other than a slight drain in her shield strength. Their mission now was one of deception and diversion, not of destruction, and Nathan intended to get the Dusahn's undivided attention and hold it for as long as possible.

"Target's shields are down ten percent," Lieutenant Commander Kono reported from the sensor station. "They're locking missiles on us."

"I've got at least a dozen warships on my threat board," Jessica announced. "I'm locking jump missiles onto all of them, with full recovery safeties."

"Target is firing," Lieutenant Commander Kono warned, as if it was necessary. A second later, the Aurora shook from the impacts of the Dusahn cruiser's incoming weapons fire and continued to shake with every impact.

"I've got solutions on eight of thirteen targets," Jessica reported. "Launching sixteen."

"Prepare to pitch under them, and jump forward ten light seconds," Nathan instructed. "We need them to keep sight of us while we evade their missiles."

"Target is launching!" Lieutenant Commander Kono warned.

"Missiles away," Jessica added.

"Pitching down," Lieutenant Dinev reported as the image of the cruiser began to slide upward on the main view screen.

The stream of plasma torpedoes leaving the Aurora stopped, as their aim was interrupted by the change in pitch attitude. There was a low rumble, mixed with the violent vibrations of the incoming weapons fire, as the Aurora's main engines fired to help change her course.

"Point-defenses are firing!" Jessica proclaimed.

"Missile impacts in five seconds!" Lieutenant Commander Kono warned. "Three.....two..."

"....Clear jump line!" Mister Bickle reported.

"....One...."

"...Jump!" Nathan snapped before the words had cleared the ensign's lips.

The jump flash washed over the bridge, and the image of the cruiser disappeared from their main view screen, replaced by the planet Takara and two frigates that were coming over the planet's horizon.

"Turn to those frigates and jump us ahead to point-blank range," Nathan ordered.

"Turning, aye," the helmsman replied.

"Plotting jump."

"I have six missile impacts!" Jessica declared.

"Target damage assessments, when able," Nathan urged his sensor officer.

"Working on it," she replied.

"Jump is ready," Mister Bickle reported.

"Ready all tubes and turrets," Nathan ordered. "Jump."

The jump flash, again, washed over the bridge. The planet grew in size, filling more of the view screen, as did both of the frigates since they, too, were now much closer than a few seconds ago.

"Firing all tubes and turrets!" Jessica announced.

Again, a stream of plasma torpedoes, departing in groups of four, mixed in with six streams of plasma bolts from the quad-barreled, plasma cannon turrets along the bow of the Aurora. Both frigates immediately turned away, their shields flashing with each impact of plasma. A split second later, the two frigates jumped to safety.

"Jump flash, directly astern," Lieutenant Commander Kono warned. "The cruiser has moved in behind us."

"Jump forward one light minute," Nathan ordered. "Start a standard-rate turn to port after we jump, and come about on a reciprocal heading." "Aye, sir."

"Multiple contacts," Lieutenant Commander Kono warned. "Now showing *two* Dusahn battleships, three cruisers, and four frigates," she reported, feeling overwhelmed. "And that's not including all the gunships and non-military traffic swarming about."

"This place is a traffic controller's nightmare," Lieutenant Dinev commented under her breath as the next jump flash washed over them.

Six crawlers suddenly appeared only fifty meters beyond the orbital shipyard's superstructure that surrounded the Teyentah. No jump flashes announced their presence; they simply came into existence, as if from nowhere. They coasted toward the Teyentah below them, firing thrusters to steer between the trusses that encompassed the massive battleship.

Lieutenant Rezhik immediately switched on his transponder, spoofing the identification codes provided by Suvan Navarro so that, to the shipyard controllers, they would appear as duplicates of existing crawlers, and would likely be attributed to a computer glitch. He checked his display, noting that his men had done likewise and that all six crawlers were now squawking expected ID codes.

The lieutenant carefully manipulated his controls, steering his crawler through the truss work structure. Once past, he altered his course just enough to steer toward the section of the hull that lay directly over the main engineering portion of the warship.

The meters counted away quickly as he closed on the massive vessel. At the last moment, he fired his thrusters again and then slightly coiled the arms on his crawler to better absorb the impact of touchdown. In near unison, all six crawlers touched down on the outer hull of the Takaran battleship. Three of the crawlers moved immediately into position and began cutting a circle through the hull in coordinated fashion, while the other three crawlers pointed their side-mounted, fixed miniplasma cannons outward, taking defensive postures.

Two Ranni jump shuttles appeared, as if from nowhere and without any jump flashes, just outside of the shipyard, on collision courses with the Teyentah. They, too, steered through the truss work surrounding the ship and then ducked into her starboard flight deck bay, disappearing from sight.

Once inside the bay, the shuttles decelerated sharply, turning toward the large door which led from the bay into the starboard hangar deck.

Suvan Navarro powered up his crawler and immediately moved it to one side of the hangar door frame, activating his mag-locks at full power. He pressed the button on the remote detonator. There was a flash of light, and his crawler shook. A split second later, something hit one of his canopy windows, scaring the daylights out of him. He heard a hissing sound and looked to his right. Just above his right ear, something, probably a piece of the blast door, had slammed into the little window and cracked it.

He was now leaking air, likely having only minutes before he would be in full vacuum and would be dead. He immediately deactivated his mag-locks and crawled furiously through the now-open bay doorway, seeking refuge inside. If he could just get to one of the crawler docks in the starboard hangar bay in time, he might still get out of the crawler and into the pressurized interior of the Teyentah, before it was too late.

One after another, each of the four Cobra gunships jumped into the Takar system. Upon arrival, they each turned toward different targets and jumped again, arriving near their intended targets a split second later. The idea was to create the illusion of an all-out attack against the Dusahn fleet, and so far, it appeared to be working. One by one, the Dusahn warships began moving away from the shipyard to engage the Aurora and the newly arrived gunships.

"Dusahn battleship twenty degrees to port, slightly below us," Lieutenant Commander Kono reported.

"Turn into the battleship and jump us over her to a position thirty light seconds beyond, then come about to jump back and attack."

"They'll get a read on us before we finish the turn," Lieutenant Dinev reminded her captain.

"Let's hope so," Nathan replied. "Just to make it look good, let's first jump even with her, on our side, and slap her with our port broadsides," Nathan suggested.

"Just to piss them off?" Jessica commented as her fingers danced across the tactical console, selecting targets for the Aurora's weapons.

"Gotta put on a good show," Nathan replied. "Lieutenant?"

"I've got it, sir."

"Both jumps are plotted and ready," Mister Bickle announced.

"Roll us onto our port side as you come out of your turn, Lieutenant," Nathan ordered.

"Aye, sir."

The Aurora came out of her turn to port, then rolled onto her port side, jumping ahead several kilometers as her roll completed, and coming out even with, and directly above, the enemy battleship. The much smaller ship's weapons immediately began to fire. Rail guns, plasma cannon turrets, and, finally, the mark three broadside plasma cannons on her aft port side, all blasted away at the much larger ship's shields as the Aurora slid over the enemy vessel.

The black and crimson battleship returned fire seconds later, pummeling the Aurora's shields, as well, and with considerably greater firepower. Within seconds, the Aurora's shields began to show signs of failing, a state made obvious by the prolonged flashes with each weapons impact against them.

Finally, before her shields could be breached, the Aurora jumped away in a brilliant blue-white flash of light, leaving the Dusahn battleship's guns spewing into the void of space.

As the overhead shield flashed with the incoming weapons impacts, Sergeant Eliason's squad of six ran across the compound toward the aboveground entrance to the prison's subterranean levels. As the entire Delta group moved into position, Echo and Foxer groups also made their way to their planned points of entry.

Now, leaning against the structure, Sergeant Eliason watched as Corporal Mitchell and Specialist Parkett placed the entry charges on the heavy door leading to the levels below.

With the charges set, the two men moved clear of the door.

"Fire in the hole," Specialist Parkett warned.

A moment later, the charges detonated. Within seconds, similar detonations occurred all over the compound as the other teams gained entry, as well.

Seconds after that, the smoke cleared, revealing a gaping, irregular hole in the door.

"Gazen! Inchin! With me!" the sergeant ordered. "Mitchell, you follow with Parkett and Prisk."

"Got it," Corporal Mitchell acknowledged.

Sergeant Eliason waited for Specialists Gazen and Inchin to enter the hole in the door and head down the stairs, then he followed them inside. "Delta Blue is going in," he reported over comms.

"Delta Red has over watch," Master Sergeant Anwar assured him.

Specialists Gazen and Inchin reached the doorway at the bottom of the stairs, followed a few seconds later by Sergeant Eliason, and a few seconds after him, by the rest of Delta Blue squad.

"Can't blast our way in here," Specialist Gazen told the sergeant. "No place to take cover."

"We'll have to cut our way through," Sergeant Eliason realized.

"That'll take a minute," Gazen reminded him. "They'll be waiting for us on the other side."

"Can't be helped," the sergeant said. "Start cutting."

Gazen and Inchin pulled out their laser torches and began cutting through the inner door at the bottom of the stairwell.

"This sucks," Corporal Mitchell said, coming down to stand next to his friend, Sergeant Eliason.

"Pop some stunners, dive and roll firing, and scramble for the far side of the foyer for cover. Then, toss incendiaries in both directions." "You feeling like a hero today, Sarge?"

"Nope," Sergeant Eliason said, grinning. "Like a kick-ass Ghatazhak."

"Incendiaries and stunners," Corporal Mitchell called back to his men behind him. "Pass them down."

Vol Kaguchi pressed the jump button on his flight control stick, causing the pale blue light to spill out over his Gunyoki fighter's hull. A second later, the view outside his canopy changed, and he found himself in the middle of a battle between the Aurora and three Dusahn frigates, with Cobra gunships jumping in and out, trying to help.

"Striker Three!" Captain Nash's voice called over comms. *"Target the frigate to your starboard side. Flip one seven Charlie, then back to rally four seven two."*

"Starboard frigate, flip one seven Charlie, rally four seven two," Kenji repeated.

Striker One's jump flash filled Vol's cockpit as the Cobra gunship jumped away, avoiding an incoming missile that now streaked past Vol's fighter, barely missing his port engine nacelle.

"That was close," Tariq exclaimed over comms.

"Oh, you're still with me," Vol joked. "Pretty good for someone who has never won a major heat," he added as he turned toward the same frigate as Striker Three was targeting. "Follow me in, Two."

"No way you can shake me, old man," Tariq teased.

"As soon as the gunship breaks to jump, I'll launch a full spread of shield busters. You follow with your main plasma cannons."

"Got it," Tariq replied, confidently.

"*Striker Three, engaging,*" Aiden's voice announced over comms.

"Striker Three, Shenza One. Do me a favor and break left after your attack run. That should set us up nicely."

"Understood," Aiden replied as he opened fire on the frigate before him.

Vol steered his Gunyoki fighter directly behind Aiden's gunship, preparing his next jump as he followed the young pilot toward the target. "Busters ready?" he asked his weapons officer behind him.

"Eight of them set to launch," Iso replied from the back of the cockpit. "Just give me a clear shot."

"You should have one in..." Vol glanced at his console, quickly assessing the rate the gunship in front of him was closing on the frigate. "...six seconds."

Five seconds later, the gunship in front of him ceased fire, rolled into a turn to port, and disappeared in a bluewhite flash of light that nearly blinded Vol. "Clear line of fire!" he told his weapons officer.

"Firing!" Iso announced.

Eight stubby missiles leapt from the big, square pods on either side of the Gunyoki fighter's fuselage and streaked ahead of them toward the frigate. The missiles slammed into the frigate's shields, causing them to overload. Emitters on the frigate's starboard side overheated and exploded, causing her shields to collapse.

Vol pitched up, not wanting to take the same escape jump line as Striker Three, and pressed his jump button before the enemy frigate could open fire on him. A split second later, he was in the clear and continued pitching up, to come over and back toward the same target. As he came around, Shenza Two appeared just above him.

"*Son of a bitch!*" Tariq exclaimed over comms.

"Did you get him?" Vol asked excitedly.

"No! The pussy jumped away as soon as you took out his shields!"

"These guys aren't stupid," Vol pointed out.

"I still say they're pussies!" Tariq insisted.

Vol chuckled to himself as he came out onto his return heading and tapped his jump button again.

Both Ranni shuttles flew through the gaping hole in the blast doors and into the transfer tunnel. With only seconds to react, both ships fired their strapped-on plasma cannons, blowing holes, not quite big enough for their ships to fit through, into the inner doors at the end of the transfer tunnel.

The ships continued down the short tunnel, diving into the holes they had just created. Both ships came to a sudden stop when the front halves of their shuttles jammed into the holes.

