

THE
FRONTIERS SAGA
EPISODE 8

CELESTIA

CV-02

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](#)

**THE
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EPISODE 8**

CELESTIA
CV-02

Ryk Brown

The Frontiers Saga Episode #8: Cestia CV-02

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CHAPTER ONE

Nathan Scott looked at himself in the mirror as he buttoned up his uniform shirt, contemplating the recent turn of events. Seven hours ago, he had learned that he had failed in his mission. He had not returned the Aurora home in time. The Earth had already been invaded, and now the Jung appeared to have control over the entire Sol system. One of the many colonies of pre-plague Earth had returned a thousand years later to conquer her, and he had failed to get the Aurora and her jump drive back in time to prevent it. The revelation had only served to reinforce what he had always known: that he was not the right man for the job. He should not be the captain of the Aurora, for he had failed to fulfill the one direct order given to him: to get them home.

As he tucked in his uniform shirt, Nathan attempted to ease his guilt with a technicality. He *had* fulfilled that order. They *had* made it back to Earth. Unfortunately, their homecoming had not been what they'd expected. No hero's welcome, no parades, no reports, or investigations, not even boards of inquiry. Not even a court-martial for sharing the jump drive technology with their new allies. Just an ambush by the Jung, the very threat that had led to the creation of the entire Earth Defense Fleet. Fifty years of massive investments by the nations of Earth to build space-going warships using technologies that had only recently been revealed to them... And it had all failed.

That failure had hit Nathan hard, but thanks to the support of his friends and command staff, Nathan had

managed to put his uniform back on and was about to face his responsibilities as the captain of the Aurora once more. His father had been after him his entire life to just that end: to face up to his responsibilities. Even when Nathan had enlisted in the Earth Defense Force, his father had only seen it as a way for him to avoid responsibility by letting someone else make decisions for him. He wondered what his father would think now, seeing him as the captain of the Earth's sole remaining warship, their world's last hope for salvation from the hands of the Jung. Would he be proud? Would he be afraid? Would he be nervous? Would he be...

Nathan's line of thought was interrupted by the terrible realization that his father, possibly his entire family, was probably dead. His father was a member of the North American Senate, by now possibly even president of the entire North American Union. As one of the eight most powerful nations on Earth, the NAU government would surely have been targeted by the Jung during an invasion.

Nathan's mind raced, and his pulse quickened. His skin became pale and clammy, and a wave of nausea swept over him. All the time he had been wallowing in his own self-pity, it had never occurred to him that his parents, his brother, his sisters... *How could I possibly have been so self-absorbed?*

He had to grab the edge of the tiny sink in the captain's head to steady himself. *They couldn't be, he thought. They had protective details, agents specially trained to protect key members of the government.* The facts ran through Nathan's mind at the speed of light. *Even senators and their spouses had protective details, he thought. If his father had won the election and indeed was the current president of the NAU, then his entire family would have been protected.*

They could all be in a secret bunker, deep underground, safe from the Jung. They could be waiting for rescue right now.

Nathan sat on the edge of the toilet seat, as his head began to spin and the walls of the tiny captain's head closed in on him. Not only were the people of Earth counting on him and his crew, but his entire family might be as well. Yet that thought had only now occurred to him—four months after he had been handed command from a dying captain.

Nathan sprang to his feet, grabbing the counter once more as he heaved what little there was in his stomach into the sink. He stood there, bent over, for several minutes, even though nothing more came up. He turned on the faucet, filling one cupped hand and wiping the cold water on his face. He remained hunched over the sink for several more seconds, waiting for his head to clear before shutting off the water. He grabbed a towel and pressed it against his face with both hands. Finally, he straightened up and looked at himself in the mirror. *This is the face of the man who will save the Earth?* The thought brought the smallest of laughs. *I am not in this alone, he reminded himself. I have friends. I have a crew. I have a ship.* Nathan stood up straight and adjusted his uniform shirt.

* * *

Sergeant Weatherly snapped to attention as the captain walked out of his quarters. The sergeant was adorned in Corinari body armor and a Fleet-issue combat helmet. A standard Corinari-issue energy rifle was slung over his shoulder. In addition, a holstered energy pistol and his favorite combat knife hung on his belt.

Nathan looked the sergeant over, somewhat surprised to see him and even more surprised to see him dressed in the unusual combination of combat gear. His eyebrows shot up. "New look, Sergeant?"

"We are at war, sir," the sergeant answered.

Nathan nodded. "Yes, I guess we are."

"Are you okay, sir?" the sergeant asked. "You look a little pale."

"Something I ate," Nathan said as he headed down the corridor, the sergeant following to his side and one step behind. "I'll be fine."

"Yes, sir."

"I suppose Lieutenant Commander Nash put you back on my six."

"SOP, Captain, since..."

"Since we're at war. I guess I'd better get used to it."

"I'll try to stay out of your way, sir."

"Don't worry about it, Sergeant," Nathan said. "I appreciate your presence, really. It's one less thing I have to worry about."

"Yes, sir."

They walked silently for several moments until the sergeant finally asked, "Do you have a plan, sir?"

"Well, I planned on going to the briefing. I am the keynote speaker, after all."

"No, I meant..."

"Oh, the other thing," Nathan said, realizing the sergeant was referring to the Jung occupation of Earth. "Not yet, Sergeant, but I'm working on it."

"Yes, sir."

As they continued down the corridor in silence, Nathan wondered if it might have been better to lie to the young marine, to say something more confident like 'I've always

got a plan' or 'You know me, I always think of something.' At the moment, he simply didn't have it in him.

A minute later, they arrived at the hatch to the command briefing room.

"Don't worry, sir," the sergeant said. "You'll think of something. You always do." The sergeant smiled at his captain, revealing his confidence in his leader.

"Thank you, Sergeant," Nathan said, taking note of the encouraging look on the young man's face.

Nathan took a deep breath and stepped through the hatch.

"Captain on deck!" the guard on the other side of the hatch bellowed.

"As you were," Nathan ordered as he strode across the compartment, trying to appear as confident as possible. The long table at the center of the command briefing room was full today, with all his senior staff present, including a few who rarely attended such meetings. Today, however, was different. They were deciding how to fight a war against an enemy that probably outnumbered them one hundred to one, maybe more.

Nathan stood at the head of the table for a moment. As he prepared to speak, a million possible openings ran through his mind. His eyes met every set of eyes in the room over the span of a few seconds. These were the people that would save the Earth, not he.

After taking a breath, Nathan spoke. "I'm sure that, by now, you are all aware that our homecoming was not as expected. It appears the Jung have already taken control of the Earth, and most likely the entire Sol system."

Abby was the first to speak, which was not unexpected, as Nathan had noticed more fear in her eyes than in anyone

else's. "How can we be sure? Maybe they've only destroyed the fleet, and the Earth is still free."

Nathan could see a shred of hope in the physicist's eyes, hope for her husband, for her children. He knew that, despite their having been sequestered on the research base along with her, Abby had seen little of them over the last ten years.

"Captain," Lieutenant Commander Nash interrupted, "we do have confirmation that the Jung have occupied Earth. We managed to get a few quick scans of the surface during battle, along with a few dozen images, just before we jumped out of the system."

Nathan could see the hope leave Abby's eyes, replaced by fear. He felt guilty that he was glad Jessica had been the one to break the news to her. "What did you find?" he asked.

"We could only see about a third of the planet during our short time in orbit," Jessica began, "but the NAU capitol building in Winnipeg, the New Britain capitol in London, and the capitols in Paris, Madrid, Amsterdam, Rome... every national capitol building we had line of sight on was gone. They probably hit all the national capitols on the planet."

"What about the cities around them?" Cameron wondered, trying to conceal her personal concerns.

Nathan knew that Cameron was from New Britain, although he did not know exactly what city she was from.

"All suffered some degree of collateral damage from the attacks on their capitol buildings," Jessica said. "However, it also appears that the Jung took out a lot of civilian infrastructure targets as well: power plants, communications, major transportation systems, waste water processing..."

“Why would they attack sewage plants?” Mister Riley interrupted from his seat along the side of the compartment, appearing somewhat confused.

“To make life as miserable as possible for the people on Earth,” Jessica said. “The quicker the masses are dependent on the Jung for their very existence, the quicker they’ll accept their rule over them. It’s simple survival.”

“Filth, stench, and disease are excellent motivators,” Doctor Chen added. “Without sewage treatment, major population areas will become ghost towns within a few years due to either death or relocation.”

“They must have had decent intel beforehand if they knew the location of every national capitol building on Earth,” Nathan said. “What about the United Earth Republic building in Geneva?”

“*It* is still standing,” Jessica said. “Most of the complex *around* it was wiped out, but the building itself appears untouched. From what I can tell, they meant it to remain standing. They’ve already set up new auxiliary buildings, guard towers, and defensive bunkers... The place is a fortress now. I’d guess they’re using it as their seat of power on Earth.”

“Interesting choice,” Vladimir commented, his eyebrows raised in speculation.

“Not really,” Nathan said, turning to look at his friend and chief engineer. “It stands to reason that they would choose an existing symbol of power, one that the world sees as familiar and trusted. I can’t think of a better one than the UER capitol building.”

“What about military installations?” Cameron asked. “Spaceports, missile sites, the Fleet academies? What about Fleet Command?”

“Fleet Command is a crater,” Jessica said bluntly. “Pretty sure they nuked themselves in order to destroy all intel. Every military site we looked for on the images was destroyed as well, but from above, not from within.”

“So once they knew they were done for, they retreated and destroyed their own command center?” Major Prechitt wondered.

“Standard practice in a retreat action,” Major Waddell added. “At least, it is for the Corinari.”

“Anything else?” Nathan asked Jessica.

“No, sir. That’s all we could figure out from what little we have.”

“Any idea how long ago it happened?” Cameron asked.

“Nothing definite,” Jessica admitted, “but from the amount of cleanup that appears to have taken place in the damaged cities we got decent images of, I’d say at least a month, maybe two.”

Nathan sighed. He had been secretly hoping that she would say two to three months, which would have eased his guilt somewhat; even if they had left the Pentaurus cluster immediately after escaping from Haven, they couldn’t have made it back that quickly.

Nathan looked at the faces of his staff sitting around the conference table. “I guess the question, then, is what do we do?”

“We kick the Jung off our planet,” Jessica answered without hesitation. “Then we kick their asses all the way back to Jungville, wherever that is.”

“Sounds good to me,” Vladimir added, equal enthusiasm in his voice.

“Does it?” Nathan wondered. “Does it really?” He looked at the faces of his staff as they stared at him in disbelief. “Don’t get me wrong,” he said, his hands raised with his

palms turned toward his staff sitting along either side of the conference table. "I'm all for kicking some Jung ass, believe me. But we're *one ship*. One ship against, what? A hundred? Five hundred? A thousand? We have no idea how many ships the Jung actually have. All we know is that they have swept across the core and conquered every world they came into contact with, including the Earth. Now, I'm as ready to die trying as the rest of you, but do we have the right to expect that of the rest of this crew? Of the Corinairans? Of the Takarans? Do we have the right to ask any of them to risk their lives against such overwhelming odds?"

The room fell silent. Nathan looked at their faces. He could tell that some of them saw his point, but he could also tell that some of them were shocked that their captain showed any doubt. The one exception was Master Chief Montrose, the chief of the boat. He simply looked angry. "Master Chief?" Nathan asked, noticing the look on the master chief's face.

"Permission to speak freely, sir?" the master chief asked, obviously exercising his usual self-control.

"Of course," Nathan urged.

Master Chief Montrose rose slowly from his seat next to Jessica, carefully considering his words. "I'll try to say this correctly," he began, "in a manner that you would expect from a master chief in *your* Earth Defense Force." The master chief cleared his throat. "What kind of a stupid fucking question is that... sir?"

Again, the room was quiet. The master chief looked down at Jessica to his right. "Did I say that correctly?" he wondered.

Jessica gave him an 'A-OK' sign with her left hand as she leaned back in her chair, a broad smile on her face. "Yeah,

you got it right," she whispered back. "But don't stop now; you're on a roll."

The master chief looked at her with a confused expression on his face, unsure of her meaning. Finally, he turned back to the captain. "Sir, I cannot speak for the Takarans, but I suspect they would feel the same. The Corinairans serving aboard this ship, however, are members of the Aurora's crew. They are not guests, and they are not Corinari, at least, not anymore. First and foremost, they are members of the Alliance. The one that you created to save our worlds. You tell us to fight, and we will fight. No one ordered any of you to fight when the Yamaro attacked our world. You took it upon yourselves to do so because it was a just cause. Taking back the Earth from the Jung is also a just cause. Tell us to fight, and we'll fight." The master chief looked around for a dissenting opinion, then took his seat, adding, "Of course, we all appreciate the fact that you don't want to risk our lives unnecessarily."

Nathan looked about the silent room once more. "Thank you, Master Chief. I apologize to you and the crew. I did not mean to question anyone's loyalty."

"Yes, sir," the master chief answered. "Thank *you*, sir. And I'm sorry if I was out of line. I still do not fully understand your military protocols."

"It was quite all right, Master Chief," Nathan assured him.

"Sounded like a master chief to me," Vladimir added with a small laugh.

"For the moment, let's assume we're going to fight," Nathan began again. "Before we can do anything, we're going to need more intelligence. A lot more. Specifically, everything we can learn about what happened on Earth during our absence, and how the Jung managed to capture

our world. We know very little about Jung tactics, but now we know where and approximately when they attacked. We have an opportunity to watch it unfold in front of us.”