General Telles quickly shook off the startling effects of the sudden stop as his pilot activated the explosive bolts holding their forward windows in place. The window panels blew outward, flying into the pressurized hangar deck in front of them.

General Telles stood up, climbed over the console, and squeezed through the opening. He then slid down the nose of the shuttle, landing on the hangar deck in front of the ship. He looked to his right as Master Sergeant Willem slid out through the forward windows of his shuttle in the same fashion, and then down to the deck, as well.

General Telles brought his weapon up to a ready position, immediately sweeping the massive hangar bay for threats but found none. He signaled the master sergeant to move to the right while he went left. "Alpha, disembark, fan left," he ordered quietly over comms.

"*Bravo, disembark, fan right,*" the master sergeant ordered his men in the other shuttle.

As the other Ghatazhak climbed out of their shuttles and followed, General Telles moved quickly toward the far bulkhead, staying in a low crouch as he moved his weapon back and forth.

He made his way to the wall and moved forward toward the far hatch. The hatch, itself, had undoubtedly sealed automatically when the inner doors had been breached. He glanced at the environmental display on the inside of his visor, noting that, although it was lower than normal, the hangar bay was still pressurized, and the pressure was slowly sealing. As expected, the inner doors were the type which automatically sealed around any object that penetrated them.

General Telles looked back toward the shuttles, noting that all twelve Ghatazhak, including himself, as well as their two pilots, had made it out of the shuttles and had found safe cover. He reached up and tapped the comm-controls on the side of his combat helmet, changing comm-channels. "Alpha and Bravo teams are inside."

Sergeant Eliason attached the extra grenades to his body armor as Specialists Gazen and Inchin finished cutting through the door at the bottom of the stairs. As soon as they finished, the men stowed their laser torches and readied their assault rifles in preparation to enter with their squad leader.

The sergeant looked back at Corporal Mitchell, who was standing a few steps up, along with the other two members of the squad. The corporal nodded to Eliason, signaling that they were ready, as well.

Sergeant Eliason looked at Gazen and Inchin, both of whom had grenades in hand, ready to deploy. The sergeant kicked the door, causing the cutout to fall inward. Gazen and Inchin tossed their stunner grenades through the door, in opposite directions, after which the sergeant tossed his incendiary grenades, as well.

Four flashes of blinding light and sensory-deafening sound went off in the corridor beyond the door, followed by four explosions that sent burning gases expanding in all directions, filling the corridor. The sergeant waited several seconds for the flashover to finish, then dove headfirst through the doorway. He landed in a tuck and roll, coming up firing with his assault rifle, first left and then right.

Four more grenades came flying through the doorway, again to the left and right. The sergeant spun around to face the wall as he activated the sensory-protection fields in his combat helmet. The room flashed again, and Gazen and Inchin entered as well, stepping quickly through the door as they opened fire; Gazen to the left, and Inchin to the right. It was a classic Ghatazhak entry maneuver, practiced countless times over their years of training together on Burgess.

The process repeated two more times, allowing the other three members of the team to enter, and for Eliason and his men to move down the corridor, pushing the Dusahn defenders back.

Section by section, Sergeant Eliason and his men advanced in the face of heavy resistance. Energy weapons fire ricocheted in all directions as red and yellow energy bolts were exchanged by both sides. Multiple times, the sergeant felt bolts of energy slamming into his body armor, threatening to knock him off his feet. Had he not been wearing it, he surely would have been dead by now.

The sergeant moved to the next doorway, crouching down low to avoid the heavy weapons fire coming from the next section. A Dusahn grenade bounced past him, rolling further down the corridor toward his men. "Grenade!" he yelled in warning as he jumped up, running toward the bouncing grenade. Leaning over as he ran, he grabbed the grenade, twisted around in the air, and tossed it back in the direction it had come. The grenade detonated as it passed through the doorway, wrecking the door frame and the wall in the blast.

On his back, the sergeant fired continuously in the direction of the blast as his men advanced past him on either side, adding their own weapons fire to the barrage. Once at the doorway, the two men stopped firing and tossed their own grenades further down the corridor, then continued firing so the enemy would not be able to grab the devices and toss them back, the way the sergeant had.

Two more explosions rocked the next corridor. Sergeant Eliason took advantage of the break in the enemy barrage, scrambling back to his feet and charging forward through the doorway into the fray. The sergeant stayed low, knowing that his men would stay high as they came in behind him, firing, as well. All three assault rifles blazed, sending a constant barrage of fire. Within seconds, three more rifles joined them, creating an unsurvivable wall of energy.

After nearly a full minute of constant fire, the sergeant signaled his men to cease fire. All six of them stood motionless in the smoke-filled corridor, waiting and listening for an indication of life ahead of them. The sergeant checked his tactical display. His combat system showed no human signatures nearby, other than a few who were barely alive and not moving.

The sergeant signaled his men to advance into the swirling smoke. They moved forward slowly, their weapons held high and ready to fire, moving back and forth, searching for targets.

Ten meters further down the corridor, the room widened into, what appeared to be, a makeshift cellblock. Sergeant Eliason moved inside, approaching the nearest cell carefully. As he reached the bars, he spotted six men cowering in the corner. "Are you Corinari?" he called to them.

One of the men turned to look at the sergeant. The man was older than the others by a few years, and appeared to have been brutally beaten in recent days. "Yes," he replied with a broken voice, rising unsteadily to his feet.

"I am Sergeant Eliason of the Ghatazhak. We have been sent by General Telles and Captain Scott to rescue you," the sergeant explained. "Identify yourself."

"Then, it is true?" the man said in disbelief. "Nathan is alive?"

"He is." The sergeant looked more closely at the man. "Do I know you, sir?"

"I am Major Jonas Prechitt of the Corinari and of the Alliance." He tried to smile. "Retired, of course," he added, nearly breaking into tears.

"Of course, Major," the sergeant replied, coming to attention and holding a salute.

Major Prechitt raised his hand and returned the salute, as best he could.

"Assemble your men, Major," the sergeant said, lowering his hand. "We're getting you all out of here."

"Thank you, Sergeant. I hope you have a big ship," Major Prechitt said. Sergeant Eliason got a puzzled look on his face. "How many of you are there, sir?"

"At least a couple thousand," the major replied. "You have room, don't you?"

"Of course, sir," the sergeant lied. "Now please, we must not delay." Sergeant Eliason turned and headed back toward the door, signaling his men to help the Corinari. He tapped the comm-controls on the side of his helmet to change comm-channels. "Seiiki, Eliason. We're going to need more boxcars. A *lot* more."

Suvan Navarro wrestled with the controls of his damaged crawler as the precious atmosphere around him leaked rapidly into the vacuum outside. He could feel the oxygen levels decreasing, his breathing become more difficult, and his vision blurring. He glanced at his environmental readings, which were dancing all over the place. He had only seconds left as he managed to guide his crawler through the blasted open hangar doors and into the transfer tunnel on the other side. Before him, he could barely make out the sterns of two Ranni shuttles, their noses stuck into the doors at the far end of the tunnel.

He urged the crawler forward, hoping to find one of the crawler docking stations that he knew existed inside the tunnel, but with each passing second, his ability to focus on distant objects faded. Even his near vision was becoming blurry, when his console finally indicated it had detected a nearby docking port.

Suvan pressed the emergency docking sequencer, praying that the damaged crawler still functioned well enough to auto-dock. The crawler surged clumsily forward, rocking from side to side as it struggled to reach the docking port only ten meters away. As Suvan fought to stay conscious, he felt his crawler hit something...something solid. A moment later, the door behind him popped open, and a rush of air slammed into his back, pushing him to the front of the tight confines of the crawler's interior.

Suvan gasped, taking in a deep breath of properly oxygenated atmosphere. The darkness around the periphery of his vision began to clear, and his eyes began to focus again. The drowsiness, which had nearly taken him over, faded with each gasping breath he took until, finally, his wits returned.

Shaking off the effects of oxygen deprivation, Suvan reached back and up, grabbing the handles, and pulling himself through the exit hatch behind him. Still feeling uncoordinated, he fell backward through the crawler's exit hatch, into the transfer airlock. He pulled his feet out of the crawler and rolled over, crawling on his belly the few meters to the inner door controls.

The inner doors opened, and Suvan fell through, into the next compartment. The sound of energy weapons fire rang out from the next compartment, then from the corridor just beyond the nearby hatch. Still on the floor, Suvan looked around, somewhat dazed, searching for a weapons locker, a heavy tool, anything he could use as a weapon. As the weapons fire grew closer, the screams of pain and anguish from the men being wounded filled his ears, causing him to scramble for cover.

But it was too late. Suddenly, a man stood before him in flat-black, full body armor. Suvan looked up at the man. His face was covered with a polarized faceplate. The man looked down at him, and his faceplate retracted into his helmet.

"Captain Navarro, I presume?" "Uh..." "I am General Lucius Telles, leader of the Ghatazhak forces serving Captain Nathan Scott and the Karuzari Alliance. We are here to assist you, sir."

Captain Navarro rolled onto his back, relief washing over him. "Pleasure to meet you, General."

"Time is of the essence, Captain," the general urged.

"Just give me a moment to catch my breath," Captain Navarro said.

General Telles knelt down beside Captain Navarro, pulling a pneumo-ject out of a pocket on his thigh armor. He dialed in the proper medication and dosage and then pressed the device against the captain's thigh. "This will help you recover more quickly, Captain."

"Thank you," Suvan said, already feeling his strength and mental clarity returning.

General Telles tapped the comm-controls on the side of his helmet, adding a second comm-channel. "This is Telles. We have made contact with Captain Navarro and are headed for the bridge."

"*Telles, Vasya,*" the corporal called urgently over comms. "*Better make it quick, sir. We've got company coming from the port side.*"

"Captain?" General Telles said.

"I'm ready," Suvan replied, sitting up.

General Telles offered his hand to the captain, helping him to his feet. "I believe you will need these," he said, handing a comm-set and an energy pistol to him.

Suvan Navarro looked at the confident-looking man standing in front of him. He had known many Ghatazhak in his life, all of whom had the same, confident gaze. A gaze that defied fear; that defied the very concept of failure.

Suvan was actually beginning to believe they had a chance.

"Jump complete," Mister Bickle announced. "We're back in the Darvano system."

"Two battleships have joined the first," Lieutenant Commander Kono announced. "Multiple gunships on the far side of Corinair. They're still trying to pound the Ghatazhak, sir."

"What about the Seiiki?" Nathan asked.

"Locking jump missiles on the two new battleships," Jessica announced.

"The Seiiki is battling the gunships," Lieutenant Commander Kono advised. "But there are too many for them to deal with by themselves."

"What about the Eagles and Raptors?"

"They're busy keeping reinforcements from reaching the prison," Lieutenant Commander Kono reported.

"Missiles away," Jessica reported.

"Bear on the nearest ship, Lieutenant," Nathan ordered. "Then jump us into firing range."

"Aye, sir."

"Captain," the comms officer interrupted. "I'm picking up a message repeat from the nearest comm-buoy. The Ghatazhak have made contact with the Corinari prisoners and are preparing to move them into position for extraction. But they are asking for additional boxcars."

"Why?" Nathan asked.

"Ready to jump," Lieutenant Dinev reported.

"Execute," Nathan ordered.

"Apparently there are more Corinari prisoners than anticipated."

"Jumping," Mister Bickle announced as the jump flash washed over the bridge again.

"How many more?" Nathan asked.

"A couple thousand, minimum," the comms officer reported.

"I have a firing solution," Jessica reported as the Aurora shook from the incoming weapons fire from the battleship directly ahead of them.

"Open fire!" Nathan ordered, a new sense of urgency washing over him.

Corinari filed out from the surface entrance of the underground prison and into the open as the shield bubble that surrounded them flashed brilliantly with each weapons impact from beyond its borders.

The prisoners moved out, instinctively seeking cover nearby, unwilling to trust the shield itself.

Sergeant Eliason also came out, standing tall and looking around. He studied the inside of his visor and noticed that there were nearly a hundred enemy soldiers encircling them beyond the shield perimeter. "Oh, shit," he muttered.

"If that shield fails," Corporal Mitchell said as he came alongside the sergeant.

"We're all fucked."

The large maintenance bay along the topside of the Teyentah's engineering and main propulsion section flashed with white light as sparks fell from the massive overhead bay hatch. The sparks stopped suddenly, and a moment later, a portion of the hatch, approximately three meters square, fell from above, descending rather slowly in the greatly reduced gravity of the empty bay.

Immediately after, the first of six yellow and black crawlers floated downward through the gaping hole, its thrusters firing to accelerate its descent. One by one, they landed and began their ungainly crawl to the docking ports at the forward end of the hangar.

The first two crawlers backed up to the docking ports, securing themselves first, as the other four crawlers stood waiting.

Lieutenant Torren Rezhik activated the egress hatch behind him, and then pulled himself upward and out of the crawler in a smooth, efficient manner. Crouched down in the meter-square transfer airlock, he turned around to face the inner hatch and raised his weapon. He activated the inner hatch, causing it to slide open, and jumped through, into the dimly lit compartment on the other side.

The docking port hatch next to him also opened, and Corporal Chodan jumped into the compartment, as well.

Both men immediately turned and entered commands into the control panel beside the access hatches. The hatches slid closed again, and the crawlers on the opposite side of the transfer airlocks automatically disconnected and moved aside, following the emergency protocols, to make room for the next crawlers waiting to dock.

"Check that corridor, and then secure that hatch," the lieutenant ordered, moving in the opposite direction to do the same with the other hatch.

The corporal nodded and moved away, disappearing through the hatch a moment later.

Lieutenant Rezhik moved through the other hatch and quickly down the corridor, his weapon held high. He went as far as the next intersection but found the next corridor to be just as dimly lit and abandoned. Satisfied that they were alone for the time being, he returned to the docking compartment. "Nothing that way," Corporal Chodan assured the lieutenant.

Specialists Chervenkov and Bains jumped through the open inner hatches, joining the lieutenant and the corporal, turning around to close the hatches and make room for the last two crawlers.

Lieutenant Rezhik tapped the comm-controls on the side of his helmet. "Alpha Leader, Charlie Leader. We're in."

"Captain," one of the controllers called to Cameron from his station at the starboard side of the command and control compartment. "Comm-relay from the Takar system. General Telles and his teams are inside the Teyentah, and the general has made contact with Captain Navarro."

"Well, that's good news," Cameron stated.

"Comm-relay from the Darvano system," another controller reported. "Aurora Actual is calling for more boxcars. As many as we can send."

"Why?" Cameron wondered.

"There are more Corinari prisoners than we thought, sir," the controller replied. "About two thousand more."

"That might be a problem," Cameron realized. She turned to the officer on loan to her from the crew of the Glendanon. "How many cargo haulers on board?"

"Just the two, I'm afraid."

"How many people can a single class-one cargo pod hold?"

"About three hundred, maximum, but not for very long. The life support systems for those pods are only designed to support a hundred people for a few hours."

Cameron thought for a moment, then tapped her commset. "Captain Gullen, Captain Taylor."

"Go ahead, Captain," Captain Gullen replied.

"Sir, I need you to set course for the Darvano system, and be ready to jump there on my command."

"*Are you sure that's wise, Captain?*" Captain Gullen asked, concern in his voice.

"Not wise, but necessary, I'm afraid. I'll explain in a few minutes. Taylor out."

"What are you planning?" the Glendanon's officer wondered.

"We're going to have to ferry them back to us," Cameron told him.

"Couldn't we do that just as easily from here?" the officer asked. "And more safely?"

"It's going to get dicey," Cameron explained. "We're going to need real-time comms to coordinate this, not this jump comm-drone crap. Trust me."

"Trust me?" the officer repeated. "That's usually what people say right before all hell breaks loose."

Cameron sighed. "You're not kidding."

* * *

"The Aurora is jumping back and forth, carrying out attacks in both this system and the Darvano system, my lord," General Hesson explained. "However, their tactics in each system indicate a greater effort in the Darvano system, by a two-to-one margin. And now, we have reports of intruders aboard the Teyentah."

Lord Dusahn looked at the general. "The *Teyentah*?"

"I believe they hope to *steal* her from us."

"That's absurd," Lord Dusahn insisted.

"Improbable, yes, but not impossible."

"But the security on the shipyards is..."

"Centered mainly on facility access and external defense," the general explained. "Since she is unfinished,

security *inside* the ship is relatively light. Only thirty or forty men guarding key areas."

"We cannot allow that ship to be taken," Lord Dusahn stated firmly. "It will make us appear weak in the eyes of the nobles."

"More importantly, my lord, it will put a *battleship* in the hands of our enemy. I think *that* should concern you more than the *appearance* of weakness in the eyes of a bunch of pompous businessmen."

Lord Dusahn glared at his long-time advisor. "Watch your tone, old man," he warned. "You *can* be replaced."

General Hesson swallowed his pride before he spoke. "Apologies, my lord. Sometimes, in my desire to ensure the success of your empire, I lose sight of my...*boundaries*."

"See that it does not happen again, Hesson," Lord Dusahn warned. "My father may have tolerated your freespeaking manner, but you will find me far less tolerant."

"My lord," the general nodded, showing respect to his leader, despite his contempt for the younger man. "May I offer some advice, my lord?"

"Speak, but carefully," Lord Dusahn warned.

"Recall our ships from Darvano to protect the shipyards and the Teyentah."

"And give them over two thousand trained men? Are you mad?"

"They are only men, my lord. Men do not win interstellar wars. *Ships* win such wars."

Lord Dusahn did not like the general's recommendation. "I have a better idea, General. Our battleships shall continue defending the Darvano system, and they shall *prevent* the rescue of the Corinari."

"And the Teyentah?" General Hesson asked, his tone a subtle challenge to his leader's desires, despite his earlier warning.

"I shall protect the Teyentah," Lord Dusahn told him, after which he stuck his finger in the general's chest and added, "*You* just see that those Corinari do not get away, for I shall hold you personally responsible if they do."

Lord Dusahn turned around with a huff and started toward the exit. "Notify my flagship!" he barked. "I will arrive to take command momentarily!"

General Hesson stood there, silently watching as Lord Dusahn stormed out of the commander center. "That man's ego will be our undoing," he said to himself.

* * *

"Helm, turn to one seven zero, twenty degrees down relative," Nathan ordered. "Once established, jump ahead one light minute."

"One seven zero, twenty down relative," Lieutenant Dinev replied as she initiated the course change.

"One light minute, aye," Mister Bickle replied.

"Status of that battleship?" Nathan inquired.

"Shield numbers four and five are at fifty percent. Twelve and fourteen at forty percent," Lieutenant Commander Kono replied.

"Recommend targeting shield sections four and five," Jessica advised. "Two of her six reactors are directly underneath."

"Agreed," Nathan replied. "Comms, tell the Cobras to attack the battleship's number four and five shields, on an attack heading of one seven zero, twenty down relative. Attack at..." Nathan glanced at the mission clock, then at the status of their turn, doing quick calculations in his head in the split-second pause. "...plus one two point three zero."

"Aye, sir," the comms officer replied.

"One seven zero, twenty down relative," Lieutenant Dinev announced, notifying her captain that the ship was on the assigned course, as requested.

"Five-degree up angle on the bow, and jump us in to attack range," Nathan instructed. "Ready all forward tubes. Full power triplets. Four rounds, then we jump ahead another light minute."

"Message away," the comms officer reported.

"Jumping," Mister Bickle announced as the jump flash washed over the bridge.

A black and crimson Dusahn battleship appeared before them, filling most of the upper portion of the Aurora's wraparound view screen.

"Firing all forward tubes," Jessica announced.

"Adjust your angle as we pass, Lieutenant," Nathan instructed his helmsman.

Red-orange flashes of light filled the bridge as waves of plasma torpedoes leapt from the Aurora's bow, slamming into the enemy battleship's number four and five shields, causing them to glow in similar hues with each impact. By the time the third round of plasma torpedoes left the Aurora's launch tubes, incoming fire had already begun shaking the ship violently.

"Forward shields are down to thirty percent!" the weapons officer warned.

Nathan counted the waves of plasma torpedoes as they left the tubes, and as the fourth wave left, he ordered the next jump.

Lieutenant Rezhik ran down the corridor, leading his men into enemy fire from the opposite end. Blue bolts of energy slammed into his body armor as he charged forth, firing his weapon at each source of the incoming fire as it appeared. In true Ghatazhak style; one shot, one kill.

By the time he and his men reached the end of the corridor, there were twelve dead Dusahn soldiers.

The lieutenant stood at the intersection, back against the wall, using the tactical sensor system and display on his visor to search the surrounding areas for targets.

"If these are Zen-Anor, we've got nothing to worry about," Corporal Chodan said as he came to stand next to the lieutenant.

"These are *not* Zen-Anor," the lieutenant stated. "I doubt they are even Dusahn."

"Conscripts?" the corporal wondered.

"Most likely." Three groups of red icons appeared on his visor display. "Take Bains and Malin, and intercept the bandits coming around the starboard side," he instructed. "I'll take Chervenkov and Coffield to port."

"What about the guys coming up the center?" the corporal wondered.

"They will likely go to either side, or possibly split up and go in both directions. That will draw them to us. If you finish off your first targets before the center group reaches you, move forward and circle in behind them."

"Got it," the corporal replied.

The lieutenant glanced at the mission time display on his visor. "And move quickly, Corporal. We are already one minute behind schedule."

"Don't blame us," the corporal said as he moved toward starboard, signaling Specialists Bains and Malin to follow him. "It's the enemy who's refusing to die quickly."

The Seiiki came out of her jump dangerously close to one of the three Dusahn gunships loitering over Corinair and bombarding the Ghatazhak shield from orbit. As soon as she appeared, she opened fire, sending balls of plasma energy slamming into the gunship's shields, causing them to flash with each impact.

Josh rocked in his seat as the Seiiki shook violently from the incoming fire, lighting up their shields.

"We can't take more than a few seconds of this," Loki warned. "Not from this range."

"No shit!" Josh agreed in earnest. He snap-rolled the ship to the right, rolling into an inverted position relative to the target as they started their pass over it, thus allowing his gunners better lines of fire. "Damn!" he exclaimed as a direct blast nearly knocked him out of his seat. "We need better restraints in this thing!"

"Take that, you son of a bitch!" Marcus exclaimed as he tracked the gunship passing over them with his doublebarreled plasma cannon. Red-orange bolts of plasma leapt from his barrels, slamming into the enemy gunship's shields but failing to penetrate them. The gunship slid away from him as he rotated his turret as far aft as possible. The gunship disappeared behind them, and a moment later, the stars changed, and the violent shaking ceased. "Goddamn it, kid! Where'd you learn to shoot? I thought you were gonna get that bastard's shields down for us!"

"*I'm trying, old man!*" Josh defended as the ship began coming about for another attack run.

"Well, try harder!"

General Telles continued down the corridor, maintaining a staggered gait and occasionally moving from one side to the other. His assault rifle was held high and tight against his shoulder, and he swept it from side to side, always ready to fire at a moment's notice.

As he rounded the corner, two men in basic battle gear appeared ten meters away. The men raised their weapons to fire, but the general was much quicker, firing four times in rapid succession, striking them both in the abdomen and lower neck. The men fell, groaning in pain and scrambling to bring their weapons up from the floor to defend themselves, but the general shot them both in the face as he continued past them.

Suvan Navarro followed the general, watching in amazement as the man dispatched enemy combatants one after the other with equal precision. He marveled at the general's ability to remain completely calm and without emotion, even when engaged in hand-to-hand combat. In fact, as easily as the general was progressing toward their objective, Suvan wondered why they had sent five others along with him.

Without warning, shots rang out from behind. Energy bolts streaked past Suvan's head with a sizzling sound, slamming into the bulkheads beyond. He immediately ducked, running to one side of the corridor as the Ghatazhak behind him returned fire.

He felt someone grab his shoulder and yank him forward, dragging him, stumbling, around the next corner.

General Telles tossed Captain Navarro about like a child, the assistive bodysuit under his armor providing him with the additional strength needed. With the captain safely out of immediate danger, the general peeked around the corner, quickly withdrawing as incoming fire flew past him. He made the calculations in his head and then leaned back around the corner, firing three shots. In the distance, beyond his men's position, the general's shots struck a large pipe running overhead. The pipe exploded, sending pressurized gas spraying all over the enemy's position.

Corporal Vasya immediately recognized the gas as flammable and tossed an incendiary grenade toward the enemy's position, then took cover. "Fire in the hole!" he warned as he covered his head and curled up in a ball on the floor.

The grenade detonated, igniting the gas. The explosion rocked the entire deck, sending a ball of fire down the corridor in both directions, like a wave from hell.

Corporal Vasya felt the heat as the flames washed over him and his men. A split second later, the flames subsided, and the corporal rose to his feet and opened fire, spraying the corridor with energy weapons fire.

Ten seconds later, the corporal ceased fire, his eyes fixed on the swirling smoke between himself and the enemy position, waiting for any signs of movement. But none came. "Clear!" he finally reported.

"Keep moving!" the general ordered as he continued forward. "Captain," he called as he walked past Suvan. "The bridge awaits us."

Suvan just shook his head as he climbed to his feet, following the determined Ghatazhak general.