“Old light,” Lieutenant Yosef said, using the decidedly nonscientific term the captain had coined long ago.

“Precisely,” Nathan said. “We head toward the Earth, starting at four light months out, and start collecting everything we can: news broadcasts, comm-signals, long-range optical images, you name it.”

“One problem, sir,” Cameron said. “We’d have to come about. We’re already more than two light years away from Earth, and we’re headed away from her. Unless you plan on waiting for two and a half years for all that light to catch up to us, we’re going to need more fuel.”

“I was thinking about that,” Nathan said. “Mister Riley, do we have enough fuel to make small course corrections? Say, a few degrees off our current course?”

“Yes, sir,” Mister Riley answered, “as long as we don’t do too many of them.”

“What about changing our speed, going faster or slower by a few percentage points?”

“Possibly. Again, as long as we don’t have to do it too often, or to any great degree in a single maneuver. I’d advise avoiding such burns however.”

“Find us a star,” Nathan said, “preferably a close one that is no more than a degree or two off our current course.”

“What did you have in mind?” Cameron wondered.

“We jump our way to the star, slingshot around it, and get back on a course for Earth,” Nathan said. “Then we just jump our way back to the point where we want to start collecting signals.”

“At our current speed, it might be better if it were a large planet,” Mister Riley said. “To be close enough to a star for a

slingshot maneuver to work, we'd get cooked."

"Then find me a star with a large planet," Nathan said. "Last time I checked, they were pretty common."

"Yes, sir."

"It's a good idea, Captain," Cameron agreed, "but with recharge layovers, jumping our way to a properly positioned gravity assist target could take a while."

"That's okay, Commander, we need time to prepare anyway."

"That will work for a while, sir," Jessica said, "but sooner or later, we're going to need more propellant, especially if we have to keep making minor course corrections to slingshot around gas giants."

"Lieutenant Montgomery?" Nathan called, remembering the conversation the two of them had shared during the trip back from the Pentaurus cluster.

"I reviewed the designs in your database for fitting the Aurora with the capability to harvest raw materials from gas giants in order to process her own propellant. It's an interesting design, and it would work. However, there are some problems. First, it will take a lot of resources, more than we currently carry, I'm afraid. We'd not only have to build the systems for harvesting, but the processing systems as well, not to mention the storage systems for the harvested raw materials, most of which are volatile. In order to do this properly, we would need to establish a mining operation on an asteroid that contained the appropriate materials, harvest those materials, and then use them to build the onboard infrastructure needed to begin propellant production and higher levels of harvesting. All of this would take time, and resources, and manpower..."

"And propellant," Nathan finished for him. "How much time are we talking?"

“Months, sir, maybe longer.”

“We have nearly a full load of spacecraft propellant on board for use in our fighters,” Major Prechitt said. “Could it be used in the Aurora’s main propulsion systems?”

“Theoretically, yes,” Vladimir said. “But additives would be needed in order to make the conversion.”

“And those additives would also have to be gathered from somewhere,” Lieutenant Montgomery pointed out.

“Captain, the Jung obviously need propellant,” Jessica said. “They probably have production and storage facilities located all over the place, maybe even in every system they control. Why don’t we just steal it?”

“First, we’d have to find it,” Cameron pointed out. “We don’t have the propellant for that either, let alone a full-on attack on a Jung-held system.”

“What about the Falcon?” Jessica asked.

“It will take at least a few weeks to repair the Falcon,” Vladimir insisted, “maybe longer if we have to fabricate a lot of replacement parts.”

“It will take us longer than that to collect the signals from Earth,” Lieutenant Yosef said.

“Make it a priority,” Nathan ordered Vladimir. “Even if we weren’t planning on looking for a Jung fuel depot, we need the Falcon.”

“Captain,” Major Prechitt interrupted, “we also need another crew to fly her.”

Nathan looked at Doctor Chen.

“Loki should be ready to report back for duty within a week,” Doctor Chen reported. “We still don’t know if Josh will fully recover. Even if he does, it will probably take months.”

“Even if they were both fit and ready for duty, we’d still need another crew, Captain,” Major Prechitt said. “The

situation has changed. You said it yourself. We're going to need a lot of recon. That means a lot of hours in the cockpit of the Falcon, more hours than is safe for one flight crew. Without at least one relief crew, our ability to fly recon will be severely limited."

"Understood," Nathan said. "Pick two additional flight teams. We'll figure out how to train them."

"Captain," the master chief said, "with the Falcon undergoing repairs, we will not be able to plug a sim-bubble into her like before."

"Can you build a mock-up?" Nathan asked.

"Maybe, but it won't be easy."

"I can concentrate on the cockpit repairs first," Vladimir said. "Other than the canopy, there is not much damage to the cockpit itself. The problem is that many of the repairs will require cockpit access, not to mention testing the system afterward."

"Work something out," Nathan said, "a schedule of some sort, so the flight crews can get in some sim time in the Falcon while she is being repaired."

"Yes, sir," Vladimir answered.

"There's another way to find out where the Jung store their propellant," Jessica said. "We can ask the resistance on Tanna."

"Tanna?" Doctor Chen wondered.

"The planet Josh and Loki crash-landed on," Jessica explained. "Captain, if that guy, Garrett, is part of a larger, organized resistance, chances are he'd know where the Jung propellant depots are located."

"Maybe they have even blown up a few," Vladimir joked.

"How do you propose we get in touch with him?" Nathan asked.

“We use the jump shuttle to get there. Loki said Garrett told him they use that cave for surveillance on a regular basis. So we park our butts in that cave and wait for them to show up.”

“You’re forgetting one thing,” Vladimir said. “The jump shuttle is still torn apart.”

“Then put it back together,” Jessica told him. “You’re an engineer, aren’t you?”

“How long would it take to get it working again?” Nathan asked.

Vladimir looked at Lieutenant Montgomery, as it was his men that were using the shuttle as a test bed for their attempts to make the mini-jump drive work with the mini-ZPED. “A week or two?” Lieutenant Montgomery nodded his agreement with Vladimir’s assessment.

“That will give Loki plenty of time to recover before we go then,” Jessica said.

“Whoa, you’re taking Loki with you?” Nathan asked, a bit surprised.

“Garrett already knows him,” Jessica said. “He’s more likely to trust us if I bring one of them along, and Josh surely isn’t going.”

“I’ll take it under consideration,” Nathan finally agreed. “Meanwhile, let’s get the jump shuttle back online. If we’d had it working all along, Josh and Loki would be sitting in on this meeting instead of lying in medical.” Nathan looked at Mister Riley and Mister Chiles sitting along the wall. “Nothing personal, gentlemen.”

“I’ll get my people on it immediately,” Vladimir promised. “I’ll need your people to remove their equipment first, Lieutenant,” he told Lieutenant Montgomery.

“Of course.”

“Sir,” Major Prechitt said, “I was wondering. Has anyone considered sending the jump shuttle back to the Pentaurus cluster to ask for help?”

“A thousand light year journey in a shuttle?” Nathan wondered aloud. “Shuttles only jump one light year at a time, Major. Granted, they don’t have to recharge, but that’s still nearly a thousand jumps.”

“Eight hundred ninety-seven, sir,” Mister Riley corrected.

“That’s still a lot of jumps for one flight crew to make.”

“It will probably be a bit more than that,” Abby said. “They’ll have to jump around that black hole.”

“Yes, she’s right,” Nathan said. “Black holes and God knows what else. And we’re supposed to ask someone to make that trip in a shuttle?”

“Captain,” Lieutenant Montgomery interrupted, “we might be able to improve their chances for a successful voyage.”

“How so?”

“I still believe it is possible to run a jump drive using the ZPEDs to power the drive directly.”

“That didn’t work out too well last time we tried,” Nathan reminded him.

“I wasn’t referring to the Aurora’s current jump drive, Captain, nor was I referring to the current shuttle’s jump drive. I believe the problem is in the materials used to manufacture the jump drive, or at least many of its core components.”

Abby leaned forward, intrigued by the lieutenant’s words.

“Abby?” Nathan called, noticing her interest.

“This is the first I’ve heard of it, Captain,” Abby admitted. “However, I am intrigued.”

“If we could construct a new jump drive, one designed specifically to work with the mini-ZPED as its sole power source, we might be able to increase its jump range dramatically.”

“How dramatically?”

“The jump shuttle uses the same type of emitters as the Aurora,” Abby said. “They’re just smaller. However, they can handle the same amount of energy being dumped into them at once.”

“Are you saying that they could jump as far as we could?” Nathan asked. “Without recharging?”

“If the lieutenant is correct in his theory about the materials being the cause of the problem, it is possible.”

“Even if we can double the range, it still improves their chances,” Major Prechitt said.

“Still, that’s a long time in a shuttle,” Nathan said, “and that’s a lot of jumps for one crew.”

“Then use two crews,” Cameron suggested, “or three.”

Nathan had not considered that. The shuttles were certainly big enough to accommodate several flight crews in relative comfort, and they could easily be fitted with the necessary amenities to get them through their journey. “Assume you had two crews working in regular rotations. How long would the trip take?”

“Even if they took five minutes to calculate each jump,” Cameron said, “which they won’t, it would only take them a little less than four days to reach the Pentaurus cluster.”

“Four days,” Nathan said in disbelief, “to travel a thousand light years.”

“Eight hundred and...” Mister Riley began before Mister Chiles bumped him to shut him up.

“Assuming all went well both there and back, they could be back within a couple of weeks,” Cameron added, “maybe

less.”

“But would the Takarans or the Corinairans be able to help us?” Nathan wondered aloud.

“At the very least, the Corinairans could send propellant,” Major Prechitt stated. “They were outfitting ships with jump drives when we left. Surely they have at least one jump-capable cargo ship in service by now.”

“While I doubt that my people would have a jump-capable warship available, at least they would know that assistance is needed,” Lieutenant Montgomery said. “That knowledge and time to prepare and deliver said assistance could make all the difference.”

Nathan looked at Jessica, then back at Lieutenant Montgomery. “It could at that, Lieutenant, but I’m not willing to bet all our money on a single horse. Can you build and install your new ZPED-powered mini-jump drive in another shuttle?”

“It would take longer, as we would have to fabricate and install another jump drive control console, but I see no reason why we could not.”

“Captain, they’re going to need to fabricate everything for the new jump drive from the ground up. That’s going to slow down repair of the Falcon,” Vladimir pointed out.

“Lieutenant Montgomery, the Falcon’s needs take priority over your jump drive project.” Nathan could see the lieutenant posturing to object. “We need the recon abilities of the Falcon far more than we need to send a call for help back to the Pentaurus cluster, especially since it’s likely that help will be a long time coming. We are almost out of propellant, people. There’s no way I’m going to let us end up adrift.”

Nathan looked about the briefing room. “Any other business to discuss? Very well. We have a direction for now.

Let's all get to work." Nathan watched as his staff rose from their seats, talking among themselves as they filed out of the compartment. As usual, Cameron stayed behind, waiting for them to leave so she could talk privately with him.

"Are you seriously considering letting Loki go back to Tanna?" Cameron asked.

"I'm *considering* it, yes."

"Maybe it would be better for her to take someone like Waddell or one of his men."

"Jessica had a good point about them being quicker to trust Loki."

"Yes, but if she gets into trouble, Loki's not much for backup."

"I'm sure Jessica has thought of that as well, Cam. She can handle herself. Trust me."

"I hope you're right," Cameron said. "It just seems like it would be safer to wait and see what kind of help we can get from the Takarans and the Corinairans."

"Cam, I spent a lot of time on Takara with Tug while we were being repaired. He's got a lot on his plate right now. I doubt he can spare a single ship. The nobles were not happy when we left. They did not want to give up their lands on conquered worlds. If Tug is unable to convince them otherwise, he could be looking at his own war."

"Maybe Major Prechitt is right," Cameron suggested. "Maybe the Corinairans could send us some propellant."

"Even if they could, it would take weeks, if not months. I'm not willing to run on empty for that long. In fact, I'm half tempted to slingshot around and head back to Tanna ourselves to save time. Problem is, we've got a very small window of time to collect those old signals from Earth. If we miss it, most of them will be too weak for us to make out, and we need that intel as well."

“And if the Tanna resistance is of no help?” Cameron asked.

“Then we start jumping the Falcon around looking for fuel depots ourselves while we wait to hear from our allies. Worst-case scenario, we set up shop out in the fringe and start our own little mining and fuel production colony. If that’s what it takes to fight this war, then that’s what we’ll do,” Nathan insisted. “There is no quick-win scenario with this one, Cameron. We all know that.”

Cameron took a deep breath and let it out with an uncharacteristic sigh. “I know. I just can’t stop thinking about what might be going on back on Earth right now.”

“I know what you mean,” he told her. “But we really are *it* this time, Cam. We can’t afford to make a single mistake.”

* * *

“Once Major Prechitt gives me an estimate on the number of simulator hours it will take to train a new flight crew, I’ll be able to work up a rotation schedule with the Cheng so that no one will be stepping on someone else’s toes,” Cameron told Nathan as they approached the entrance to the bridge.

“I don’t imagine it will take them too long,” Nathan said. “All his pilots are well trained, and the Falcon’s technology is outdated even by Corinairan standards.”

“I spoke with Vladimir, and he thinks he can rig a data pad to act as a cockpit simulator for the purpose of testing their repairs as they go.”

“How is that possible?” Nathan asked.

“Captain on the bridge!” the guard announced as Nathan stepped through the hatch.