"Jump complete," Mister Bickle reported as the jump flash cleared from the Aurora's bridge. "Darvano system."

"Three gunships loitering over the extrication point," Lieutenant Commander Kono reported. "Two battleships now protecting the first battleship, which is still disabled. One of the battleships is turning toward us, Captain." "The gunships are two light minutes out," Jessica reported. "I'm locking jump missiles on them now."

"New course," Nathan announced. "Turn to three five six, up sixty relative. New jump, one light hour,"

"Three five six, up sixty," the lieutenant acknowledged.

"Confirming one light hour, sir?" Mister Bickle asked.

"Confirmed," Nathan replied. "One light hour."

"Aye, sir."

"Missiles away," Jessica announced.

"Sir, that will put us directly above the group of battleships," Mister Bickle realized.

"That's the plan, Ensign," Nathan replied. "Jess, we're going to thread the needle."

Jessica smiled. "I'm ready when you are, Skipper."

"Three five six, sixty-degree up angle relative," Lieutenant Dinev reported after completing her turn.

"Jump us ahead, one light hour," Nathan ordered.

"Jumping," Ensign Bickle replied.

"Calculating target positions based on last known course and speed," Jessica announced.

"Hold your course," Nathan instructed. "Ninety-degree down angle, relative to the ecliptic. Steer a course directly between the calculated position of those battleships, one minute from now. Make sure we'll pass just astern of the ship they're protecting."

"Aye, sir," the lieutenant confirmed.

"Roll, as needed, to bring our broadsides to bear on the targets as we pass between them," he added.

"Aye, sir. Pitching down and adjusting course for optimal attack angle."

"One minute to jump," Mister Bickle reported.

The stars outside shifted slightly as the Seiiki came out of its jump less than two kilometers above the three Dusahn gunships currently bombarding the Ghatazhak shield from above.

"...eady to start extrication!" Sergeant Eliason's voice called over comms as they came out of the jump. "But you have to get those gunships off us first, or we'll never get out alive!"

Josh immediately opened fire, sending a stream of plasma bolts toward the distant group of gunships. Flashes of light appeared in the area of the distant gunships, followed by multiple explosions. "What the..." Josh said in shock. "I got them?"

"You didn't get them," Loki corrected. "But somebody did."

"Nice shootin', boys!" Sergeant Eliason congratulated. "Now, just keep them away for ten more minutes, and we're home free!"

"Who the hell took them out?" Josh wondered.

"It had to be the Aurora," Loki decided, checking his sensor readings. "There were jump flashes just before the gunships blew up. It must have been jump missiles."

"Sweet!"

"Seiiki to all Eagles and Reapers," Loki called over comms. "Extraction is about to begin. Keep those ground forces at bay until *our* ground forces are clear."

"Eagle Leader, understood."

"Reaper Leader, we're on it."

"Ready to jump," Mister Bickle reported.

"Ready on all weapons?" Nathan asked.

"Ready," Jessica replied.

"Take us in, Ensign," Nathan ordered.

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

Nathan watched as the view screen lit up with the bluewhite jump flash. When it cleared a second later, there were three Dusahn battleships, their black hulls trimmed with crimson highlights, filling the screen. The already damaged battleship was directly ahead of them, slowly sliding out of the Aurora's path of flight, moving from the top of the view screen toward the bottom. The other two battleships were slightly closer, about to slide past them on either side of the screen. The view itself was alarming, especially since all three battleships were undoubtedly turning their guns toward the Aurora at that very moment.

The view screen suddenly lit up. Red-orange plasma torpedoes streaked from under the Aurora's bow, and dotted lines of red leapt from her gun turrets, lashing out at all three approaching battleships. A few seconds later, the intensity tripled as the battleships returned fire, lighting up the Aurora's shields as they struck, violently shaking her crew.

"Forward shields are already down to forty percent and dropping," the systems office warned.

"Concentrate torpedoes on the far target, directly ahead," Nathan ordered. "Mister Bickle, be ready to jump us ten light seconds ahead, once we have a clear jump line."

The Aurora dove down between the two Dusahn battleships, all her gun turrets blazing. Plasma cannons sent bolts of energy slamming into the passing warship's shields, and rail guns sent unending streams of exploding projectiles the size of a small car, each of them exploding on impact. The enemy's shields flashed as they tried to absorb the energy. The flashing was so rapid that it appeared constant, with only minor fluctuations in intensity. As the Aurora moved between the two much larger enemy vessels, she added her broadside cannons to the fray. Unfortunately, the massive Dusahn warships' shields, although diminishing in strength with the continued onslaught, held.

The shields of the damaged battleship, directly ahead of the Aurora, did not.

The view screen suddenly filled with yellow and orange explosions as the Aurora's plasma torpedoes finally found their way through the enemy battleship's hull, setting off secondary explosions that tore through the massive ship within seconds.

"Both port and starboard shields are about to fail!" the Aurora's systems officer warned.

"Clear jump line in ten seconds," Mister Bickle reported.

"Hold your course, and continue firing," Nathan ordered.

"Captain!" the systems officer urged, becoming concerned.

"Stand by to jump, on my command," Nathan ordered as the ship continued to shake under the bombardment.

"Five seconds!"

"Starboard midship shield is failing!"

The ship shook even more violently.

"Clear ju..."

"Jump!" Nathan ordered, not waiting for the navigator to finish his announcement.

The bridge filled with blue-white light, once again, and the violent shaking ceased a split second later.

"Hard to starboard, and be ready for another ten-second jump!" Nathan ordered. "Lock a spread of missiles on both targets and launch when ready! Sensors, damage assessments on all three targets!" The ship rolled to starboard and started a rapid turn while all four of those addressed verbally confirmed their orders as they carried them out.

"Missiles away!" Jessica announced.

Nathan waited ten seconds, knowing it would take time for the light of the battle, from which they had just jumped away, to catch up to them at their current location.

"Primary target is destroyed," Lieutenant Commander Kono finally reported. "Shields on the other two battleships were weakened but no damage. Targets have broken formation and are steering toward the far side of the..." The lieutenant commander paused a moment as new sensor readings came in. "Correction! One of the ships has jumped away. Based on course at jump, she's headed back to the Takar system."

"And the other battleship?" Nathan asked.

"She's headed for the far side of Corinair, sir," the lieutenant commander replied.

"They're going to take over the bombardment of the Ghatazhak shield on the surface," Jessica realized.

"How long until they reach firing position?" Nathan inquired.

"They'll have to make at least two jumps to get around the planet, sir," the lieutenant commander replied. "Five minutes, max."

"Comms, warn the Ghatazhak. They've got four and a half minutes to get out of there before all hell breaks loose," Nathan ordered.

"Captain, they can't move two thousand some-odd people in four minutes," Jessica insisted.

"Not people," Nathan reminded her. "Corinari. Big difference."

"If we can slow those battleships down..."

"We're due to cover the Teyentah's escape in just over a minute," Nathan reminded her sternly. "We'll come back when the Teyentah is safely away."

"Aye, sir," Jessica replied, biting her tongue.

"Change course for Takar, and prepare to jump us in close to the shipyard on the departure side," Nathan instructed.

"Jump complete," the Glendanon's helmsman announced.

"Any contacts?" Captain Gullen asked his first officer.

"I'm picking up three battleships on the near side of Corinair," Mister Lontu reported. "Also, multiple gunships, octo-fighters, Eagles, Reapers, and the Seiiki."

"The Aurora destroyed one battleship and the last three gunships. Another battleship left, possibly returning to Takara, and the last battleship is moving to take over the bombardment of the Ghatazhak shield on the surface," Cameron explained over comms. "We're ten light minutes out, so you're seeing old images."

"I'm aware of relativity, Captain," Captain Gullen reminded her.

"The Aurora advises that we have four minutes to complete the extraction before the battleship reaches firing position and resumes the bombardment. That shield won't last long under that kind of firepower."

"Understood," Captain Gullen replied. "I'd appreciate a better tactical picture up here, Captain."

"We're launching recon drones to keep our tactical tracks current," Cameron told him. "We'll uplink our tactical display to your sensor display."

"Much appreciated," Captain Gulled replied. "Mister Aletti, tell our boxcars to make it quick."

"Yes, sir," the comms officer replied.

"And make sure our weapons and shields are powered up and ready at all times."

"You got it, Captain," Mister Lontu promised.

"Last time we were here, we nearly got our asses handed to us," the captain said. "I'm not planning on going through *that* again."

"Jump complete," Mister Bickle reported. "We're back in the Takar system."

"Battleship, dead ahead. Ten kilometers, parallel course, twenty degrees off our port bow," Lieutenant Commander Kono reported.

"Missiles," Nathan ordered.

"Already locking on," Jessica replied.

"Target is jumping," the lieutenant commander warned.

"He was expecting us to follow him," Nathan realized. "New location?"

"Unknown," Lieutenant Commander Kono replied. "He must have jumped more than a few seconds out."

"Scan the shipyard," Nathan instructed. "What's the status of the Teyentah?"

"Checking now."

"Octos and gunships attacking from starboard," Jessica warned. "Point-defenses are engaging."

"Comms, direct the Gunyoki after those octos, and get the Cobras after the gunships."

"Aye, sir."

"Captain, the Teyentah still isn't showing any signs of powering up," Lieutenant Commander Kono reported. "But every other ship in the shipyard *does*. They're all spinning up for departure."

"Type and number?" Nathan inquired.

"Two older, Jung-style battleships, a cruiser, and four old frigates."

"Helm, come to zero five zero, twenty down, and jump ahead five light minutes," Nathan instructed. "Jess, take a snapshot of all targets before we jump, and be ready to lock jump missiles on all of them based on last known course and speed. It's time we shake this system up a bit and make them nervous."

"Captain!" Lieutenant Commander Kono interrupted. "I am picking up weapons fire from *within* the Teyentah. Specifically, near engineering and near the bridge."

"Then, they're almost ready," Nathan realized.

He glanced at the time display. In three minutes, the Dusahn would resume bombardment of the Ghatazhak position on Corinair, and their makeshift shield would not protect them for more than a minute or two.

Lieutenant Haddix rolled his Reaper into a tight, right turn, in preparation to come back around for another strafing run.

"New column approaching from the east," Ensign Weston reported from the copilot's seat, gazing out the starboard window. "Ghatazhak, Reaper Six!" he called over comms. "New column coming in from the east. Five troop carriers and four technicals. Suggest you cover your east side *before* you drop your shields again."

"Understood," Sergeant Eliason replied.

The ensign studied his tactical display before continuing. "Eagle Five, convoy to your south. Five troop carriers and four technicals, heading west on a side road, one minute from the shield barrier. Engage and destroy."

"*Eagles Five and Six will be there in thirty seconds,*" the pilot of Super Eagle Five replied.

The convoy of Zen-Anor troops sped down the side streets of Aitkenna, breaking out into the open as they reached the edge of the city, headed for the ex-Corinari base a few kilometers ahead of them. As their last few vehicles passed out into the open, two jump flashes appeared low in the sky behind them, revealing a pair of Super Eagles bearing down on them.

The gun turrets on the technical vehicles spun around as they barreled down the road, opening fire on the diving jump fighters. The forward shields around the jump fighters flashed as the Dusahn weapons fire slammed into them, but the shields held firm.

The diving fighters opened up, spraying the roadway with a barrage of red-orange bolts of plasma. Dirt, pieces of the roadway, and dust kicked up in all directions as the bolts of plasma tore up the roadway and surrounding landscape. The bolts of energy walked up the line of vehicles, blowing them apart one by one. Three of the vehicles swerved, leaving the roadway and finding room to maneuver, but the rest of the vehicles were destroyed, erupting in six separate explosions.

The burning vehicles rolled to a stop, and two dozen surviving Zen-Anor troops jumped out, running for cover and firing their assault rifles at the Super Eagles as they streaked low overhead, and then jumped away.

Because she was not yet finished, the bridge of the Teyentah was lightly staffed, with mostly specialists and technicians whose jobs were to test the systems that had recently been installed. Only two of the men on the bridge were armed, and neither had any real combat training, having been trained only to basic levels. By now, everyone aboard the nearly completed battleship was well aware of the intruders who were making their way through the ship, causing mayhem and death everywhere they went.

In a vain effort to defend the bridge, the two armed guards lined up the technicians as a protective barrier between them and the door, knowing full well that whoever was attempting to seize control of the ship, would likely require their expertise to do so. What they hadn't counted on was the skill and determination of the Ghatazhak.

The hatch blew open with an earsplitting blast, and a pair of grenades came flying over their heads, landing behind everyone. The two guards looked at each other, then ran toward the sides of the bridge as the grenades detonated, filling the Teyentah's bridge with blinding white light and a deafening sound meant to incapacitate. The guards put their hands over their ears, falling to their knees in pain. Seconds later, energy weapons fire rang out, and both men took bolts of plasma to the head, killing them instantly.

General Telles and his men stormed into the bridge, their weapons trained on the technicians who were also on their knees, the discomfort caused by the stun grenades just beginning to subside.

The technicians looked toward the main entrance as a man in a standard jumpsuit, worn by crawler operators, entered.

"I am Captain Suvan Navarro, commander of the Avendahl, exiled leader of the illegally de-registered House Navarro. I claim this vessel on behalf of all free Takarans. Assist in our escape, and your lives will be spared. Refuse and they will end in like fashion," he said, gesturing toward the two dead guards. The bridge of Lord Dusahn's flagship, the Pon-Azzari, was massive, with separate levels. The majority of the ship was highly automated, but every level of that automation was controlled by the sixty-plus technicians stationed here.

The doors at the command-level entrance to the bridge opened, and Lord Dusahn strode out of the elevator. The two guards on the sides snapped to attention, their weapons held directly in front of them, as if for inspection. No mention was made of the ruler's arrival, and only the command officers were expected to turn and face their lord while standing at attention.

Lord Dusahn strode confidently across the bridge leading from the elevator, across the open, lower two levels, and onto the command platform in the center of the bridge. Without a word, he moved to take his seat, triggering a multitude of tactical and systems displays, which floated in the air around him. "Readiness?" he queried.

"All stations are manned and ready, and the ship is at full power and ready for departure," Lord Dusahn's executive officer reported.

"Excellent. Take us out, Commander. Raise shields and power all weapons."

"Of course, my lord," the commander replied. "But should we not wait until we have cleared our moorings before we raise shields, to avoid damaging the structure?"

Lord Dusahn cast a sidelong glance at the commander. "There is a warship jumping around, firing weapons and launching jump missiles, Commander. I care not about how our shields might damage this shipyard."

"Of course, my lord." The commander turned to face forward. "Docking officer, cast off all moorings. Helmsman, thrust forward at twenty percent. Weapons officer, raise all shields, and charge all weapons. Sensor officer, locate all potential targets and prepare to engage." The commander stood fast as he listened to the acknowledgments from all four officers. Once satisfied that his orders were being carried out, he turned back to his leader. "My lord, if I may inquire as to our strategy?"

"Strategy?" Lord Dusahn stated. "Our *strategy* is to teach young Captain Scott a very painful lesson, and to put an end to this rebellion, once and for all."

* * *

Lieutenant Rezhik charged into the Teyentah's engineering department, blasting away as he ran. Behind him were five other Ghatazhak soldiers, also firing. The men split to the left and right as the Teyentah's engineering teams scrambled to defend themselves. Within seconds, weapons fire streaked in all directions, ricocheting off the bulkheads and equipment.

As with most of the combatants they had met thus far, the training of those in engineering was subpar. In seconds, the Ghatazhak had killed nearly everyone, and those who were left were tossing their weapons out into the middle of the compartment, throwing their hands up, and begging for their lives.

"Please, do not kill us," one of the engineers begged the lieutenant as he came out from his cover, his weapon trained on the man. In seconds, the other five Ghatazhak were on them, dropping them to their knees and searching them for weapons, before applying bindings to their hands and feet.

"But you will need us to operate the ship," the engineer reminded them.

Lieutenant Rezhik moved to the main engineering control console and began entering commands. "Seeing as how I

hold high level degrees in both physics and engineering, and my men hold degrees in related topics such as power generation, propulsion systems, computer and control systems, and advanced electronics, need for your assistance seems doubtful."

"But...but... These systems are quite complex. They are of the latest technology. You couldn't possibly expect to..."

Several indicators on the massive engineering displays on the wall in front of the lieutenant began to light up, and a low hum began to rise in pitch and intensity as the Teyentah's zero-point energy reactor plants began to come online.

The engineer watched in disbelief as indicator after indicator came to life.

The lieutenant tapped the comm-controls on the side of his helmet. "Alpha Leader, Charlie Leader. Reactors are coming online now. We should have maneuvering and main propulsion momentarily, and jump capability shortly after."

"Charlie Leader, Alpha Leader. Good work, Lieutenant," General Telles replied.

Lieutenant Rezhik turned back to the engineer kneeling before him, with his hands on his head. "You were saying?"

The cargo airlock door opened, and the first few hundred Corinari stepped through into the massive forward hangar deck of the Glendanon. Those strong enough helped those who were weakened by starvation and physical abuse while in captivity. Regardless of their haggard condition, they moved quickly and in disciplined fashion, knowing the lives of their fellow Corinari, as well as the Ghatazhak who had risked their own lives to rescue them, depended on their rapid debarkation. Vol Kaguchi checked his flight displays as he rolled his ship back and forth to evade the weapons fire coming from behind him.

"*I'll be there in thirty seconds, Vol*," Tariq called.

"Take your time," Vol replied confidently as the truss work of the spaceport superstructures raced past him on all sides. "This guy's playing right into my hands."

"You want to clue me in?" his weapons officer asked.

"Just hold on," Vol warned. He pulled his flight control stick back, causing his ship to rotate around the engine nacelle axis, bringing his nose over to face the Dusahn octofighter that was pursuing him. A split second later, he killed his main thrust, flipped his engine nacelles over to face aft, as well, and fired the plasma cannons on the front of the nacelles.

The red bolts of plasma energy slammed into the octofighter's shields, overwhelming them and causing them to collapse. With the enemy's shields down, the next round tore into the octo-fighter's hull, causing it to explode.

His ship rocked as defensive fire from the shipyard slammed into his shields, causing them to flash repeatedly. After a quick glance at his flight displays to ensure a clear jump line, he flipped his ship back over to face in his direction of flight and pressed the jump button to escape the bombardment.

"Nice," his weapons officer congratulated from the back of the Gunyoki fighter's cockpit.

"If that guy had ever watched a race, that would not have worked that easily," Vol admitted.

"Power, propulsion, and maneuvering are online. We'll be able to jump by the time we clear port," Lieutenant Rezhik reported over the general's helmet comms. "Understood," the general replied. "It is time," he told Captain Navarro.

"I'm almost done entering the override codes," Suvan replied. "It is a complex system of entering algorithms, using various parameters, and then using the results of those algorithms to generate an override code that the system will accept. If done incorrectly, the entire system will shut down, and our mission will be over sooner than expected."

"By all means, Captain, take all the time you need."

An eyebrow went up on Captain Navarro's face. "Ghatazhak humor," he said as he punched in the final numbers. "I have missed it."

Suvan entered the last few numbers and pressed the send key. After several seconds, the control panel lit up. "We have control," he announced. "Take us out, gentlemen."

The technicians looked at one another, then back at Captain Navarro. "Uh...how?"

"What?"

"We're technicians, not pilots," the technician told him.

"None of you know how to operate this ship?" General Telles asked them.

They all shook their heads.

General Telles moved to the main control station at the center of the bridge. "How hard can it be?"

"I trust you are familiar with Takaran navigation systems?" Suvan asked, moving to the helm station next to the general.

"I believe I can figure it out quickly enough," the general assured him, taking a seat in the navigator's chair.

"I can pilot it, but I will need your assistance operating the jump drive," Suvan explained. "Vasya, find the weapons station and see what you can do," the general ordered.

"Yes, sir," the corporal replied. "Where's that?"

"Over there," one of the technicians said, pointing to the left.

"Do you know anything about it?" the corporal asked as he headed over to the weapons station.

"Yes," he replied. "It's my job to test it."

"Then, get your ass over here," the corporal ordered.

"We won't be able to detach and retract all the various boarding ramps," Suvan warned. "That is done by the shipyard."

"We've got that covered," the general promised, tapping the comm-controls on the side of his helmet. "Gunyoki Flight, Alpha Leader. We are about to get under way."

"Copy that, Alpha Leader," Vol Kaguchi replied. "Give me thirty seconds."

"You take the starboard side, I'll take port," Vol instructed as he steered his Gunyoki fighter into the assembly bay around the Teyentah and maneuvered over to the battleship's port side.

"Locking missiles on all gantries and boarding ramps," Isa announced. "Are you sure about this?"

"Part of the plan, my friend," Vol assured him.

Isa took a deep breath and pressed the firing button.

Two dozen stub missiles leapt from the missile pods on either side of the Rakuen fighter, streaking ahead and slamming into every structure that was connecting the Teyentah to the shipyard surrounding it. Gantries, boarding tunnels, and the like blew apart, sending debris in all directions. A moment later, the massive Takaran battleship, now under the control of Suvan Navarro and the Ghatazhak, fired its docking thrusters and began to move slowly forward.

"Dusahn battleship is leaving port bay one," Lieutenant Commander Kono reported from the Aurora's sensor station.

"Steer us into that battleship and prepare to jump us in," Nathan ordered.

"We can't stand toe-to-toe with that thing," Jessica warned. "It's bigger and better armed than any other battleship we've seen so far."

"Turning into the target," Lieutenant Dinev acknowledged.

"We just have to keep it busy and away from the Teyentah until she can get under way," Nathan reminded her.

"On intercept course," Lieutenant Dinev reported.

"Jump us in to standard attack range," Nathan ordered.

"Jumping," Mister Bickle replied.

The jump flash washed over the Aurora's bridge, and the main view screen filled with the image of the Dusahn's battleship pulling out of the bay at the far end of the orbital shipyard.

"Fire all weapons," Nathan ordered.

"Firing!"

"Jump flash!" Lieutenant Commander Kono announced. "Another battleship. I believe it's the one from the Darvano system."

"Where the hell have they been?" Jessica wondered as she continued to fire plasma torpedoes at the primary target.

"Missile launch from the second battleship," the lieutenant commander warned. "They're jump missiles!"

"Escape jump!" Nathan ordered.

"We're moving," Suvan announced from the Teyentah's helm. "How long until the jump drive is ready?"

"Three minutes, minimum," General Telles replied.

"This is the tactical display, right?" Corporal Vasya asked the technician. "Uh, General? There's a really big battleship pulling out of the number one bay to port. They're going to have a really easy shot at us."

"Then perhaps you should figure out how to fire first, Corporal," the general suggested.

"Working on it, sir," Corporal Vasya promised.

"Everything is automated," the technician assured the corporal. "All you have to do is tap the icon you want to attack, and the system will choose the right weapons based on target type, distance, rate of increase or decrease in range, etcetera."

"Excellent," the corporal replied, pressing the icon representing the battleship. Nothing happened, so he pressed it again. "Nothing's happening."

"First, you have to arm the tactical grid, then the weapons matrix, then..." The technician pushed the corporal aside. "Let me do it," he insisted, pressing buttons in rapid succession.

Corporal Vasya laughed. "Check this guy out," he said to his comrades. "Show us what you've got, tech-boy."

The technician quickly finished setting up the weapons system for automatic weapons assignments, then began pressing icons on the screen. "The system is functioning," he said as he watched the display. "It's selecting multiple weapons systems for multiple targets... Jesus, it's firing!"

"Well that's what it's supposed to do, right?" the corporal said.

"It's firing on the battleship," the technician reported in disbelief. "Oh, my God, I think I just killed two octo-fighters."

Corporal Vasya laughed, slapping the technician on the back. "Feels good, doesn't it!"

"Perhaps you two can figure out how to raise our shields, when you're done congratulating one another," Captain Navarro suggested as he steered the ship out of the shipyard.

"My lord, we are taking incoming fire from *two* warships."

"Two?" Lord Dusahn was puzzled. "Which two?"

"The Aurora and the Teyentah," the commander replied.

"The *Teyentah*. How is this..." His voice trailed off as he examined the tactical plot hanging in the air before him. "Is her jump drive operational?"

"It is, my lord, but it will be several minutes before it has enough power to jump even a few light days."

"Turn us toward the Teyentah," Lord Dusahn ordered. "Block her jump line."

"Her shields are not yet raised," the commander pointed out. "We could easily disable her jump drive *and* her main propulsion."

"And risk damaging her further? Unacceptable! You must think of the bigger picture, Commander!"

"Of course, my lord. My apologies." The commander turned and barked orders at his crew to carry out their leader's instructions, then turned back to Lord Dusahn. "And what of the Aurora?"

"Destroy her," Lord Dusahn ordered. "Without mercy."

"Escape jump complete," Mister Bickle reported.

Nathan glanced at the tactical display as it refreshed, noting that they had jumped only a few kilometers, just enough to escape the incoming jump missiles.

"The Teyentah is moving!" Lieutenant Commander Kono reported with excitement. "And she's firing on that battleship!"

"Really." Nathan smiled. "I guess Captain Navarro is back in command." Nathan glanced at the tactical display on the mini-view screen at the center of the helm. His face crinkled, and his eyes squinted, as he noticed the icon representing the battleship changing course. "Where is he going?"