“Does he have to do that?” Nathan whispered to Cameron.

“We talked about this, sir,” she whispered back. “We need tighter discipline. We’re going to war, after all.”

Nathan nodded, indicating his understanding and recalling their earlier conversation.

“Anyway,” Cameron continued as they headed toward the center of the bridge, “he’s going to reprogram a data pad to send the same control signals as the Falcon’s cockpit controls, as well as receive and display the same data about the ship’s systems that the cockpit display would show. If it works, the flight crews can train as much as they’d like without interfering with the repairs.”

“That’s a really good idea,” Nathan said as he stepped up onto the small command podium at the center of the bridge. “That man is smarter than he looks.”

“It wasn’t actually his idea,” Cameron said. “The Corinari flight mechanics use a similar device during maintenance. It saves them from having to climb up into the cockpit or have a second person do so.”

“Still, it’s a good idea to adapt one of our data pads to do the same thing.” Nathan sat down in his command chair and turned his attention forward. “Mister Riley, what do you have for us?”

“Beta Virginis to Wolf 1481 to Sol,” Mister Riley reported, “That will put us at the requested point in the Sol system. Our course at arrival will not be directly at the Earth, but a small course correction would put us on an intercept course if desired.”

“Will that give us the viewing angle we’re looking for?” Nathan asked Lieutenant Yosef.

“Close enough that it shouldn’t make a difference,” the lieutenant reported.

“I’ve reviewed Mister Riley’s proposed course,” Cameron said. “At the speed we’ll be traveling on arrival at the recon point, the change in our viewing angle over the course of a full day’s travel will only be a single degree.”

“Any idea if either of those systems is occupied?” Nathan asked.

“According to the survey files in the Data Ark, neither system has any habitable worlds, mostly just gas giants and frozen, rocky worlds,” Cameron said. “Beta Virginis does have a super-Earth, but it’s too far from its parent star to have liquid water. If there are any colonies in either system, they’ll most likely be mining operations of some sort, but I doubt anyone will be out there. There are many more worlds in the core that are far better candidates for such operations.”

“Just as well,” Nathan said. “We don’t need the extra complications right now, unless one of them just happens to have a fuel depot.”

“No one is that lucky,” Cameron said, “not even you.”

“I suppose that would be too much to ask, wouldn’t it? How long will it take us to get there?” Nathan asked.

“If we push the jump drive to her new safe max range of fifteen light years, then limit each jump to fourteen light years to ensure that we have enough power for an emergency escape jump at each arrival point, it should take us around forty-two hours,” Cameron explained. “That includes the time it will take to perform the two gravity assist maneuvers.”

“Better than I thought,” Nathan said. “Maybe we should think about using gravity assistance to make big turns more often.”

“We got lucky this time, sir,” Cameron reminded him. “We’re not always going to find such convenient alignments.”

“Still, until we know we have a reliable source of propellant, we should always look for a gravity assist course whenever possible. Like you said, every drop counts.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Well done, Mister Riley,” Nathan said. “Execute your first jump when ready.”

“Aye, sir,” Mister Riley answered. “Activating auto-nav. Executing course change for the Beta Virginis system in one minute.”

“You know,” Nathan said to Cameron, “if we *are* going to fight a long, drawn-out, guerrilla-style campaign, eventually we’re going to need a base of operations.”

“What did you have in mind?” Cameron asked.

“I don’t know, a small moon, an asteroid, maybe even a hospitable world.”

“We’d probably have a hard time finding one in the core that isn’t already taken,” Cameron said. “From what we’ve learned, we may have a hard time finding one within a few hundred light years.”

“Yeah, that would be asking a lot as well, wouldn’t it?” Nathan said.

“I think we’re a long way from needing a base of operations, Captain.”

“Just thinking ahead, Commander.”

Cameron’s eyes narrowed. “Is that why you were hoping to find an industrialized world outside the core on our way home? You wanted a base of operations?”

“Actually, no,” Nathan said, “although it would have been nice. In all honesty, I really did expect to hand the ship back over to Fleet when we got home.”

“The thought that we might be too late *never* occurred to you?” Cameron asked, a faint hint of disbelief in her voice.

Nathan felt the ship’s maneuvering systems firing to alter her attitude. A few seconds later, the mains fired in order to adjust her heading. The Aurora’s inertial dampening systems still allowed for some sensation of movement while removing enough of the force of acceleration so as not to interfere with the normal operations of her crew. “Perhaps. Maybe I just didn’t want to admit that possibility to myself. Just between us, I wasn’t all *that* surprised when it *did* happen, considering how things have gone so far.”

“Yes, we’ve had our share of luck,” Cameron agreed, “both good and bad.”

A minute later, the main engines went quiet.

“Course correction complete,” Mister Riley reported. “We are now on a heading for Beta Virginis.”

“Very well, Mister Riley,” Nathan said. “You’re cleared to jump.”

Nathan was relieved to be jumping away from the Earth, even though his mind was still on the billions of people on their homeworld now living under Jung occupation. He tried to tuck away his concerns about his parents, his brother, his sisters, and all of their children, but they kept creeping back into his thoughts. At least for a time, they were heading away from trouble, even if only temporarily.

As the bridge filled with the blue-white light of the jump flash, he knew the Aurora could be headed directly into another Jung stronghold, but it was a risk they had to take. Every jump was a calculated risk, especially now that they were back in the core and in enemy territory. It seemed strange to him to refer to his own home system as enemy territory, but that was the reality.

* * *

Marcus stood in the Aurora's port-side aircraft maintenance bay staring at the damaged Falcon, his arms folded across his chest.

"What do you think, Senior Chief?" Vladimir asked as he entered the maintenance bay.

"I don't rightly know," Marcus admitted. "That boy has banged up a lot of ships over the years, and I've been able to fix them all. But this one? To be honest, I'm not sure which end to start at."

"It is not that bad," Vladimir assured him. He looked over the exterior. The Falcon sat on a tow dolly, as her landing gear doors were buckled inward and would not open. The front half of the canopy was completely shattered. There was evidence of unburned fuel on the fuselage near the thrust ducts, which meant problems with the air-breathing turbines. There were also numerous dents, scratches, and even some sections where the hull skin was torn open. "It's all body work," Vladimir declared.

Marcus handed him his data pad. "Here's the internal systems' diagnostics report."

Vladimir looked over the list. "That's only twelve items."

Marcus reached over and pressed a button on the data pad to go to the next page.

"Okay, twenty-four items," Vladimir said, as members of his repair detail began to arrive.

"That's only page two," Marcus told him, "of eight."

"*Oh Bozhe*," Vladimir mumbled. "How did they get this thing off the ground again?"

“Josh was the pilot, remember?” Marcus said. “The boy don’t know when to keep his feet on the ground.”

Vladimir looked at the interceptor as it sat perched at an unnatural angle on the tow dolly. “You start at one end, and I’ll start at the other,” he joked.

“Get the cables on her and lift her up, boys!” Marcus ordered the work crew. “First thing we gotta do is get some jack stands under her, so we can work on her gear doors.”

“We are going to be here for a long time,” Vladimir said as he rolled up his sleeves and headed for the aft end of the Falcon.

“Yup.”

* * *

“I’ve been thinking,” Cameron said between bites of her salad.

“About?” Nathan asked.

“How we’re going to go about this. Fighting the Jung, I mean.”

“And?”

“As long as we don’t take too many hits, we can jump in, strike, and jump out indefinitely. I mean, how do they counter that ability?”

“By being ready to fire in any direction,” Nathan said, “or laying mines all over the place, or using a firing pattern that just sweeps all over the place, kind of like what Tug used to take out that comm-drone.” Nathan took another bite as he thought. “There are There’re a lot of ways to counter our jump drive once they figure out how we’re using it. That

advantage will not last long. Once every ship in the Jung fleet knows about us, they'll be ready."

"If we had the plasma cannon turret working, we could jump in beside them, take a dozen shots, and jump out again along the same course, all without maneuvering. We'd only be in their sights for a few seconds. Do that a few times from varying angles and ranges, and just about any ship would fall sooner or later."

"Why couldn't we just jump with our nose pointed toward where we know the target will be when we come out of the jump?" Nathan said. "The plasma cannon in tube one made short work of them."

"Can we jump with our nose pointed off our course?" Cameron asked.

Nathan shrugged. "Why not? The way I understand it, our course and speed are the determining factors, that and the amount of power dumped into the jump fields when they cross. I don't think attitude is part of the equation."

"I'll have to check with Abby about that," Cameron said. "That reminds me; we should probably go ahead and replace all our torpedo tubes with the plasma cannons."

"Why?"

"We're going to run out of torpedoes sooner or later," Cameron explained. "Seems logical to switch them over while we have the time."

"I'm not so sure," Nathan argued. "There may be advantages to physical torpedoes over the plasma cannons that we don't know about. I think I'd prefer to keep at least half our tubes as they were built for now. Besides, we don't have any evidence yet to suggest that two cannons on each side would be twice as effective as one." Nathan took another bite of his lunch. "Like I said, let's not make any mistakes."

“You can make a mistake by not doing something just as easily, Nathan.”

“Very true. I’m just saying I’d like to analyze the idea a bit more before coming to a decision.”

“Nathan Scott, thinking before acting.” Cameron laughed. “Never thought I’d see the day.”

Nathan flashed a sarcastic lopsided smile her way as he finished his lunch and pushed the empty container aside. “Doesn’t matter anyway. With the Falcon and the new jump shuttle project, the fabricators are going to be busy for the next few weeks. We’ll make do with what we have for now. As soon as they get that new inner bulkhead installed in the starboard forward torpedo room, we’ll have two working plasma torpedo cannons pointed forward. That will have to do.”

“Plasma torpedo cannons?” Cameron asked. “I’ve never heard that term before.”

“Makes sense to me,” Nathan said. “They shoot bolts of plasma energy from a cannon that sits in one of our torpedo tubes. Plasma torpedo cannons.”

“Maybe just plasma torpedoes,” Cameron suggested. “That way they won’t be confused with the turret-mounted cannon once we get that up and running.”

“Sounds good.”

“I was also thinking about the missile battery,” Cameron said. “We only have a finite number of missiles as well.”

“You want to replace our missile battery also?”

“The missile battery isn’t the problem. It’s the space that the additional stored missiles take up. If we cut the number of missiles we carried by at least half, we’d gain a lot of deck space above us.”

“What would we do with it?”

“Put in more plasma torpedo cannons? Two facing forward and two to each side maybe? Or a ring of plasma cannon turrets, like the ones on the Avendahl?”

“Where would we put the extra missiles?”

“Store them below in the cargo decks,” Cameron suggested. “The forward elevator pads go from the missile deck to the cargo deck. That’s how they get them from the cargo shuttles on the hangar deck up to the missile deck.”

“That’s moving the missiles a long way from the launcher,” Nathan said. “It would take an hour to get them moved back up and into the loader racks.”

“What’s the most you’ve ever launched in one engagement?”

“I don’t know, twenty maybe? Thirty?”

“Then store twenty-four in the loader racks. That’s six rounds of four. We’re probably looking at quick, hit-and-run engagements now anyway. I doubt we’ll ever use them in such scenarios.”

“You could be right about that,” Nathan admitted. “Run the idea past Lieutenant Montgomery and Vlad. See what they say.”

“Yes, sir.”

“It’ll be a big project though.”

“Perhaps,” Cameron said as she took the last bite of her salad. “But I suspect we’ll have some of those.”

* * *

“Captain,” Jessica called from the hatch to the captain’s ready room, “do you have a moment?”

“Of course,” Nathan answered, placing his data pad down on his desk. He had been studying the performance parameters and potential firepower reports for the new plasma cannons installed in two of their torpedo tubes as well as the turret-mounted version that they were planning on testing. It was mind-numbing scientific data, and he welcomed a brief interlude. “What can I do for you?”

“I was going through all of the signals we collected during our brief time in Earth’s orbit,” Jessica began as she closed the hatch behind her.

“You collected signals, too?”

“I didn’t tell you?”

“No, you didn’t.”

“Oops,” she said as she plopped down on the couch in her usual fashion. “Yeah, I asked Naralena’s assistant to monitor any and all signals emanating from Earth.”

“How much did you collect?”

“Only a few minutes’ worth, I’m afraid. But there was a lot of data to be found in those few minutes. For starters, I was right. There is an organized resistance on Earth. There were several reports of attacks against small Jung targets on the surface. Nothing huge, but enough that it is probably pissing them off.”

“What else?”

“There’s chatter about us, about us returning that is. Apparently, they did think we were lost. The official word was that we had crashed into Jupiter. It was quite a shock when we suddenly appeared nearby out of nowhere. From what I can tell, they seem pretty excited.”

“Our people might be, but I’m pretty sure the Jung are not,” Nathan said. “What else?”

“There was a signal beamed directly at us.”

“Beamed?” Nathan wondered. The word implied that the message was targeted in order to avoid just anyone picking it up.

“Laser comm. A portable unit, based on the signal strength. Set to wide beam, probably because we were maneuvering and hard to lock onto.”

“I thought those units were designed to automatically lock onto the laser comm array of a friendly ship,” Nathan said.

“Yeah, but as soon as we went to general quarters, Naralena shut down the locking beacon. Standard procedure. Besides, even with the beacon on, those portable units don’t work as well as they’re supposed to.”

“So the message was targeted at us,” Nathan said. “What was the message, and who was it from?”

“It was an action order, sir,” Jessica said, “sent over Fleet channels using our standard rotating encryption codes. Valid authentication codes as well.”