"I think he's turning *toward* the Teyentah, Captain," the lieutenant commander replied.

"They're going to try and block her jump line," Nathan realized, leaning forward in his command chair. "Helm, turn to two eight five and come eighteen degrees up relative. I want us between the Teyentah and that battleship. We have to keep that ship out of their jump line."

"Two eight five, eighteen up relative, aye," the lieutenant replied.

"We can't run block for them for long," the systems officer warned. "Our shields won't hold."

"We'll change the ship's attitude relative to the target, keeping our strongest shields toward them at all times," Nathan explained. "Comms, tell the Teyentah what we're up to, and tell them to steer away from that battleship and jump as soon as they can. Time is running out."

"Aye, sir."

Nathan rotated his chair around to face Jessica at the tactical station behind him. "I need you to pound that thing with everything we've got. Probe her shields. Find a weak spot. Every shield's got one."

"You got it," Jessica replied.

All around them, the ground and air battle raged. The shield protecting them flashed constantly, and in numerous locations, as Dusahn ground and air forces attempted to breach the shield with energy weapons while Alliance Super Eagles and Reapers tried to stop them. Without the shield, they would not have lasted this long.

"Is this the last group?" Sergeant Eliason inquired at the top of his lungs as the stream of Corinari prisoners, from the underground holding facilities to the waiting boxcar, continued.

"Yes, sir!" Corporal Mitchell replied. "How much time do we have?"

"Don't ask!" the sergeant replied.

"Delta Blue Leader! Delta Red Leader! Status!"

"We're loading the last group now, sir!" the sergeant replied.

"Move your ass, Sergeant! That battleship will be in firing position in twenty seconds!"

"Yes, sir!" the sergeant replied. "Fuck!" he exclaimed in frustration, looking around at the shield perimeter. He turned back toward the stream of men moving toward the waiting boxcar. "CORINARI! DOUBLE-TIME! MOVE, MOVE, MOVE!"

Suvan Navarro watched the main view screen as he started a slow turn to starboard. "We're turning," he declared, almost sounding surprised.

"Any progress on those shields, Corporal?" General Telles inquired as he attempted to spin up the jump drive.

"We're working on it," Corporal Vasya replied, his voice tense.

"Not all of the arrays are operational yet," one of the technicians explained, moving over to help. "We might be

able to reroute some of the matrices in order to generate at least *some* shielding, but they'll only be half as effective, at best."

"Better than nothing, right?" the corporal insisted.

"Make it happen yesterday, Vasya," the general urged.

"That ship is trying to block us off," the technician on the sensor console exclaimed.

"I am aware of that," Captain Navarro replied as he continued the Teyentah's slow turn to starboard. "This ship is sluggish to turn. I believe her maneuvering system is automatically limited while in close proximity to the shipyards."

"Can we *override* those limitations?" the general wondered.

"Probably, but it would take time," Suvan replied. "Time that we do not have, I'm afraid."

"Shields are coming up," Corporal Vasya declared triumphantly. "Not *great* ones, but they are shields."

"How much coverage?" Captain Navarro asked.

"Port side only," the corporal admitted, "and most of the ones around the bow, but only the forward sections are complete. The back half is still full of holes."

"Keep working on it," Suvan ordered.

"You bet."

"That ship is gaining on us," the technician at the sensor station warned. "They're going to be in front of us in no time!"

"The Karuzari have managed to evacuate nearly threequarters of the Corinari prisoners," General Hesson's aide reported.

The general studied the tactical maps for both systems, taking special note of the location of their battleship in the

Darvano system. "How long until they complete the evacuation?"

"Zen-Anor on the ground believe they are loading their last transport now. After that, all that will be left are the Karuzari forces who conducted the operation. Perhaps a minute, at the most."

"Order our battleship to strike the perimeter around the shield," the general instructed. "Maximum force."

"There will be collateral damage, General," his aide reminded him.

"The site is *outside* Aitkenna, is it not?"

"It is, but there are still many residences, businesses, industrial complexes, and even a hospital, all within the blast range of such an attack."

"It cannot be helped. If we cannot stop the Karuzari from freeing the Corinari, we can at least make the *cost* a distasteful one."

"Tubes coming to bear on target," Lieutenant Dinev reported.

"Firing all tubes!" Jessica announced. "Full power triplets!"

"Don't stop," Nathan reminded her.

"Forward cannons are locking on, as well," she added as the bridge lit up with flashes of red-orange light from the departing torpedoes.

"Target is holding course," Lieutenant Commander Kono reported. "If she doesn't turn, she'll hit us in ninety seconds."

"She'll turn," Nathan said, more to himself than to his crew.

"Forward cannons are firing!"

"Target is locking weapons on us," the lieutenant commander warned. "They're firing!"

A second later, the Aurora rocked again as rail gun slugs and plasma bolts lit up their already weakened shields.

"Has the Teyentah raised her shields yet?" Nathan inquired.

"Yes, but not all of them. Some on the port side, mostly forward, but not complete coverage anywhere," the sensor officer reported. "But the battleship hasn't targeted the Teyentah, yet."

"They will," Nathan said. "Helm, maintain position. Keep us between the Teyentah and that battleship."

"More jump missiles!" Lieutenant Commander Kono announced.

"Point-defenses are on them," Jessica assured her captain.

"Six of them!" the lieutenant commander added. "Probably from the second battleship!"

"Where are they?" Jessica wondered as the ship rocked with weapons impacts.

"Just maintain position," Nathan insisted.

As the last few hundred Corinari made their way up the massive ramp into the boxcar's cargo pod, the cacophony of the battle around the shield perimeter suddenly ceased.

"What the hell?" Corporal Mitchell commented, looking around. "Why'd it stop?" he wondered, turning to Sergeant Eliason.

The sergeant looked around, as well, equally confused. "Keep them moving!" he barked, noticing that the Corinari had slowed their progression, also curious as to the sudden end of the assault against their position. "Delta Red Leader, Reaper Three!" the Reaper pilot called over the general's comm-channel. "Dusahn forces are falling back, and fast!"

"That can't be good," Mitchell stated.

"No, it can't," the sergeant agreed, tapping the commcontrols on his helmet. "Delta Red Leader, Delta Blue Leader! Suggest we start positioning our forces for a fast bug out!"

"Blue, Red," the master sergeant responded. "Agreed. Delta Leader to all Ghatazhak forces. Fall back to evac positions!"

"The Aurora is not moving," the commander informed Lord Dusahn.

"How long until her shields are depleted?" Lord Dusahn asked.

"Two minutes, maximum," the commander replied. "But we will collide with them in half that time."

"They will move," Lord Dusahn insisted.

"And if they do not?"

Lord Dusahn glared at the commander. "They will move."

"Reaper Two, Eagle Leader. Are you seeing this?"

"Eagle Leader, Two. Yes! They're retreating! All of them!"

"*They're running like scared rabbits!*" another pilot laughed.

"What is going on?" Josh wondered.

"I don't know, but that battleship is now in firing range." Loki called up the Ghatazhak comm-channel. "Ghatazhak, Seiiki! The battleship has reached firing range!"

"Why the fuck aren't they firing, then?" Josh wondered.

Loki studied the sensor readings on the Seiiki's center console. "I think they're waiting for their forces to get clear."

"What are they planning on hitting them with, nukes?" Loki looked at Josh.

"Dude, I was kidding."

"Ghatazhak, Seiiki! Recommend immediate evac! Repeat! Recommend immediate evacuation of everyone! They're going to hit your position...*hard*!"

"Captain," Jessica called. "I can't defend against *two* battleships. Sooner or later, they're going to launch everything they've got and overwhelm our defenses."

"Not while we're this close to their shipyards," Nathan insisted. "They can't risk it."

"Thirty seconds to impact," Lieutenant Commander Kono announced.

"Tell *them* that!" Jessica barked.

"Hold position," Nathan ordered, determined not to flinch first.

"That ship is six times our size and ten times our mass," Jessica warned.

"Twenty seconds."

Nathan felt his anger growing and his frustration rising.

"They'll plow right through us and barely scuff their paint."

Countless scenarios began to run through his mind. Moving; not moving; waiting until a second before impact before jumping, but leaving one of his antimatter cores in the path of the Dusahn warship... None of them offered an acceptable result. The Aurora would survive, but the Teyentah would be lost.

"Fifteen seconds, Captain," Lieutenant Commander Kono warned, her tension rising.

Then he began thinking about what would happen if the Aurora was lost or, at least, severely damaged.

"More jump missiles! Directly astern!" Lieutenant Commander Kono announced.

"Captain..." Jessica urged.

If the Aurora was destroyed, and he and his crew survived, they could still finish up the Teyentah and continue the fight...assuming that the Teyentah survived.

"Ten seconds."

But if the Aurora was destroyed, he and his crew would also die. Would he become a martyr that would inspire others? Or would the loss of Na-Tan cause a loss of hope?

"Nathan!" Jessica yelled.

Those who fight and run away...

There was an odd, yellow flash on the left side of the main view screen.

"Shield impact!" the lieutenant commander reported. "Hull impact in five seconds!"

Live to fight another day. "Missiles, point-blank, no jump," Nathan ordered, quickly and calmly.

"....Four..."

"Escape jump, my mark."

"....Three...."

"Launching missiles! Point-blank! No jump!" Jessica replied.

"....Two...."

Nathan couldn't remember where he had heard that phrase before, but it rang true.

"...Missiles away!"

"....One...."

"Jump."

Multiple explosions to port bathed the semispherical main view screen that wrapped around the front half of the Aurora's bridge in hues of red an orange. A split second later, those colors were overwhelmed by a blue-white flash as the ship jumped to safety.

"Distance from target?" Nathan asked.

"Ten light minutes," Mister Bickle replied, embarrassed that he had jumped so far out to escape.

"Dispatch a recon drone for target damage assessment," Nathan ordered.

"Aye, sir," Lieutenant Commander Kono replied.

"Sorry, Captain," Jessica said, feeling guilty for doubting her friend.

"No need," Nathan replied. "Another spread of missiles, Jess. Hit them before they have a chance to recover and get their shielded side toward us."

"Yes, sir."

"Helm, come about and prepare for another attack run," Nathan instructed. "The more they have to worry about us, the less attention they will have for the Teyentah."

"Coming about, aye," the lieutenant replied.

"Logic dictates that they ignore us and try to take out the Teyentah," Jessica said, offering her opinion.

"I'm betting they still think they can keep the Teyentah and take us down," Nathan replied as he rotated around to look at Jessica. "But I am willing to change my mind, if evidence warrants," he added with a wry smile.

"Yes, sir."

Lord Dusahn leaned on one elbow, his hand supporting his chin, as he listened to the damage reports coming in.

"Multiple hull breaches on our starboard side. Detonations in our starboard number three and four propellant tanks. Hangar bays and fighter launch tubes on the starboard side are out of commission..." "The Teyentah is headed for open space, my lord," the commander warned. "She will have jump capability any moment."

"...All targeting systems, point-defenses, and gun emplacements on our starboard forward quarter are down, along with all shields on our starboard side, from our bow to section one one four, just aft of midship..."

"We *must* target the Teyentah," the commander begged. "At least, take out her jump drive or main power... *Anything* to keep her from jumping away."

"...Eighty-seven dead, one hundred twenty injured, and fifty-nine missing. Two reactors are offline, and power is at thirty percent of capacity..."

"We *shall* attack." Lord Dusahn decided. "Target the Teyentah, but *only* to rob her of her ability to jump."

"My lord, our shields are down, our main power is at minimum operable levels, and a third of our crew is incapacitated. Furthermore, our targeting systems are damaged, and their accuracy *cannot* be guaranteed. I recommend we use our still functional port launch tubes to dispatch our fighters to disable the Teyentah."

"And rob us of our glory?" Lord Dusahn questioned, finding the idea unfathomable.

"My lord, in our current state, we can *barely* defend ourselves. If the Aurora manages to strike our starboard side again..."

"I think you underestimate this ship's abilities, Commander, as well as the significance her victory this day might hold."

"I cannot see matters of the empire as you can, my lord," the commander stated apologetically. "I can only offer my expertise in regards to *this* vessel. I willingly leave the future of our empire to *you*." "As you should," Lord Dusahn agreed, shifting in his command chair. After a moment's thought, he sighed. "Very well, Commander. You may send our fighters after the Teyentah. But make quite certain they understand their mission."

"Of course, my lord," the commander agreed, bowing respectfully. "And what are your orders for this vessel?"

"Maintain a pursuit course," Lord Dusahn ordered. "Stay behind the Teyentah and to her starboard side. That will keep our shielded side toward them. The empire will *not* see their flagship retreating."