“And you’re just telling me this now?” Nathan asked, not bothering to conceal the irritation in his voice.

“The comm-tech didn’t even know it was there, Nathan,” Jessica said. “He’s Corinairan and has never seen a Fleet comm-signal before. Neither has Naralena, for that matter. Also, it took me a while to decode the message. I haven’t done one since the academy, and we don’t have any code guys on board.”

“What did the message say?”

“Recon, one five zero five seven two, which I’m pretty sure is a date, and then a string of numbers I haven’t figured out yet.”

“Let me see them.” Nathan took Jessica’s data pad from her and studied the message. After a minute, he laughed. “Right ascension and declination.”

“What?”

“They’re used to find stars in the sky in astronomy. I had a telescope when I was a kid. I used to spend hours staring at the night sky,” he explained as he punched the numbers into his console. “Strange, but it doesn’t match anything in the astronomy charts. So they’re not asking us to recon a star system.”

“Why the date?” Jessica wondered. “Is that when they want the recon performed?”

“I don’t think so,” Nathan said. “This date is two months ago.”

“Wait a minute. Do you think that date is when the Jung attacked Earth?”

“Holy crap, you’re right. They’re giving us a viewing angle *and* the distance from the recon target,” Nathan said.

She frowned. “I thought you said the numbers didn’t point to any known star?”

“No, they don’t. The angle leads back to Earth from a point along the angle two light months away from her. Earth is the recon target. They want us to see what happened.”

“Why give us an angle to look from?” Jessica asked.

“Because they want us to see something,” Nathan surmised, “something special.”

“Are you sure?”

“What else could it be?”

“It could be a trap, for one,” Jessica warned. “They could’ve compromised our encryption and authentication codes.”

“Possibly, but why not just use a standard action order format? And why not put the name of the officer giving the order? That would be standard practice on a Fleet action order.”

“Without the issuing officer’s name, shouldn’t we be questioning its authenticity?”

“Normally, yes, but—I don’t know,” Nathan said. “There’s something about this that feels legit.”

“Well, I’d be sure to have everything armed and ready if you do go to that point,” Jessica said, “because if it is a trap, there are going to be a whole lot of Jung there to spring it.”

“Duly noted,” Nathan said with a nod. “And be sure that both Naralena and her assistant know how to recognize a Fleet comm-signal. We can’t afford to have any messages going unnoticed for days on end.”

Jessica looked suspiciously at Nathan. “That’s it? No butt chewing?”

“Not today. That’s the XO’s job anyway,” Nathan told her. “Besides, I have a confession of my own.”

Obviously happy she was not in trouble, Jessica leaned forward, her arms on her legs, trying to look serious. “What did you do, young man?”

“I’m afraid I inadvertently kept something from you,” Nathan said, bracing himself for her response. “Something that might be considered a security issue.”

Jessica tried not to laugh at her captain’s defensive body language as she leaned back on the couch again. “What makes you think I don’t already know?”

“Mister Percival is really Captain Dubnyk.”

Jessica laughed. “I guess I didn’t know.” Jessica looked at him. “What the hell, Nathan?”

“Vlad figured it out.”

“Since when does Vlad play detective?”

“He was working on the logs from the failed Jasper colony. He found a video transmission between the leader of the colony and Captain Dubnyk. It was Mister Percival.”

“Okay, so either Mister Percival is lying to us, and his real name is Dubnyk, or his real name is Percival, and he was lying to the colonists.”

“Why would he do that?”

“Why would he lie to us? Why would he want to be Percival instead of Dubnyk? To hide a criminal past? It’s been a thousand years, Nathan. None of the governments that existed back then are still around. Who’s going to arrest him?”

“Good point. But he’s lying about something. Or he’s lied about something.”

“Who hasn’t?”

“Either way, we should try to get to the truth of the matter.”

“And how do we do that?” Jessica asked. “Take a bio-scan and run it against arrest records from a thousand years ago? Which, by the way, we don’t have access to.”

“What if he is hiding something terrible?”

“Like what? Running an unregistered colony mission in an unregistered cargo ship? What was the penalty for that back in 2400? Take away his ship? Check. Strip him of his captain’s license? Check, if he ever had one, that is.”

“What do we do with him then?”

“Look, Nathan, I appreciate that you feel guilty for not telling me right away. And for the record, don’t do that again... ever,” she said as she pointed an accusatory finger at him. “I doubt he’s a threat to this ship. I mean, he’s a feeble old man. If you’re worried about him, just restrict him to his quarters or something. We’re already monitoring his movements. So far, he only goes to the head, medical, and the galley.”

“What about his computer usage?”

“Mostly just Earth history since after the plague. He’s also watched a few old, pre-plague movies—you know, the ones from the Ark. He hasn’t tried to look at anything more sensitive than a deck map so far. You want me to talk to him,” she said as she cracked her knuckles in jest, “get the truth out of him?”

Nathan recognized her sarcasm. “I’ll talk to him... Captain to captain, so to speak.”

“Suit yourself, Skipper,” Jessica said as she rose. “I’ll think about your punishment and get back to you,” she added with a smile as she headed for the exit.

“Thanks,” Nathan said. “And send Mister Riley in. I have some course changes for him to calculate.”

* * *

“Jump complete,” Mister Chiles reported.

“Position verified,” Lieutenant Yosef reported. “Approaching Beta Virginis Four.”

Nathan stared at the image of the massive, Earth-like world that nearly filled the main view screen. “Did we jump in too close, or is that thing really that big?”

“It’s really that big, sir,” Lieutenant Yosef answered.

“How much speed are we going to pick up during this maneuver?”

“Actually, we’re going to decelerate,” Mister Chiles said. “We’re coming around the planet in front of her orbital path, so we’ll be shedding some of our angular momentum to the planet.”

“That was at Lieutenant Yosef’s request,” Cameron told Nathan. “We were going a bit fast for data collection.”

“How much bigger is that planet than the Earth?” Nathan wondered.

“Approximately three and a half times the mass of Earth,” Lieutenant Yosef answered.

“I wonder what it’s like on the surface.”

“Freezing cold, extremely high gravity, and extremely high air pressure,” the lieutenant said, “not to mention that the air is rather toxic.”

“How long will the maneuver take?” Nathan wondered.

“Six point four hours,” Mister Riley said. “Like the lieutenant said, it *is* a big planet.”

“Anybody ever explore it?” Nathan asked.

“According to the database, it was explored robotically during the early days of core exploration. They found the usual resources you’d expect on a rocky world, as well as plenty of frozen water. No complex life to speak of other than microbial. They never paid it much attention.”

“Probably because of its mass,” Nathan said. “Too much propellant getting on and off that frozen rock.”

“Five minutes to our insertion point,” Mister Riley reported. “We will need to do a small course correction just before insertion, sir.”

“Very well.” Nathan looked at his watch. “I assume you’ve got this.”

“Yes, sir,” Cameron answered. “You don’t want to hang around and watch?”

“A six-hour maneuver? No thanks. Besides, I’m still not sleeping well.”

“Maybe you should go by medical and get something to help you sleep,” she suggested.

“Maybe.”

* * *

It had been nearly three days since Nathan had ordered the Aurora to retreat and jump away to safety. Leaving the Earth behind at the hands of the Jung had been one of the hardest things that he had ever done, and ever since they jumped away, he had not been able to sleep more than a few hours at a time. He had so much on his mind that all he could do was lie in bed and worry.

Sleep had eluded him during much of their time in the Pentaurus cluster as well. At the time, he resorted to pushing himself to exhaustion so that his body left him no choice but to sleep. However, it had been an unpleasant way to live, one that he didn't care to repeat. He didn't care much for pharmaceutical sleeping aides, which usually left him feeling groggy when he woke. Unfortunately, he had little choice this time. He no longer had the luxury of knowing that he would eventually be handing his ship back to Fleet. Now, he was taking his ship to war against a powerful enemy that undoubtedly had them vastly outnumbered. This time, there would be no one to hand the responsibility to. The responsibility was his and his alone. That meant he needed to take better care of himself. He needed to sleep.

Nathan entered the treatment area in medical and spotted Loki sitting in his bed, reading a data pad. The room was dark other than the light over Loki's head and the soft lighting around Josh's bed next to him. "How are you doing?" he whispered as he approached his bed.

"Fine, sir," Loki answered. "A little sore, and my eyes seem to tire easily, but otherwise, I'm doing okay."

"That's good to hear," Nathan whispered.

“Josh isn’t sleeping, sir. He’s in a medically induced coma so that he won’t feel the nanites working in his head. You don’t have to whisper.”

“Right.” Nathan took a seat next to Loki’s bed. “You don’t feel them?”

“Not really, but they said the nanites have already moved out of my head and into my gut, or something like that.”

“I see.”

“I’m sorry about what happened, sir,” Loki said, “to Earth, I mean. After everything you guys went through to get back home, well, that had to suck.”

“Yeah, pretty much,” Nathan said.

“It’s gotta be hard for you, sir.”

“What do you mean?”

“I can see it in your face,” Loki told him. “When I was worried about something, my father would tell me I looked like I had the weight of the world on my shoulders. I imagine I looked much like you do now.”

“That obvious, huh?”

“Yeah. Of course, you actually *do* have the weight of the world on your shoulders, so I guess you have a right to look the way you do.”

“I’m just tired,” Nathan told him. “I haven’t been sleeping well the last few days.”

“I don’t blame you, sir. Of course, you’re probably used to it by now, especially after fighting the Ta’Akar.”

“The Jung are not the Ta’Akar,” Nathan said. “They’ve got a lot more ships, and they control a lot more worlds. And we don’t have the Karuzari to help us this time.”

“Maybe we do.”

Nathan looked quizzically at Loki.

“Those resistance fighters in the 72 Herculis system on Tanna,” Loki said. “Aren’t they pretty much the same thing?”

“Not exactly,” Nathan said. “First, it sounded to me like they were more local than the Karuzari. Second, I doubt that one of them is an illegally deposed monarch.”

“Yeah, probably not,” Loki agreed with a shrug, “but if there’s one, there’s gotta be more, right?”

“You’ve been talking with Lieutenant Commander Nash, haven’t you?”

“She was in here a little while ago, asking me questions about Garrett and his friends. She really wants to go back there and talk to them.”

“I know. She told me.”

“I know it’s probably none of my business, sir. I’m just a navigator, but, are you going to let her?”

“I’m still thinking about it.”

“I guess captains have to do that a lot: think about things. Frankly, sir, I don’t know how you do it.”

“Do what?” Nathan wondered.

“Make the big decisions.”

“You just do. Most of the time, you don’t have any other choice.”

Loki was silent for a moment, looking down at his hands and thinking. Finally, without looking up, he said, “I guess that’s what makes you Na-Tan.”

“You don’t really believe in that Na-Tan garbage, do you?” Nathan asked. He looked at Loki as his head slowly rose to reveal a mischievous smile. “You’ve been hanging around Josh too long,” Nathan added.

“Yeah, he starts to corrupt you after a while.”

Nathan smiled back. “You know, she suggested that you go with her back to Tanna.”

“Yeah, she told me,” Loki said, offering no hint of how he felt about the idea.

“How do you feel about that?”

“I’m okay with it, sir,” Loki answered. “Anything to get me out of here. I’m getting awfully bored.”

“Even if I do let her go, it will be a while,” Nathan told him, “maybe a month or more.”

“Yeah, she told me we’re going to coast for a while and collect old signals and images. Just as well, I guess. I suspect I’m not going to be a hundred percent for a few more weeks anyway.”

“Think you’ll be up for a little consulting work sometime soon?” Nathan asked.

“The sim stuff? Major Prechitt already asked me. I told him I’d do what I can, but that’s not much, really. Josh does most of the flying. I mostly just plot the jumps and manage the sensors and other systems. It’s all straightforward stuff. Those Corinari pilots will figure it out in no time, sir.”

“Don’t discount your expertise too quickly,” Nathan told him. “You may not realize it now, but you probably know a few tricks in the backseat that would be useful to your relief crew.”

“Then you’re not planning on replacing us?”

“Not unless you’re planning on quitting on me,” Nathan told him.

“No, sir, not me. Not Josh either, once they wake him up, that is.”

“Good, because we’re going to need a lot of recon flights, far more than one crew can handle—maybe even more than two crews can handle.”

“I’ll miss working on the bridge, though,” Loki said.

“Oh, you’re still going to be working on the bridge, Mister Sheehan. I only have one other flight team, remember?”

“Yes, sir,” Loki answered, smiling.

“Get some rest, Mister Sheehan,” Nathan instructed as he rose. “I’ve got to find the doctor and ask her for something to knock my ass out for a few hours.”

“Thank you, sir.” Loki watched his captain walk across the treatment room, disappearing through the doorway at the far end. He looked at his friend, Josh, lying unconscious in the bed next to him, his breathing controlled by an artificial respiration device connected to him by tubes and wires. He closed his eyes and listened to the sound of the pressurized air being pumped intermittently through the tubes to cause his friend to breathe. Loki let the rhythmic hisses lull him back to sleep.

* * *

Nathan left medical with a small container of med-tabs that Doctor Chen promised would help him sleep without leaving him groggy. He had never liked taking medications, something that he had picked up from his mother. She had always told him stories about how her grandmother could cure just about anything with a root, a paste, or a special blend of herbal teas. Many ailments of his youth had been cured by such recipes, all handed down over a hundred generations who had to learn how to treat themselves in the absence of modern medicine. He put the container into his pants pocket and continued down the corridor.