Six Dusahn octo-fighters jumped in less than a kilometer from the Glendanon, immediately launching a barrage of missiles. The massive cargo vessel, its shields already active, absorbed the energy of the missile detonations, but before she could retaliate, the enemy fighters disappeared behind sudden, blue-white flashes of light.

"What was that?" Cameron wondered as the command center deep inside the Glendanon gently shook.

"Dusahn octo-fighters!" the comms officer reported. "Bridge reports six of them just jumped in, launched missiles, and jumped out. Captain Gullen is jumping the ship to a new position."

"Make sure he tells that last boxcar where to find us," Cameron told the comms officer. "There's no way that many people can survive in that thing all the way back to the rally point."

"Yes, sir."

"And tell Captain Gullen he needs to be quicker on the jump next time," she added. "The shields on this ship aren't meant to withstand direct attack, just small rocks and dust." "That's it!" Corporal Mitchell declared. "That's the last of them! Close it up!"

The massive cargo ramp on the boxcar's under hung cargo pod began to rise in preparation for liftoff.

"Delta Leader to all Ghatazhak," Master Sergeant Anwar called over comms. "Fall back to the evac point!"

"You heard him, boys!" Sergeant Eliason yelled. "Let's move!"

The sergeant and his men moved quickly away from the boxcar as its door finished closing, and its engines began spinning up for liftoff.

"Ghatazhak! Seiiki! The battleship is launching weapons!"

"Ghatazhak! Double-time!" the sergeant barked, breaking into a dead run toward the cargo pod at the center of the protected area, where the shield generator was housed.

"*Reapers are inbound for evac!*" one of the Reaper pilots reported.

"Buster is inbound for evac," the pilot of the cargo shuttle also announced.

"Boxcar Four is inbound! Get as many people as you can into the shield pod! I can have you off the ground in less than a minute after shield shutdown!"

Four large missiles streaked toward the planet on fiery trails, closing the distance from orbit to the surface in less than a minute. As they approached the surface, they split apart into six projectiles each, every one of them with its own deadly warhead. Blinding flashes of light filled the sky, nearly overpowering the filters in the Ghatazhak's combat visors. A second later, a thunderous roar filled the air, and the ground began to shake. The shield protecting them collapsed, and then the ground they ran across suddenly shot upward, sending more than a hundred Ghatazhak flying. Seconds later, before they could fall back to the surface, they were incinerated by the blast.

"Oh, my God," Loki exclaimed.

Josh looked at the sensor display on the center console. "Oh, fuck," he gasped. He leaned forward, looking out his window at the planet below, his eyes widening in shock and horror at the glowing mushroom cloud that was rising from the surface.

"Please tell me that wasn't the evac site," Marcus begged over comms.

"It was, Pops," Josh replied solemnly.

The sensors beeped in warning, causing Loki to look again. "Multiple octos inbound," he said. He looked at Josh, who was still staring out the window at the horror below. "Josh, we've got to get out of here."

"Yeah, right," Josh replied, settling back into his chair. "I'll jump us to the Glendanon's last position."

"Good idea," Loki agreed. "They need to know."

"Jump drive is coming online," General Telles reported.

"Eight octo-fighters just jumped in close on our starboard side," the technician manning the sensors reported.

"Punching them in now," Corporal Vasya announced. "Automated defenses are tracking. Anti-fighter turrets are firing."

"Get us out of here, General," Suvan urged.

"Activating emergency escape jump," the general announced. "Jumping in three..."

"Fighters are launching missiles," Corporal Vasya reported.

"....Two...."

"Point-defenses are firing."

"....One...."

The ship rocked as the missiles struck the Teyentah's starboard side, nearly knocking General Telles and Captain Navarro out of their seats.

Corporal Vasya held onto his console tightly, bracing himself to avoid falling as the ship rocked yet again. "Multiple hits!" he barked. "At least six of them!"

"Did we jump?" Suvan wondered.

"Negative," the general replied, scanning his console. "The jump drive is offline."

The lights went out, and the emergency lighting immediately kicked in.

"Main power is offline!" another technician shouted.

"What about the zero-point reactors?" Suvan demanded.

"I have no idea," the technician admitted. "My console is completely dead."

"So is mine," Corporal Vasya reported.

Suvan glanced at his and the general's console. "Helm and navigation are both functioning," he announced. "I still have maneuvering, but main propulsion is not responding. Whatever speed we've got is all we're going to get for a while. What about your jump drive?"

"I'm showing damage to multiple emitter arrays," the general replied. He looked at Suvan. "I believe it's time to cut our losses, Captain." "They took seven missiles in the starboard side," Lieutenant Commander Kono reported. "Their *unshielded* side."

"Are they still under attack?" Nathan asked.

"No, sir. Not yet, anyway."

"They want that ship intact," Nathan surmised. "What about her jump drive? Can they get it working?"

"Not anytime soon," the lieutenant commander replied. "Their field generators are fine, but at least a third of their emitters are damaged. If they tried to jump now, they'd probably leave half the ship behind."

"What's that battleship doing?"

"The big one is still shadowing the Teyentah, keeping their good shields toward them," the Lieutenant Commander replied.

"And the other one?"

"They're jumping all over the place, Captain. Never in any one spot for more than thirty seconds."

"They're jumping around to launch missiles at us from all directions," Jessica surmised. "I'm surprised they haven't launched a full-blown, time-on-target attack on us yet."

"They will," Nathan said. "They will."

* * *

Suvan Navarro studied his console and then looked at the main view screen. Before them was outer space; escape. But as far as he had come, those stars were still beyond reach. He realized now, they always would be.

He thought about his wife, hiding out on a resort world that, to date, was still *outside* the Dusahn Empire. He wondered how long it would remain so and what might happen if her true identity was ever discovered. He thought about his children, still stuck on Corinair, living under assumed identities, worrying that, at any moment, they too would be discovered. It pained him greatly that he would likely never see any of them again. It pained him even more that he could do nothing more to ensure their safety.

Except for one thing.

Suvan breathed in deeply, summoning all his courage. "General Telles," he began. "Please get everyone to your ships."

"Our ships are not usable," the general told him. "This was a one-way trip."

Suvan looked at the general, surprised. "The escape pods then."

"Captain, what are you planning?"

"I will turn the ship around and ram the orbital shipyard."

"A bold idea, to be sure, but if you miss the core, you will not destroy it. Not completely."

"If the zero-point reactors are still online, it will *all* be destroyed. The shipyard and any ship within twenty kilometers, I expect."

General Telles also took a deep breath, examining the older captain. "And I cannot convince you to come with us, I suppose."

"Someone must remain, to ensure impact," Suvan said, stating the obvious.

General Telles nodded, knowing the brave captain was correct.

Suvan looked at the general. "Find them, tell them. Tell them that I died to protect them. And promise me that you will protect them."

"I will protect them, by protecting all of us. Takara, Corinair, the entire cluster," General Telles promised. "I will protect them by preventing the spread of those who would inflict their will on others by use of force. On this, you have my word, Captain." "Thank you." Captain Navarro took another breath, sighing. "I really thought we could do this."

"A victory that comes in an unexpected form is still a victory," the general told him.

Suvan nodded in begrudging agreement. After a moment, he looked back at the general. "What are you waiting for, General?"

"I am waiting for my commanding officer to give the order."

Suvan smiled, then pressed a button on the intercom control on his console. "This is Captain Suvan Navarro, commander of the Teyentah. Abandon ship. All hands report to the nearest escape pods and abandon ship."

General Telles rose, placing his hand on Suvan's shoulder. "Good luck, my friend."

"Continue the fight, General," Suvan replied.

"I am Ghatazhak," the general replied. "I know no other way."

Suvan Navarro nodded one last time at the general, who then led the others to the exit, leaving the captain to complete his mission, alone.

"Message from command and control," the Aurora's communications officer announced. "The Corinari evacuation is complete. All forces have left the Darvano system." The ensign's voice suddenly became somber. "But there were heavy casualties, sir."

Nathan sighed. He would have to worry about the casualties later.

"The Teyentah is turning," Lieutenant Commander Kono reported, surprised.

"She still has maneuvering?" Nathan asked.

"Yes, sir. It's a slow turn, but she *is* turning."

"Turning to where?" Jessica wondered from behind the tactical console.

Nathan, again, ran multiple scenarios and outcomes in his head, and in a split second, came to the only logical conclusion. "He's turning around."

"The Teyentah is coming about!" the sensor officer reported. "She is turning back *toward* the shipyard."

"I thought she had no propulsion?" Lord Dusahn said, casting a cross eye at the commander. "How is it she is coming about?"

"They are burning their maneuvering thrusters at maximum," the sensor officer reported, overhearing his leader's question.

"An inefficient method but effective, nonetheless," Lord Dusahn commented. He sighed, surrendering to the inevitable. "All ships are to target the Teyentah and destroy her."

"As you command, my lord," the commander replied.

"And add whatever functioning weapons we still have to the mix, Commander. So this ship doesn't appear *completely* ineffective."

"Yes, my lord."

General Telles and his team quickly found the nearest escape pods, four of which were located at the back of the command deck on the starboard side, not far from the bridge. He pressed the key on the control panel on the bulkhead, and the inner door opened, followed by the pod door itself. He peeked inside, noting that it was designed to accommodate eight people. "Willem, Telles. Have you located an escape pod?" "Are you kidding?" the master sergeant replied. "This ship is loaded with them."

"Good, get in and wait for Captain Suvan to launch them," the general instructed. "If something goes wrong and you feel you cannot wait, go manual, and launch the pod yourself, but *only* if you have no choice."

"Understood."

"Once clear, jump to rally point Echo, find a place to hide, and await rescue."

"No problem. Good luck, General."

"To you, as well," the general replied. "Rezhik, Telles. Did you copy?"

"Affirmative," Lieutenant Rezhik replied. "Request permission to delay abandoning my post for a few minutes."

"Reason?"

"I believe I can bypass the safeties that prevent the jump field generators from working when too many emitter arrays are damaged. It may provide Captain Navarro with a tactical advantage."

"Make it quick," the general ordered before he followed his men into their escape pod.

"Micro-jump! Two clicks! Execute!" Nathan ordered as the Aurora rocked with the missile impacts against their weakening shields.

"Two clicks! Jumping!" Mister Bickle replied as the jump flash filled the bridge.

"Reacquiring primary target," Jessica announced.

"Starboard shields are down to thirty percent," the systems officer warned.

"Roll us over, and show them our port side for a while," Nathan ordered. "Adjust your gun selections as we roll, Jess." "Rolling to port."

"I'm with you," Jessica assured him.

"Teyentah is finishing her turn," Lieutenant Commander Kono reported. "You were right, sir. She's burning everything she's got and making a run for the shipyard."

"Comms, raise the Teyentah," Nathan ordered. "I want to speak to Navarro."

Four explosions suddenly rocked the Aurora, nearly knocking Jessica off her feet. "Damn it!" she cursed, hanging on. "We just took four jump missiles in our number four shield."

"What happened to our point-defenses?" Nathan asked.

"They jumped in less than fifty meters away!" she replied. "No time to lock on and fire."

"Number four shield is down to ten percent!" the systems officer warned. "One more hit and it's gone!"

"Lay down a defensive fire field in front of the number four shield," Nathan ordered. "Cheng, Captain. Can you channel extra power into the number four shield?"

"Only if I draw it from our jump reserve," Vladimir replied.

"How much jump juice do we have left?" Nathan asked his navigator.

"Five point two light years in drive one, eight point seven in drive two," Mister Bickle replied.

Nathan did the math in his head. If they kept their battle jumps short, and the Dusahn didn't pursue them after the battle, it would be enough. It would have to be. "Cheng, Captain. Do it."

"Yes, sir," Vladimir replied.

The ship rocked more violently than before, catching Nathan off guard and nearly knocking him out of his command chair. "Damn it, Jess!" "Nothing I can do, Captain!" Jessica defended. "Those ones jumped in at thirty-five meters! Their range and targeting systems must be damned good."

"Second battleship just jumped in behind us!"

"Jesus," Nathan exclaimed. "Well, at least they won't be firing any jump missiles at us."

"Incoming rail gun fire from the second battleship!" Lieutenant Commander Kono warned. "Big ones!"

"How are you coming with the call, deBanco?" Nathan asked.

"I'm trying, Captain," the comms officer replied. "But their comm-array is offline. If we can get closer, I can probably get him on a comm-set channel."

"Helm, slide us in closer to the Teyentah," Nathan ordered as his ship shook with the impact of the incoming rail gun rounds.

Suvan Navarro struggled to maintain control of his battered vessel. His automated weapons systems traded energy weapons fire with the Dusahn super-battleship that was shadowing him just beyond the Aurora, as well as numerous octo-fighters that slipped past the Aurora's defensive efforts on his behalf. Had the Aurora not been running a blockade between him and that ship, he would have been destroyed several minutes ago.