It took less than a minute to reach Mister Percival’s quarters, as he had been assigned to one of the rooms that had been converted into an extended care room due to its close proximity to the ship’s medical department. As he

approached Mister Percival's quarters, he tapped his comm-set. "Nash, Captain," he announced in a hushed tone.

"*Go for Nash,*" Jessica's voice answered over his comm-set.

"Are you ready?" Nathan asked as he played with the volume on his comm-set, setting it as low as possible while still being audible to him.

"*Yes, sir.*"

Nathan pressed the buzzer next to the doorway and waited. For days, he had thought about what to say to the man, and for days, he had wondered what that man would say when confronted. A hundred different ways to ask him why he had pretended to be someone else had run through Nathan's mind. He had discussed it with Jessica more than once, but now he was going to have to choose one.

The door finally opened, and Mister Percival stood on the other side. His gray hair was neatly trimmed and styled, and his whiskers were trimmed and stately in their appearance. He was dressed in medical scrub pants and a loose fitting T-shirt, and he appeared ready for a good night's sleep.

"Captain, I wasn't expecting you," Mister Percival said.

"I didn't wake you, did I?" Nathan asked politely.

"Of course not. I was just reading."

"May I speak with you a moment?"

"Of course. Please come in," Mister Percival said, stepping to one side to allow Nathan to pass.

Nathan stepped into the small room as Mister Percival closed the door and followed him in. The main lights were off, and the room was lit by the bedside lamp and the glow of the view screen mounted in the bulkhead over the desk at the foot of the bed. "What were you reading?" Nathan asked.

“Just browsing some of the files in your database about your early post-plague Earth history. How your ancestors managed to survive the total collapse of industrialized society is fascinating. It makes me feel quite proud, actually, that human beings could be so resilient. Quite surprising really, considering the state of humanity at the time the plague struck.”

“Yes, well, don’t believe everything you read,” Nathan told him. “A lot of the early stuff is based on some pretty weak evidence. Nobody bothered keeping decent records for at least a century after the fall.”

“You sound like an historian, Captain.”

“It was my area of study in college.”

“A logical choice for a future starship captain,” Mister Percival said as he sat on the edge of his bed. “Please, sit.”

Nathan took a seat on the chair at the small desk built into the bulkhead. He glanced at the viewer on the wall over the desk, noting that there were history files on display, just as Mister Percival had indicated.

“To what do I owe the honor of your company, Captain?” Mister Percival asked graciously.

Nathan thought for a moment, all of the best tactics that he had discussed with Jessica running through his mind one more time. He pulled his data pad from his thigh pocket and thumbed the power button, the screen instantly coming to life. He glanced at the screen just long enough to see that it was still displaying the last thing he had viewed on it. “I was wondering if I might ask you a question.”

“Of course.”

Nathan tossed the data pad unceremoniously onto the bed next to Mister Percival. “Why is the man in this video log file addressing you as Captain Dubnyk?”

"Well, that's a different approach," Jessica's voice whispered into Nathan's ear over his barely audible comm-set. *"Don't believe we discussed that one."*

Mister Percival picked up the data pad, his eyes still locked onto Nathan's. His expression had changed, as had the look in his eyes. He pressed the play button and listened to the video log for several seconds before pausing it again. "I guess you already know the answer to that question, Captain. That's why you're here, isn't it?"

"So, are you Dubnyk, or are you Percival?"

The old man cocked his head to one side, his eyes gazing upward for a moment as he considered the captain's question. "I would say that I am more *Dubnyk* than I am Percival."

"His name probably isn't Dubnyk either," Jessica whispered over the comm-set.

"So you're not Dubnyk, either," Nathan said. "Then what's your real name?"

"I'm a man born a thousand years ago, Captain. Does my real name matter all that much?"

"No, I suppose it doesn't. We'd have no way to verify it one way or the other," Nathan admitted, remembering that Jessica had pointed that out to him in an earlier conversation. "However, *who* you are, as in what *kind* of man you are, *does* matter. At least, it does to me."

"An honest man's word is worth more than a liar's money," the old man answered, obviously quoting something he had heard before.

"Something like that." Nathan leaned forward, his forearms resting on his knees as he stared into the old man's eyes. "Who *are* you?"

The old man stared right back, unflinching in his gaze. "For all intents and purposes, I am Captain Alan Dubnyk,

owner and captain of the interstellar cargo ship, Jasper.” The old man bowed his head a little as he held his hand out slightly to his sides, palms up, as if to say *at your service*.

“All right,” Nathan said, sitting up straight again. “For the purpose of this discussion, let’s say you *are* Captain Dubnyk. Why were you pretending to be Mister Percival?”

“*And why were you in his stasis pod?*” Jessica whispered over Nathan’s comm-set.

Nathan was shaken for a split second. He had almost forgotten that Jessica was listening in on the conversation. “*And why were you in his stasis pod?*”

Captain Dubnyk’s eyes narrowed slightly, examining his interrogator. “The colony had died due to no fault of my crew or me, victims of a string of unfortunate events. I had insufficient resources to leave orbit and no way to get down to the surface, which was frozen solid by then, in any case. My only hope of survival was my emergency beacon and that dying old man’s souped-up, medical stasis pod.”

“What did you hope to accomplish?” Nathan wondered.

“I was trying to live, Captain,” Captain Dubnyk insisted. “I figured another ship full of evacuees would pick up our beacon and respond. Even if they didn’t, sooner or later, one of the fringe planets would recover and start sending ships out once more. Maybe by then they would have detected our beacon and sent someone out to rescue us.”

“Quite the long shot,” Nathan commented unemotionally.

“True enough, but I had no other options.”

“So you killed a helpless, unconscious, old man and took his place in his stasis pod.”

Captain Dubnyk shifted uncomfortably in his chair. “I had *three hundred* colonists still on board, Captain. Most of their pods were still working, and might have continued to do so for some time, but only if someone maintained them. The

crew's pods were in substandard condition at best. The odds of long-term survival in any one of those pods was laughable. Yes, I killed our benefactor, but I did so to try to save the lives of three hundred people, healthy people. Young and well, with long and prosperous lives ahead of them. There were even some children, Captain. Would you prefer that I had killed one of them instead? I mean, what use would the children have been in that situation?"

"Damn," Jessica whispered over Nathan's comm-set. *"I didn't see that coming."*

"When did you do this?" Nathan asked, trying not to miss a beat, or show any emotional reaction to Captain Dubnyk's defensive pleas.

"When?"

"When."

"That put him on the ropes," Jessica whispered over the comm-set.

"Once I was sure that everyone on the surface was dead and that I had no other choice."

"How many years after you made orbit?" Nathan said, clarifying his question.

"About two hundred, I believe," Captain Dubnyk answered. "I did not simply kill him, Captain. He was still alive when I placed him into my stasis pod and activated it. He had as much chance as anyone else."

"Anyone else except you," Nathan commented.

"The safety and survival of those colonists were my responsibility," Dubnyk insisted.

"As was the life of Mister Percival, your benefactor," Nathan reminded him.

"I am not proud of what I did, Captain," Captain Dubnyk said, "but I stand by my decision."

"This guy is good," Jessica whispered.

"I'm sure you do, Captain," Nathan said, ignoring Jessica's comment over his comm-set.

Captain Dubnyk sat up straight and crossed his arms, appearing indignant. "Who are you to judge me, Captain?"

"No one is judging you, Captain Dubnyk, least of all me."

Captain Dubnyk pointed an accusatory finger Nathan's way. "You've made decisions that have cost lives, Captain Scott—or should I say, Na-Tan? I've heard your crew talking in the mess about your adventures in the Pentaurus cluster. When exactly did the Earth fall to your enemy, Captain? While you were playing the role of a legend back on Corinair?"

"*He's trying to rattle you, Nathan,*" Jessica whispered in his ear over Nathan comm-set. "*Don't let him.*"

"Captain Dubnyk," Nathan began calmly as he sat back in his chair. "I have no idea if your actions constitute a crime or simply a desperate act by the captain of a doomed mission. Either way, I suspect that the act occurred out of the jurisdiction of any government in place at the time. Even if it had, none of those governments are still around to press charges. In addition, there doesn't appear to be any government around to do so now. It seems that, while time may have slowly drained the years from your life, it has also provided for the absolution of your sins. Now, as captain of this ship, I have the authority to investigate this matter *and* take appropriate actions as I see fit. However, I have other, *far* more pressing concerns with which to deal, and I cannot afford the distraction."

"What is it you intend to do with me?" Captain Dubnyk demanded.

"Nothing," Nathan stated, "for now. I doubt very seriously that a nice, safe world to set you off on will present itself anytime in the near future. In the meantime,

your movements about this ship will be restricted and monitored.” Nathan pulled a small wrist device out of his pocket and tossed it at the old man. “You are to wear this monitoring device on your wrist at all times. You are restricted to your quarters, the head, the galley, and medical.”

“You’re imprisoning me?”

“No, but I can if you’d like,” Nathan told him sternly. “We do have a brig on board.”

“Captain, this is unfair...”

“On the contrary, Captain Dubnyk, if that is your real name. I’m being quite fair. I’m the captain of a ship at war. According to Fleet regs, I have the power to do a *lot* more than I am, so consider yourself lucky.”

Captain Dubnyk sat, staring at Captain Scott, studying him. Finally, his expression softened, revealing his acceptance of his situation. “I am a feeble, old man, as you have so graciously pointed out. I am thankful that you rescued me, and I regret that I am the only one that survived more than you will ever know.” Captain Dubnyk took a breath and let it out slowly. “I will not cause you any trouble, Captain.”

Nathan rose and straightened his uniform. “Thank you, Captain Dubnyk,” Nathan stated.

“Please, Captain Scott, drop the title. It is no longer appropriate. I am Alan or Mister Dubnyk.”

“As you wish,” Nathan agreed as he stepped toward the door. He stopped and turned around. “If time permits, we may talk about this further.”

“If you desire, Captain. You know where to find me.”

“Good night, Mister Dubnyk.” Nathan opened the door and stepped into the corridor, closing it behind him.

"Damn, Skipper," Jessica said over Nathan's comm-set. *"I didn't know you had that in you."*

"Neither did I," Nathan said as he headed down the corridor.

"What do we do now?" Jessica asked.

"You go back to work," Nathan ordered. "I'm going to bed." He tapped his comm-set and closed the channel. As he continued down the corridor, he pulled the packet of med-tabs out of his pocket, opened it, and dumped one of the tiny, flat tablets into his palm. He then popped it into his mouth. It had been a long day, and one way or another, he was going to get some sleep.

* * *

"Jump complete," Mister Riley reported.

"Verifying position," Lieutenant Yosef announced. "Position verified. Seventeen point five light months from Sol. That also puts us four point three light months from the location where we first jumped to nearly four and a half months ago."

"Where the Jung ambushed us," Nathan added.

"Yes, sir."

"And you can calculate it that closely?" Nathan asked in astonishment.

"Actually, sir, the ship's systems keep a running calculation of Earth time as we travel based on our speed and length of time at said speed. It's a really complex system that's fascinating once you understand it."

"I'll take your word for it," Nathan interrupted. "Begin scans."

“Aye, sir, beginning scans,” Lieutenant Yosef answered.

“Scan ahead to the recon point, Mister Navashee,” Nathan said. “And be sure to scan the area around the point as well. Make the radius equal to our current distance from the recon point. I don’t want any surprise guests, not this time.”

“Yes, sir,” Mister Navashee reported from the port auxiliary station.

“That’s no guarantee that there won’t be anyone there waiting for us,” Cameron reminded him.

“I’m well aware of that fact, Commander,” Nathan said. Cameron had argued against trusting the message ever since she had learned of it, and like a good XO, she was making sure her captain was aware of her objections.

“They could be parked anywhere along that line, waiting for us. From this distance...”

“I know,” Nathan interrupted. His stern tone was enough. Cameron got his message and ceased her tactful objections.

“I’ve got a visual fix on one of the Jung gunboats, Captain,” Lieutenant Yosef reported excitedly, “the one that originally ambushed us when we finished our first test jump.”

“Put it on the main view screen,” Nathan ordered. A moment later, a small dark gray ship appeared on the screen. “I can barely see it,” Nathan stated as he squinted his eyes.

“We’re on the opposite side from this angle,” the lieutenant said. “We’re seeing its unlit side.”

“Can you zoom in?”

“Yes, sir, but I’m keeping a wide field in the hope of catching us as we come out of our first test jump.”

“This is strange,” Nathan mumbled.

“Creepy is a better word,” Jessica added. Abby stepped up next to her, having entered the bridge a moment ago. “Doctor,” Jessica greeted.

Nathan turned and looked at her, surprised to see her, as she had not been on the bridge in some time.

“I’m sorry, Captain,” Abby apologized. “I just had to see.”

“That’s quite all right, Abby,” Nathan assured her as he turned back toward the screen.

“There,” Mister Chiles announced, pointing to the lower left corner of the screen as they observed the flash of the Aurora’s first test jump from the orbit of Jupiter out into the very position in the Oort they were observing.

Abby gasped, her hands going to her mouth.

Nathan knew that Abby was not seeing the Aurora, but rather her father, the inventor of the jump drive, who had died on board the Aurora shortly after that first jump. On the Aurora she was seeing on the view screen, he was still alive and well, standing by her side at the jump console. She turned her head and looked at the starboard auxiliary console near the aft portion of the bridge that had once served as the jump control station, expecting to see her long-lost father standing there and beaming with pride at the first successful demonstration of his device.