"Captain, Telles," the general called over Suvan's commset. "We are in the escape pods. I recommend that you jettison all escape pods at once, including the unoccupied ones, so the Dusahn will have a more difficult time shooting us down before we are able to jump away."

"An excellent idea, General," Suvan admitted. "I am embarrassed I did not think of it myself." "I suspect your hands are full at the moment," the general said.

"Thank you again, General."

"It has been an honor, Captain. Telles out."

The ship rocked as missiles launched by the superbattleship found their way around the Aurora's defenses and impacted the Teyentah's failing shields. Alarms went off on his panel as several more shield sections collapsed, leaving his ship even more vulnerable than before. He checked his range to the shipyard. At his current speed, it would take him four minutes to reach the station. Unfortunately, he doubted his ship would hold together that long.

"*Captain Navarro, Lieutenant Rezhik,*" the call came over Suvan's comm-set.

"Go ahead, Lieutenant."

"Sir, I have managed to bypass the safety protocols that prevent the jump drive field generators from operating when the emitter field is too badly damaged."

"Are you telling me I can jump the ship?" Suvan asked as he struggled to stay on course.

"Yes, sir. However, I cannot guarantee the distance accuracy of any jump, nor can I promise the entire ship will jump."

"I suppose I'll have to take my chances, Lieutenant. Thank you."

"You are most welcome, Captain," the lieutenant replied. "There is one more thing. I also had my men sabotage one of the zero-point reactors, so the fail-safe will not kick in. As you know, if the containment fields fail, the result is a microsingularity that will consume everything within a few kilometers before the singularity collapses. That type of spatial disturbance should be sufficient to destroy the shipyard and anything nearby." "Impressive, Lieutenant."

"Thank you, sir, but again, I cannot guarantee an event. Only that, if the reactor is seriously damaged or the containment fields are disturbed, the fail-safes that prevent such an event will not operate as designed. It was the best I could do on short notice."

"It was a valiant effort, nonetheless, Lieutenant. Now, I suggest you and your men get to the escape pods while you still can."

"Captain?"

"Yes, Lieutenant?" Suvan replied as he checked his range to the shipyard.

"I understand you are a sailor?"

"It's been a few years but, yes."

"Then I wish you fair winds and following seas, Captain."

"To you, as well, Lieutenant."

"Rezhik, out."

Suvan let out a sigh of relief. If he had to die, at least he would strike a serious blow to the Dusahn Empire in the process.

".....ntah, th.....py?"

Suvan tapped his comm-set, trying to clear up the transmission.

"Te...tah, this ... the Auror..... you copy?"

"Aurora, this is the Teyentah. I copy you."

"Cap...n Na...ro?"

"Yes, this is Navarro," Suvan replied as another missile impact rocked his ship, setting off more system failure alerts.

There was a pause, and then a voice he never thought he would hear again came through his comm-set. "*Captain Navarro, this is Captain Scott.*" Suvan smiled broadly, shaking his head in disbelief. "It is good to hear your voice, Captain."

"Yours, as well, my friend."

"To be honest, I wasn't sure I believed the messages were actually from you."

"Yours, as well, my friend," Nathan repeated with a chuckle. "Perhaps you can share your plans with me?"

"Simple enough," Suvan replied. "I intend to use this ship to destroy the Dusahn shipyard and hopefully, a few Dusahn ships along with it."

"I'm assuming you're planning on getting to an escape pod before that happens?"

Suvan called up the status screen for the escape pods, noting that the one closest to the lieutenant's post in engineering now showed it was closed and ready to launch, with six persons aboard. Without thinking twice, he activated the auto-launch sequence for all the pods. "I had considered that option, believe me. Unfortunately, the ship is too badly damaged. Someone must remain on board to pilot the ship and ensure a successful impact."

"Suvan," Nathan said, trying to make a more personal connection. "You don't have to do this. Your ship is already on course. Just shut everything down and let your ship's momentum do the job for you."

"I'm still three minutes out," Suvan told him as the ship rocked from several missile impacts. More alerts sounded, causing him to call up the damage report screen. "I've lost seventy percent of my shields. The ship will not last that long. They'll blow it apart, and nothing large enough to do any appreciable damage will reach the target."

"All the more reason for you to..."

"Captain!" Lieutenant Commander Kono called. "The Teyentah just jettisoned her escape pods!"

"All of them?" Nathan asked in disbelief.

"I'm not sure," the lieutenant commander admitted, "but it looks like it."

"Suvan, did you just jettison *all* of your escape pods?" Nathan asked over comms.

"It was necessary to maximize my crew's chances of escape."

"I don't understand," Nathan said. "They'll blow your ship to pieces long before you reach the shipyard, whether you're piloting her or not."

"I failed to go down with my ship once, Nathan. I shall not fail a second time."

"But you could do so much more to help defeat the Dusahn by surviving," Nathan insisted.

"Listen, Nathan, I have no death wish. I am just being practical. One of your Ghatazhak managed to turn this ship into a giant jump missile, armed with a micro-singularity warhead."

"A what?"

"That had to be Rezhik," Jessica muttered.

"It is the only way, Nathan. If that shipyard is allowed to continue operating, your chances of defeating the Dusahn and freeing my family...my people.....all our people......"

There was a long pause. "Suvan?" Nathan finally called.

"It is the only way..... You know this."

Nathan hung his head down. "I know."

"Captain, a third battleship just jumped in on the other side of the Teyentah," Lieutenant Commander Kono announced. "They're locking all weapons on her."

Nathan steadied his emotions. "You're being targeted by a third battleship, Captain. You must jump now." "Understood," Suvan replied.

"He's spinning up his jump drive," the lieutenant commander reported.

"Good luck to you all," Suvan wished them.

"The battleship is firing."

"Godspeed, Captain," Nathan replied, standing. He watched his main view screen as his ship continued to be pounded by enemy fire. The pale blue light spilled out across the Teyentah's hull, albeit unevenly. A second later, the portions that were covered flashed, transporting those portions of the battered warship into the shipyard several kilometers ahead, while leaving nearly a third of her behind.

As the portion of the Teyentah that was left behind broke apart and exploded, there was a flash of light in the distance.

"Max magnification," Nathan ordered, still standing and staring at the screen. When the view screen refocused, they could see the Takaran shipyard, collapsing in on itself as the micro-singularity grew, pulling everything around it across the event horizon. Explosions went off as the shipyard collapsed into the singularity, breaking the station up as it imploded. The singularity grew in size as it consumed the station, but when there was nothing left nearby to feed on, its gravity became insufficient, and it collapsed onto itself, ending in another brilliant flash of light. In fewer than ten seconds, what had taken the Takarans decades to build, and the Dusahn minutes to capture, had been completely erased from existence.

If only it had taken those battleships with it, Nathan thought. "Lieutenant Dinev?" Nathan asked.

The lieutenant gazed up at her captain, noticing a tear running down his cheek. "Yes, Captain?"

"Get us out of here," Nathan said softly. "This battle is won."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Nathan sat in his ready room, studying the combat data logs from the battle.

"Hey," Cameron called from the hatch.

Nathan looked up. "How is it going?"

Cameron entered the room, closing the hatch behind her. "I was going to ask you the same thing." She pointed at the data pad. "What are you reading?"

"Just studying the combat logs," Nathan admitted.

"You've been studying those for three days now, Nathan. Maybe you should give it a rest?"

Nathan sighed. "I can't help thinking that my new superbrain missed something. That I let my new confidence get the best of me."

"It's possible, I'm not going to lie," Cameron said. "But we all miss something. Even those of us with 'super-brains'. Hell, even Telles misses something once in a while."

Nathan's eyebrow went up. "Name one," he challenged.

Cameron thought for a moment, realizing she might have misspoken. "Oh!" she suddenly exclaimed. "I've got one. He recruited Jessica into the Ghatazhak."

Nathan chuckled. "Okay, I'll give you that one."

"You know, if you just put that away for a few days and come back to it later with fresh eyes, you just might find what you're looking for."

"Funny, Telles said the same thing an hour ago."

"Yeah, I talked to him in the officer's mess," she admitted. "He said he was worried about you."

"I'll be alright," Nathan assured her. "I just hate losing people, you know?"

"I know."

"I mean, a *hundred* Ghatazhak...and in the *blink* of an eye. That's nearly *half* of their numbers."

"Don't forget about the thousands of Corinairans that died in that blast," Cameron reminded him. "And the tens of thousands who will likely suffer due to the radiation. It will take the Dusahn *months* to clean that up."

Nathan sighed, turning off his data pad. "Any comms traffic from Earth?" he asked, changing the subject.

"I'm afraid not," Cameron replied. "Not for more than a week. Is it possible that your sister went dark for some reason?"

"I suppose so," Nathan admitted.

The intercom beeped. "Captain, Tactical," Jessica called. "Two contacts just jumped in. A Takaran medium cargo ship and a Sol Alliance cargo vessel."

"On my way," Nathan replied, rising from his seat and following Cameron out.

"Captain on the bridge," the guard announced.

Nathan eyed the guard as he passed, annoyed by his constant declarations of Nathan's comings and goings.

"The Takaran cargo ship is one of ours," Lieutenant Commander Kono reported from the sensor station. "The Motta-Fawls."

"What about the Alliance cargo ship?" Nathan asked. "It has to be Hunt's ship, right?"

"It is, sir," the comms officer reported. "Message from Captain Hunt. He is requesting your presence aboard his ship. He says it is urgent. He is requesting a doctor and a medical team, as well."

"That can't be good," Nathan surmised. "Jess? Want to play bodyguard?"

"Why not?" Jessica agreed.

"You have the conn," he told Cameron.

"Yes, sir."

"Alert medical," Nathan instructed the comms officer as he and Jessica headed for the exit. "Tell them to meet us in the main hangar bay."

"Aye, sir."

* * *

Nathan and Jessica followed Doctor Chen and her medical team through the tight confines of the cargo ship, winding their way to its modest sick bay. As they approached, Captain Hunt came down the forward ladder, his eyes widening when he spotted Nathan.

"Captain Scott," Captain Hunt greeted.

"It's good to see you, Chris," Nathan said, shaking the captain's hand.

"Go ahead," Nathan instructed Doctor Chen and Jessica. "I'll meet you inside."

"Jesus, you haven't aged a day," Chris laughed.

"Actually, I think I'm a couple years younger. I haven't really done the math yet." When he noticed the confused look on Captain Hunt's face, he added, "It's a long story. Why am I here?"

Captain Hunt looked down as he scratched his head, obviously troubled by what he was about to tell the man he had long thought dead. "Maybe we should speak in private, Nathan." Nathan entered the cargo ship's sick bay. His movements were slow, his expression crestfallen, and his eyes red. He appeared a man broken; a man who had just had his heart ripped from his chest; his being devoid of all hope.

Jessica could barely stand to see him suffering so much pain. She took his hand as he neared her, squeezing it lovingly as she gazed into his eyes, her face full of sympathy and compassion. "I'm so sorry, Nathan," she whispered, almost crying.

Nathan looked at her, barely able to control himself. He tried to smile at her but could not. In fact, at that moment, he wondered if he would ever smile again. He had never known such pain and anguish. He had never even imagined it. First his mother, then his brother, and now... *Everyone*.

Everyone except...

Nathan stepped into the quarantine compartment. Inside, Doctor Chen was inspecting three stasis tubes.

"How are they?" he asked in a whisper.

Doctor Chen looked at him with the same sympathetic expression as Jessica. "The children are not injured. They were put into stasis by your sister's security team. Considering the voyage they were about to take, it was probably for the best. They can be awakened at any time."

Nathan looked at the doctor. "What about..." He couldn't finish his sentence.

"She is alive, but she is badly injured."

"Can you save her?" he was barely able to ask.

"I will do everything that I can, Nathan. I promise."

Nathan nodded, as if to tell her that he believed she would do her best. The doctor stepped aside, and Nathan moved closer to the three stasis pods. The first two pods contained his niece and nephew, neither of whom he had seen in more than seven years. They had grown so much, he hardly recognized them. They looked so peaceful. He wondered how he would ever tell them what had happened. They, too, had lost so much.

Nathan moved to the third pod. It took all his strength and courage to look inside. When he finally did so, he nearly fell apart. His sister, Miri, his closest friend and confidant growing up, lay there motionless. Her face was bruised and swollen, and her head had been shaved. She had a surgical scar on the side of her head and across the top. She had tubes and wires attached everywhere, and she looked like a lifeless corpse, being kept alive by a multitude of technology.

"Oh, Miri," he cried.

Thank you for reading this story. (A review would be greatly appreciated!)

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