Nathan watched as her face saddened. “Zoom in on us... I mean them... I mean, the Aurora. You know what I mean.”

“Aye, sir,” Lieutenant Yosef said. “Zooming in on the old Aurora.”

“Thank you.” Nathan turned back to Abby. “Are you all right, Doctor?”

Abby nodded, her hands still covering her mouth, her eyes tearing as the image of the Aurora from four months ago suddenly filled the screen.

“This really *is* creepy,” Cameron repeated.

“Yeah, it is,” Nathan agreed, his eyes transfixed as he watched his ship suddenly maneuver toward the first Jung ship.

“They see the first gunboat,” Cameron said. “God, Nathan, I can remember sitting in the navigator’s chair and passing you the intercept course like it all happened yesterday.”

“I can remember executing the turn and throttling up. Captain Roberts liked to close on his targets quickly. He said the ship was designed for such maneuvers. I remember *that* from our sim training.”

“She’s firing torpedoes,” Cameron said.

They watched for nearly twenty minutes as the four and half month-old images of their ship battling, and then boarding, the Jung gunboats replayed in front of them on the forward view screen. Now, finally, the Aurora was running away from the second damaged gunboat that was firing her rail guns at them.

“I remember the pounding on our hull by those guns at close range,” Cameron said. “It was frightening.”

“Try floating in space between those two ships,” Jessica said, recalling her part in that encounter, “with your ship coming toward you really quickly.”

Nathan turned in his chair and smiled at Jessica, remembering how he had dipped the tail end of the ship just as she was about to hit in order to soften her blow. “I remember that little maneuver as well.”

“By the way, thanks again for that one, Skipper,” Jessica said with a wink.

“She’s running,” Cameron announced, as if calling a play by play. “Where were you headed?” she asked. “I don’t remember giving you a course.”

“You may not have. I don’t remember. I just remember turning away from that Jung ship and going to full burn on all four mains,” Nathan said. “Shortly after that, we were hurtling toward the Campaglia and being fired upon from all directions.”

“Why didn’t you turn toward Earth?” Jessica wondered.

“If I had, that gunboat would have had her guns on us longer. Plus, we would have been even closer to her when her reactor went. I was just trying to get as much distance as possible between us and that ship.”

“Good thinking,” Jessica said.

They watched as the Aurora’s engines burned brightly, their light nearly obscuring their view of her aft end as she sped away from them. Blue-white light suddenly spilled out across the fleeing Aurora’s hull as she began her jump cycle, but then, just as suddenly, a massive ball of intense, white light erupted from the Jung gunboat. The entire screen was instantly filled with the bright light, causing everyone on the bridge to cover their eyes with their forearms or hands.

“Jesus!” Nathan exclaimed. It took several seconds for the bright, white light filling the screen to begin to fade. Then, as suddenly as it had appeared, it vanished.

“So that’s what an antimatter explosion looks like,” Vladimir stated from the back of the bridge, having come in only moments before.

“Is that what the Earth would’ve seen?” Nathan asked the lieutenant.

“Not exactly,” she answered. “They would have been looking at it from a slightly different angle, and the image would be reversed. To them, the detonation would be coming from behind the Aurora, if they were even looking, that is.”

"I'm sure someone was looking," Abby stated. "They knew our destination."

"Then they probably think..." Nathan began.

"They haven't even seen it yet, Captain," Lieutenant Yosef reminded him. "We were still thirteen light months away from Earth, beyond the outer fringes of the Oort."

"Then they have no idea what happened," Nathan realized. "They don't even know we were ambushed."

"No, sir. Not for another nine months," the lieutenant added. "As far as they know, we went around the backside of Jupiter and never came back around."

"They could've sent an FTL runner to look for us," Cameron said, "or an FTL recon ship."

"A runner, maybe, but all the FTL recon ships were probably too busy keeping an eye on the Jung in the Alpha Centauri system," Nathan said as he stared at the now empty star field on the main view screen. He knew that every star he saw out there was light years away and that the light he was seeing was tens, hundreds, maybe millions of years old. Yet it had never occurred to him that the light from the antimatter explosion that instantly sent them a thousand light years across the galaxy had not yet reached the Earth's observatories. They had not yet seen it happen.

Nathan took a deep breath and sighed. "Even if they did send someone out to check on us, they would've seen the same thing we just did. If we hadn't lived through it, I would have assumed we were destroyed by that antimatter explosion."

"Especially after not being heard from for four months," Jessica added.

Nathan took a deep breath. "Well, we've seen all we needed to see from this position. Mister Riley, plot a jump to the recon point."

“Aye, Captain,” Mister Riley answered.

“How are the scans going, Mister Navashee?” Nathan asked.

“Almost finished, sir.”

“Jump plotted and locked,” Mister Riley reported.

“Tactical, take us to general quarters.”

“General quarters, aye,” Jessica answered.

As Cameron quickly left the bridge for the Combat Information Center, the lights on the bridge dimmed, and the trim lights all around the overheads and the deck turned red. As the prerecorded call to general quarters played throughout the ship, Nathan could envision his crew as they quickly and methodically assumed their proper stations. His executive officer had trained them well and had drilled them repeatedly during their journey back to Earth. At the time, Nathan had thought the constant drills served little purpose other than to keep the crew busy. Now, he was happy to have been wrong.

He listened to Naralena’s two communications assistants taking calls from all over the ship as each department reported their state of readiness. Naralena stood, watching over them at the new comm-center in the middle of the aft end of the bridge. With as much traffic as those two technicians were handling just from within the Aurora, Nathan couldn’t imagine how Naralena had once handled it all on her own.

No more than forty seconds later, Naralena turned to face forward. “All battle stations report manned and ready, Captain. XO is in CIC, chief of the boat is in damage control, the CAG is in flight ops, and hangar deck is ready for action.”

“Very good,” Nathan responded. “Mister Navashee?”

“No contacts within ten light days of the recon point, sir.”

“Tactical?”

“Threat board is clear. All weapons show ready for deployment,” Jessica reported.

“Execute your jump, Mister Riley,” Nathan ordered.

“Aye, sir,” Mister Riley answered. “Jumping in three..... two.....one.....jumping.”

The blue-white jump flash washed over the bridge, automatically subdued by the main view screen.

“Jump complete,” Mister Riley reported.

“Verifying position,” Lieutenant Yosef announced.

“Rescan out to ten light days, all directions,” Nathan ordered.

“Aye, sir,” Mister Navashee answered from the secondary sensor station set up at the port auxiliary console.

“Position verified,” Lieutenant Yosef confirmed. “We are at the recon point.”

“Course?”

“On course for a near pass of Earth,” Mister Riley reported from the navigator’s chair. “At present speed, it would take us several years to get there.”

“Tactical?”

“Threat board is clear, Captain,” Jessica answered.

“Mister Navashee?”

“No contacts out to ten light days in all directions, sir.”

“Very good. Tactical, set condition two. Maintain readiness and rig for stealth run.”

“Aye, sir. Set condition two and rig for stealth.”

“Attention all decks,” Naralena called through the ship-wide address system. “Set condition two and maintain combat readiness. Repeat, set condition two and maintain combat readiness. All decks, rig for stealth run. Repeat, all decks, rig for stealth run.”

The red lights along the overheads and decks changed from red to orange as Naralena finished her announcement.

“Comms, have the XO and the COB remain on station for now. Same with the CAG. We’ll stay at condition two for an hour and reassess.”

“Aye, sir,” Naralena answered.

“All decks report rigged for stealth, sir,” Jessica reported. “All electrical and heat-generating systems along the outer edges of the ship have been shut down. Hull temps should be down shortly.”

“Mister Chiles, bring the ship into a topside first orientation so we’ll have a better angle for all sensor and comm arrays.”

“Aye, sir,” Mister Chiles answered from the helm. “Pitching up and rolling over.”

“Comms, tell the Cheng to switch to the backup heat exchangers. I’d like to keep our topside as cold as possible while it faces the Earth.”

“Aye, sir.”

“Maneuver complete,” Mister Chiles reported.

“Very good,” Nathan answered. “All right, everyone, let’s see what happened to the Earth while we were gone.”

CHAPTER TWO

"In his first week in office, President Scott is already under pressure, as fears of a Jung invasion of Earth continue to grow after the loss of the Earth Defense Force's first faster-than-light ship, the Aurora, in a tragic accident over Jupiter two months ago," the newscaster reported on the display screen at the front of the compartment. *"Support of the newly elected president's promise to establish peaceful relations with the Jung through negotiation has lost much of its support in recent days. With the loss of the Aurora, many fear that the Jung may see this as an opportune time to strike. Proponents of the EDF call for an increase in commitment from all the world's nations, while those in opposition still insist that the construction of any starship capable of traveling to other star systems will be seen as a threat by the Jung. President Scott is on his way to the United Earth Republic headquarters in Geneva for today's vote on the EDF's new budget. Many of those who supported the president during his bid for office now wonder if the president's judgment may be affected by the loss of his youngest son, Ensign Nathan Scott, who was serving aboard the Aurora at the time of her tragic loss."*

"When are they going to stop bringing that up?" Eli said as he entered the shuttle's forward passenger compartment.

"They love tragedy," President Scott said as he gazed out the window. The over-sized shuttle was nearing the top

of its suborbital arc across the Atlantic on its way to Europe. From the edge of space, the nations of Earth seemed so insignificant, just as Nathan had told him during one of his few visits home in his four years at the academy.

“One of the many things that is wrong with the world today,” Eli added in frustration as he took a seat next to his father. “I have the latest analysis of the new EDF budget proposal for you,” Eli told him as he muted the view screen. “It doesn’t look good.”

“How so?”

“They’re asking for more than we thought—a lot more. They insist they need to lay keel on the Aurora’s replacement as soon as the Intrepid clears the Orbital Assembly Platform.”

“They’re not satisfied with additional funding to speed up the completion of the Celestia?” the president wondered.

“I guess not. There’s something in there about needing more than one FTL warship in order to adequately defend the Earth while the other one is off on diplomatic missions. I guess they figured out that you were going to send the Celestia to seek out the Jung as soon as she was ready to fly. They don’t want to give up their only fast ship.”

“They’re just posturing for the press,” the president said as he leaned his head back against the headrest to rest for a moment. “They expect me to vote against any spending increase, so they’re padding their bid to give them more wiggle room.”

“But that budget was supposed to be finalized weeks ago.”

“They have the right to amend portions of it at the last minute. It’s in the charter.”

“Well, it shouldn’t be,” Eli protested. “That’s another thing that’s wrong with the system.”

Dayton Scott closed his eyes. It was not the first time Eli had complained about the Republic's global system of government. "No form of government is perfect, Eli," President Scott stated solemnly, his eyes still closed. "The more perfect you ask it to be, the less perfect it will become."

"That doesn't even make sense," Eli mumbled as he leafed through his copy of the proposed budget.

President Scott sighed as he opened his eyes, leaned his head forward again, and began to read the highlighted changes. He had once believed that Eli would carry on his family's political dynasty. However, early on, he had realized that his eldest son was far too idealistic for politics. Thus, he had been relegated to serving as an assistant to his father in the hope that the experience would bring him the wisdom and balance he lacked. Unfortunately, it had not been the case. If anything, Eli had grown more impatient with the realities of thirty-fifth century Earth politics.

* * *

"Many of those who supported the president during his bid for office now wonder if the president's judgment may be affected by the loss of his youngest son, Ensign Nathan Scott, who was serving aboard the Aurora at the time of her tragic loss."

"Whose goddamn idea was it to put a president's son on board a new, untested starship in the first place?" the admiral bellowed as he picked up the remote and muted the news broadcast. He turned to face his aide. "Anybody ever figure that one out?"

“No, sir,” his aide apologized. “It’s time for your evening briefing, Admiral.”

The admiral grumbled. “Very well, let’s get this over with.”

“Yes, sir,” his assistant answered.

Admiral Galiardi watched as his assistant left the office, disappearing through a side door that led to the offices of his senior staff. He turned his chair to face the large window behind his desk and stared at the city of Port-Gentil stretched out to the north. It was one of thousands of cities of Earth that had risen from their own crumbled ruins during the centuries that followed the great bio-digital plague. He looked eastward, toward Cape Lopez Bay, at the sprawling spaceport between the Earth Defense Force’s command center and the bay itself. It was a day like any other, with a constant stream of cargo and personnel shuttles coming and going as they ferried workers and supplies between the Earth Defense Force’s main spaceport and its only orbital spaceport, the Orbital Assembly Platform. It was a never ending procession, changing only in ebbs and flows. It had been going on for more than forty years, ever since the EDF first established the spaceport after learning of the Jung’s desire to rule all the core worlds, if not the entire galaxy.

“Good evening, sir,” Rear Admiral Marois greeted as he led the procession of senior staff officers into the admiral’s office.

“Evening, Lance,” the admiral greeted, “gentlemen.”

The eight senior officers took their usual seats at the briefing table on one side of the admiral’s office. Admiral Galiardi had never been a fan of large offices. Nevertheless, his appointment as commander of the EDF had necessitated such trappings. At least it was convenient to be able to hold

his daily briefings in his own office rather than in another room elsewhere in the massive EDF complex.

The admiral waited as his officers took their seats. "Let's make this brief. I have to leave for Geneva within the hour."

"The budget vote?" his chief of staff, Rear Admiral Marois, asked.

"Yes, the budget vote," Admiral Galiardi said.

"Odd hour for a vote, don't you think?"

"I think they like to give their constituents the illusion of them working long hours," the admiral answered. "Makes them look dedicated."

"Do you seriously believe they'll cut our funding with the Jung virtually knocking at our doorstep?" another officer asked.

"I believe they will do what they believe to be the right thing." Admiral Galiardi turned to his chief of intelligence and changed the subject, not wanting the usual discussion of politics to derail the briefing. "Anything new from the recon ships?"

"No, sir," Rear Admiral Novikoff answered. "However, we still haven't heard from all six FTL runners this morning."

"Which runners have yet to report in?" Admiral Galiardi wondered.

"Three and Six, sir."

"Any reason I should be concerned?" Galiardi asked.

"Six is not due to return for another two hours," Rear Admiral Novikoff stated. "Three is currently twenty minutes overdue." The EDF's chief of intelligence could see the look in everyone's eyes. "Relax, gentlemen. Such delays are not uncommon. We normally don't become concerned until they are at least an hour past their report time."

"I still think we should have built more of those little buggers," Rear Admiral Bentley complained.

“Those runners may be small, but they were not cheap,” Admiral Galiardi reminded his chief of operations. “Six was as many as we could squeeze out of the budget without alerting the Republic that we were building FTL-capable ships. We’re just lucky our orders were to not build FTL-capable *warships*. They could have ordered us not to build any FTL-capable ships.”

“You really think they don’t know?” Rear Admiral Bentley wondered.

“Oh, they know all right,” Admiral Galiardi said. “They’re just not saying anything, because they know we need them. And this way, they won’t have to take the heat if the public finds out.” The admiral turned to his longtime friend, Rear Admiral Duncan. “Speaking of which, how are we doing with the *Celestia*, Marty?”

“We’re still three months out from completion,” Rear Admiral Duncan reported. “The *Aurora* crashing into Jupiter didn’t help matters. That investigation kept our crews at a standstill for more than a month. We should be only two months from completion by now.”

“Is she space-worthy yet?” the admiral asked.

“Technically, yes,” Rear Admiral Duncan explained. “All her maneuvering systems are installed and functional, and two of her four main engines are ready as well. Problem is we don’t have all the corridors completed that connect her command deck with her engineering deck.”

“But her command deck is completed?” the admiral asked.

“Functional, yes, but far from completed,” Duncan answered. “The bridge has all her consoles and displays in place, as well as artificial gravity and life support. But most of the systems—the bridge consoles, controls, and monitors—are not even installed.”

“Such as?”

“Weapons, long-range sensors, electronic countermeasures and jamming systems... She doesn't even have long-range comms yet.”

“What about her flight deck?” Admiral Galiardi wondered.

“Her flight deck is in place, but she doesn't have any working transfer airlocks yet. Those won't be ready for another week. Once they are in place, things will go a lot faster, as we'll be able to move crews and materials into her midsection through the hangar deck instead of just the fore and aft boarding hatches.”

“What about her weapons?” Galiardi asked. “When will they be installed?”

“All her mini-rail guns have been installed,” Rear Admiral Duncan explained. “They're fully assembled, complete in their bays planet-side, so it was just a matter of shuttling them up and plugging them in from the outside. Hooking them up is another matter. Until the inner decks are constructed, there is no way to connect them. Remember, a lot of the Celestia is still empty hull right now.”

“So, what you're saying is that she can fly, and she can support life within her command deck and her engineering sections, but the two spaces are not connected.”

“Correct.”

“How long until they are?”

“The connection between the flight deck and engineering has already been completed. The connection between the flight deck and the command deck should be completed in another week. To be honest, sir, it's a miracle her entire hull is completed already. It's not like we've been following the original production schedule.”

"I know, Marty," the admiral admitted. "I know." The admiral sighed. "How soon will she be fueled up and ready to leave the OAP? The Reliant is already a month past her return to port due to the Intrepid's weapons refit. If we don't get her in pretty soon, she's going to be too low on propellant to be considered combat effective."

"We've already started fueling her up," Rear Admiral Duncan said. "It will take a couple days to fill her main tanks, but she's already got enough propellant on board to leave the OAP if necessary. However, that would delay getting her fully fueled, not to mention the delay in the installation of the rest of her systems. The Intrepid can leave port anytime. The remainder of her refit can be performed internally. Her crew has been recalled from the surface and should be on board by the end of the day. After that, she can move out. If you like, you can recall the Reliant now. The OAP will have an empty bay by the time the Reliant reaches her."

"The Reliant is mid-system right now," Admiral Galiardi said. "I don't want to recall her until the Intrepid is in position to take her place."

"Yes, sir," Rear Admiral Duncan said. "I'll see to it that the Intrepid is under way as soon as her crew reports in."

"Very good," Admiral Galiardi said. "I want the Celestia fully fueled and ready to leave the OAP as soon as possible. Once the Intrepid departs, reassign her work crews to the Celestia. I'd like to see her flight deck functional so we can start using it as a construction staging area. Four sub-light warships are not enough. They may be heavily armed, but the Jung ships can easily outrun them. Without the Aurora, the Celestia is our last hope of defending ourselves. Let's get her built, Marty."

"Yes, sir."

“Now, if there is nothing further,” the admiral said as he stood, “I have a shuttle to catch. I’ll return tonight, after the budget vote.”

* * *

Marlene Scott stood beside the armchair in her husband’s office, staring out the large picture window that overlooked the valley below. She could still remember her youngest son sitting on his father’s knee as they stared out the window together. Nathan had always been a fidgety child, never sitting still. He had always wanted down off his father’s knee in order to go and play. He was so unlike his older brother, Eli, who would sit there listening intently to his father for hours on end without complaint.

“Mother?” her youngest daughter, Miri, called from the doorway. “Everything is packed. Would you like to look over the bags before we load them?”

Marlene looked at her daughter. “I’m sure they’re fine.”

Miri saw the tears in her mother’s eyes. It had not been an uncommon sight over the past two months, ever since her brother, Nathan, had been lost along with the other hundred souls on board the ill-fated Aurora. She moved closer to her mother to provide comfort and support. “What is it?”

“I was just picturing Nathan trying to climb down off your father’s knee right here in this chair.”

Miri stepped up beside her mother, putting her arms around her as she leaned her head against her mother’s shoulder. “Maybe getting away from this house for a while is a good thing.”

“Perhaps,” Marlene said, “but this house will be with me wherever I go. It’s our home.”

“I know. But there are so many things here that remind you of Nathan, Mom.”

“I don’t need anything to remind me of him.”

“I know. That’s not what I meant,” Miri said.

Marlene turned back toward the window. “I don’t really want to live in Winnipeg. Especially not with...”

“Mom, you have to stop blaming Dad.”

“I don’t blame him, honey,” Marlene protested. “After all, I’m the one that begged him to change Nathan’s assignment. I blame myself.”

“Then why? Why don’t you want to be around him?”

“Because he doesn’t *feel* anything,” Marlene said. “He hasn’t so much as cried since Nathan disappeared. How do you not feel for a lost child? For your own son?”

“He feels, Mom. He feels. He just can’t show it. He has too much to deal with right now. He’s the president, remember?”

“Mrs. Scott?” the protection agent called from the doorway. “The van is here. Shall we load your bags, ma’am?”

“How can I forget,” Marlene told her daughter. “Yes, please. Thank you,” she said to the agent.

“Yes, ma’am,” the agent replied as he backed out of the doorway.

“Why don’t you go ahead,” Miri suggested to her mother. “I’ll see to the bags.”

“You have your own family to care for, dear.”

“They’re at a pool party at their friend’s, Mom, and Lee is at the hospital. I have plenty of time.”

“I’m going to miss you all so much,” Marlene said as she kissed her daughter on the cheek.

“We’re only an hour away, Mother,” Miri reminded her. “And you’ll have your own private shuttle on standby for you, remember? You’re the wife of the president.”

Marlene rolled her eyes. “Then I guess I’d better be going,” she said, pulling herself together. “Somebody has to turn that dreary place they call a residence into an acceptable home.”

Miri watched as her mother headed for the door.

“I’ll get changed,” her mother called as she left the room.

Miri sighed and took a seat in the large armchair in front of the window. She, too, had sat on her father’s knee as he sat in that very same chair, as had all of her brothers and sisters at one time or another. She, too, could remember Nathan squirming from his father’s grasp as he struggled to get down. He had always been so rambunctious, so independent. A tear welled up in her eye as she thought of her younger brother. *Oh, Nathan, she thought. Why did you have to join the fleet?*

* * *

Captain Yahi sat in his command chair as he sipped his cup of tea. All about him, the bridge of the UES Reliant bustled with activity as more than a dozen officers and technicians went about the daily routine of running the massive sub-light warship. They had been on patrol for nearly two years now, and his crew was as practiced and efficient as any crew in the fleet, but they were also homesick. They needed to go back to Earth, to see the clear, blue skies of their homeworld, to see their loved ones,

to sleep in their own beds, and to wear civilian clothes. They needed to be reminded of what it was they were protecting.

“Latest communiqué from Fleet,” Commander Denker, the Reliant’s executive officer, said as he handed the data pad to his captain.

Captain Yahi set down his tea on the arm of his command chair and placed his left thumb against the data pad’s fingerprint reader. The data pad’s screen lit up and displayed the message. “The Intrepid will be getting under way sometime tomorrow morning. We should be clear to return to Earth within twenty-four hours of her departure from the OAP.”

“It’s about time,” Commander Denker said. “If we don’t get back to port soon, you’re going to run out of tea.”

“Well, we can’t have that, now can we?” The captain smiled as he handed the data pad back to his XO and picked up his teacup once more.

“Flight reports delta patrol is away,” the tactical officer, Lieutenant Calloway, reported.

“What’s the latest from the FTL recon ships?” Captain Yahi asked the lieutenant as he took another sip.

“Last feed was three hours ago, sir. All recon points except for Three and Six show no contacts.”

“What’s with Three and Six?” the captain wondered.

“Last word from Fleet said Three was overdue,” Commander Denker added.

“How overdue?” Captain Yahi asked, the slightest concern showing on his face.

“This message was sent an hour ago, so Six still isn’t due for another hour,” Commander Denker said. “But Recon Three is nearly an hour and a half past her check-in window by now.”

“Let’s keep our long-range sensor array pointed at Three’s territory until Fleet hears from her, just in case,” Captain Yahı said.

“Hunch?” the commander asked, noticing his captain’s slight change of expression.

“Just caution,” the captain said as he sipped his tea again. “We’re two days from port. Not a good time for surprises.”

* * *

Synda Conklin plodded up the last few stairs of her apartment building, her bag slung over her shoulder, tired after a long shift at a job she detested. She could still smell the stench of alcohol and tobacco on her clothing as she made her way down the hallway to her door.

“I’m home!” Synda announced as she entered the apartment and closed the door behind her.

“You’re late!” her roommate, Nikki, called from the next room.

“I worked a double,” Synda responded as she tossed her bag on the couch, “and all my tips were in change. It took forever to cash them in.”

“Cheap bastards!” Nikki said as she entered the living room. “You’ve got emails,” she said, pointing to the computer terminal on the desk in the corner of the room.

“Where are you going?” Synda asked her roommate as she sat down and logged onto the terminal.

“I’ve got a date,” Nikki announced excitedly as she pulled on a colorful, loose-fitting sweater.

“At ten o’clock in the morning?”

“Actually, it’s a continuation of last night’s date,” Nikki said. “I just came home to change and freshen up. We’re going out to brunch.”

“Slut.”

“You’re just jealous.”

“Oh, crap,” Synda said, her expression becoming worried.

“What?”

“I’ve got a message from Fleet.”

“Well, read it,” Nikki urged.

“I’m afraid. I don’t think I can take another rejection.”

“How are you going to fight the evil Jung hoards if you can’t even open an email?” Nikki teased.

Synda tapped the screen to open the message and began reading. Her expression immediately became crestfallen. “I knew it.”

Nikki froze in the middle of putting on her shoes. “I’m sorry, Syndles. Maybe next time?”

“That’s three tries, Nikki,” Synda said. “Fleet doesn’t accept more than three applications. That’s it. I’m done for.”

“Oh, come on,” Nikki said, trying to be supportive. “Fleet isn’t your only option in life.”

“What am I supposed to do? Find a nice guy, get married, and start popping out kids like some kind of baby factory?”

“What’s wrong with that?” Nikki asked, her hands on her hips.

“Nothing,” Synda said, apologetically. “It’s not what I want out of life.”

“Well, there’s always the militias,” Nikki said as she grabbed her bag and headed for the door.

“Guess I have to face it,” Synda admitted as she picked up her own bag. “I’m going to be stuck as a ground pounder

for the rest of my life.”

“Where are you going?” Nikki asked.

“I’m going to the gym to work off my frustrations before I go to bed.”

“Well, I’ll try not to wake you when I get back,” Nikki promised.

* * *

Sergeant Surbeck watched as the guards changed at the gates of the United Earth Republic headquarters compound. Behind the gates, the colors of the setting sun sparkled off the distant waters of Lake Geneva, casting a somber amber light across the city.

“Good evening, Sergeant,” the corporal greeted as he approached the guard post.

“Good evening, Corporal,” Sergeant Surbeck said. “What are you doing here?”

“The lieutenant wants to double-up on all guard posts tonight, what with the EDF budget vote and all.”

“What does the lieutenant think the Jung are going to do? Attack a budget meeting?”

“No, sir,” the corporal answered with a grin. “I think he’s more worried about civilian protesters and such. Haven’t you been watching the news feeds?”

“Yeah, I’ve been watching. I’m just not worried about a bunch of tree-licking crybabies who don’t have the guts to defend their world.”

“I take it you don’t care much for the anti-military types.”

“They have their place, I suppose,” the sergeant said, “as long as that place is as far away from me as possible.”

“Couldn’t agree with you more, sir.” The corporal smiled.

The sergeant watched the retiring squad leave its post at the front gate just as the second unit, the one the lieutenant had requested, also arrived at the main gate. He looked out at the gathering crowd in the distance, their signs resting lazily on their shoulders as they waited for the first dignitary to arrive. There were no news cameras pointed at the mingling crowd as of yet, which meant they had little interest in demonstrating at the moment. That was fine with the sergeant, who did not look forward to an entire day of snappy slogans aimed at the very people who were trying to protect the world and see to it that everyone, everywhere, was safe.

“Command reports the NAU shuttles are inbound,” the corporal informed him.

Sergeant Surbeck looked at the crowd as it began to move into position, their signs and banners raised in unison as they began their chants. Somehow, they always seemed to know when someone important was arriving. The news cameramen also began to move into position, aiming their cameras at the assembling crowd as it surged toward the main gate.

“Stand ready, gentlemen!” the sergeant barked.

* * *

“Control! Sensors! Multiple contacts! Four two mark two eight five. Range: twenty million kilometers. Transferring tracks to tactical!”

Captain Yahli handed his tea to the steward on his left. "Tactical, I want ID, course, and speed on those contacts."

"Working on it, sir," Lieutenant Calloway answered.

Commander Denker looked at the plotting table in front of him. "Four two mark two eight five is right in line with Three's recon area, Captain."

Captain Yahli looked at his XO without saying a word. "Still waiting on course and speed, Lieutenant," he urged his tactical officer.

"Flight, stand by to launch a comm-runner!" the XO ordered.

"Standing by on a comm-runner, aye!" the flight operations officer answered.

"Captain, based on thermal signatures, I make all six contacts as Jung cruisers. They're flying in a standard cruise formation, Captain."

"Course?"

"They're headed for Earth, sir. ETA at present speed: four hours."

"Mister Erbe, time to intercept at maximum acceleration?" the captain asked.

"Eighty-seven minutes, sir," the navigator answered.

Captain Yahli turned to his executive officer. "Sound general quarters, Commander. Launch the comm-runner."

"Tactical!" Commander Denker bellowed as a chill went down his spine. "Set general quarters! All hands to battle stations!"

"Battle stations, aye!" Lieutenant Calloway answered.

"Flight! Launch the comm-runner," the commander continued. "Report all contacts to Fleet: type, course, and speed. Advise Fleet we have gone to battle stations and are changing course to intercept." The commander looked at

the time display above the forward view screens. "Time of intercept will be one one three seven Earth standard."

"Comm-runner away, sir!" Lieutenant Fudala reported from the flight operations station.

"Mister Stewart," the commander said, turning forward. "Bring us onto an intercept course with the contacts, best possible acceleration to a maximum of one percent light."

"Changing course toward contacts," the ensign at the helm answered. "Best acceleration to one percent light, aye."

Commander Denker paused by his captain on his way to the exit. "Let's hope they're a peace envoy," he mumbled.

CHAPTER THREE

The massive assembly room of the United Earth Republic was filled with the sounds of dozens of conversations in dozens of languages, as the sixteen members of the EDF budget committee and their various advisors and administrative assistants discussed the topic of the day's vote.

President Scott sat quietly in the second row, his son Eli on his right and his military liaison on his left. He had not partaken in any of the morning's debate on the EDF's new budget proposal, choosing instead to listen intently as others expressed their concerns, many of which were similar to his own. His son had urged him several times to stand and speak his mind, if only to put on a show for those voters who expected him to fervently oppose the EDF's budget proposal and call for a decrease in overall military expenditures around the world. The President of the North American Union, however, had chosen to remain silent, soaking in the opinions of the world leaders around him as if his own decisions rested on the opinions of his fellow representatives.

The repeated pounding of the UER president's gavel as he hammered it against its base finally brought the din under control and, eventually, a hush fell across the great room. "We have heard the opinions of many this day," President Wilkey began, "and their views have been varied. But the time has come to put the newly proposed budget of

the Earth Defense Force to a vote.” President Wilkey raised his hand and gestured to the committee member at the far end of the first row. “President Nwosu, if you would begin the vote.”

The light at the front of the table before President Nwosu, of the Republic of Africa, turned green, indicating approval of the proposed EDF budget. The African president’s eyes remained fixed straight ahead as the man next to him activated his green light as well. One by one, the lights in the room turned mostly green, with a few naysayers casting red lights to indicate their disapproval.

Admiral Galiardi watched from his table as the votes were cast. When the vote reached President Scott, of the North American Union, there were only four committee members left who had not yet voted. With a two-thirds majority required in order for the budget to be approved, one more nay vote would send the admiral back to his financial planners for yet another overhaul of the budget. Of the four members left, only President Scott had been publicly opposed to the military buildup aimed at defending the Earth from the Jung.

The president glanced at the admiral for only the briefest of moments, after which, the president’s voting lamp turned green.

Admiral Galiardi could not believe his eyes. He was so shocked by President Scott’s support of the new budget that he did not even notice the three green lights that followed.

“Voting has been concluded,” President Wilkey announced from his podium. “The new budget for the Earth Defense Force has passed. I thank you all for your attendance.” The president struck his gavel one last time. “This meeting is adjourned.”

The buzz of conversation once again filled the great room as those in attendance prepared for departure, each anxious to return to their own country and the daily routines of running it.

“Well, I didn’t see that coming,” Eli told his father. “How the hell do you think your constituents are going to react?”

“I suspect many of them will be displeased,” President Scott admitted.

“That’s an understatement,” Eli said as they rose from their seats to depart. Eli followed his father and their party through the attendees, heading for the exit.

“Mister President,” the admiral said as he approached.

“Admiral Galiardi.”

“I have to admit I am surprised at your support of our new budget.”

“Why is that, Admiral?” President Scott asked as he continued pressing forward toward the exit.

“Well, sir, during your campaign, you were quite vocal about your opposition to military expansion.”

“The plan called for two FTL ships,” the president said. “One was lost, and now, you need to replace it. I see no reason not to approve such funds. After all, you are not asking for an expansion, Admiral, just maintaining the originally agreed upon resources.”

“That’s a very fine line, Mister President,” the admiral said as he walked alongside President Scott into the main corridor, “one that I’m not sure your supporters will be able to recognize.”

“Then I’ll just have to explain it to them,” President Scott said. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, Admiral, I have an ocean to cross before dinner.”

“Of course, Mister President,” the admiral said as his stride slowed, allowing President Scott to continue on his

way without further distraction.

“Was that his way of saying thanks?” Eli wondered aloud.

“In a roundabout way, I suppose it was,” the president said.

“We’ll be ready in a moment, sir,” the lead protective agent told the president as they approached the outer doors to the courtyard.

“I’ll be riding in the backup shuttle on the way home,” Eli told his father.

“Why?”

“I have some business to take care of once we get back to North America. I figured it would be faster to do it on the way instead of making a separate trip later,” Eli explained.

The doors opened, and the president’s protective detail led them outside and into the waiting transport.

“Just make sure you’re back by dinner,” the president told him. “Your mother is arriving from Vancouver today. She’d like it if you were there.”

“Of course,” Eli promised. “I’ll be back in plenty of time.”

* * *

“Delaveaga!” a voice cried out.

Luis looked across the crowded terminal at the North American Fleet Academy’s main spaceport on the southern tip of Florida. The terminal was packed with cadets arriving to begin their next semester at the Academy, as well as those departing for their new assignments.

“Delaveaga! Over here!” the voice called again.

In the distance, Luis could see a hand waving above the crowd. He pushed his way toward the calling voice, finally

reaching the far side of the terminal despite the crowd that seemed to work against him. "Devyn!" he called out when he finally found the person calling him. He dropped his bag and wrapped his arms around his friend, giving her a friendly hug.

"How have you been?" Devyn asked as Luis released her from his embrace. "I haven't seen you since the memorial service."

"I've been well," Luis told her. "I've been hiding out down at my mother's."

"Kind of hot down there this time of year, isn't it?" Devyn said.

"I'm used to it. I grew up down there, remember?"

"Kyle is around here somewhere," Devyn said. "Tilly as well. They came in around noon. I think they're looking for something to eat. I guess we'll all be riding up together, huh?"

"I can't wait to get up there," Luis stated enthusiastically. "Two months is too long."

"Tell me about it," Devyn said. "I've probably forgotten half my algorithms by now."

"I know what you mean," Luis said. "I was studying the tactical manual on the way over. Hopefully no one will ask me anything difficult for a few weeks."

"Luis!" Kyle called as he returned.

"Kyle!" Luis reached out, grabbing his friend's hand and pulling him in closer for a pat on the back. "What have you been up to, man?"

"Just riding the waves while waiting for our ship to be ready. Sorry I couldn't make it in for the memorial, man. I know Nathan was your best bud and all."

"Don't worry about it, Kyle. It was depressing as all hell anyway."

“Yeah, I kind of figured as much. Really sucks, what happened to him, you know?”

“Hey, we all know the risks, right?” Luis said. It was a common expression used in the fleet to dismiss the inherent danger of a life in space. “Where’s Tilly? He’s assigned to the Intrepid as well, right?”

“Sure is. He’s around here somewhere. Last I saw him, he was talking up some hot-looking cadet over by the lounge. She’ll shoot him down soon enough, I figure.”

“Same old Tilly, huh?” Luis commented. “Damn, it’s good to see you guys again.”

“Our shuttle should be here in about twenty minutes, so if you want to take a dump in a normal toilet one last time before we go, you’d better get busy, Ensign.”

“Jeez, Kyle,” Devyn complained. “Is that all you ever think about? Pooping?”

“Nope. Surfing, too. And eating. Don’t forget eating.”

Luis couldn’t stop grinning. The last two months had been difficult. Nathan Scott had indeed been his best friend and roommate for his entire four years at the Fleet Academy. Nathan had even spent time in South America with Luis, visiting his family. Not a day went by that he didn’t think of his friend. At least now, he was back in the company of his fellow graduates, about to embark on their first patrol together. At least for a while, he wouldn’t have time to think about his lost friend.

* * *

“What’s taking so long?” Miri asked her mother as she watched the house staff load the van.

“Seems I forgot to pack a few things,” her mother said.

“Like what? We emptied your closet and your dressers.”

“Just a few odds and ends, honey. Pictures and mementos and the like,” her mother explained. “I’ll just be a bit longer.”

Miri knew what she meant by pictures and mementos. Her mother was bringing along some of Nathan’s belongings to keep with her. She had hoped that her mother would use the change of residence as an opportunity to leave the past behind and start anew, to forget and put the tragedy behind her. Unfortunately, her mother seemed determined to do everything she could to remember her lost son.

Miri couldn’t blame her mother, as she, too, would have had difficulty dealing with the loss of any of her own children. She tried on several occasions to imagine what it must be like to lose a child, but she could not. It was bad enough for her to have lost a brother, especially Nathan. Unlike most of her sisters, and especially her brother Eli, who was the oldest sibling in the family, she and Nathan had only been born a year apart. They had grown up together, played with the same friends, and gone to the same schools. She had even married one of Nathan’s older classmates, despite his many protestations. Yet she had managed to move on.

Her mother, on the other hand, had no more children about the house to occupy her time. They were all grown with families of their own. Of course, as the wife of the President of the North American Union, Marlene Scott would eventually become quite busy. In the meantime, Miri would have to bring her kids to Winnipeg on the weekends to keep her mother busy and her mind off Nathan.

Miri checked her watch, noting the time had passed more rapidly than expected. “Mom, I need to go. I have to

pick up the kids in an hour.”

“Of course, dear,” her mother said. “Go ahead. I’ll finish up and be on my way to the airport in no time.”

“Are you sure?” Miri asked, worried that her mother would continue to pick through her dead brother’s belongings.

“Yes, yes, I’m sure, Miri,” her mother promised her. “Now go, and kiss your angels for me.” Her mother kissed Miri on the cheek, then set off to return to the main house.

Miri sighed. “You’ll make sure she leaves soon?” she asked the protective agent watching over the van. “I promised my father that I would get her to Winnipeg in time for dinner, and they’re two hours ahead.”

“Yes, ma’am,” the agent replied politely. “I’m well aware of the time difference. I’ll make sure we leave on time.”

“Thanks,” Miri told him as she turned and headed for her car.

* * *

Synda’s anger continued to grow as she punched and kicked at her padded opponent. As she danced about the ring, dodging her opponent’s blows, all of the possible reasons for her denial into the Fleet Academy raced through her head. She knew it wasn’t her intelligence, as she had scored highly in all categories during her evaluation testing. It wasn’t her health, as she was as fit as anyone. It also wasn’t her background, as she had never been in trouble of any kind. In fact, her parents had been killed when she was seventeen, so she had no family ties planet-side. As best

she could tell, she was the perfect candidate, except for one thing... She was small.

While most people rejected due to body size were either too tall or too heavy, she was both ten centimeters and ten kilograms below Fleet minimums. She had tried to gain weight, working out religiously with every resistance machine there was. She had put on some muscle, but it was not enough. She had even tried spinal expansion, but her back muscles were in such good shape that she had gained barely a single centimeter in height after repeated sessions.

It seemed so unfair to her. She hoped her intellectual scores and physical prowess might make up for her lack of size, but the Fleet recruitment review boards stuck to their rules every time. And now, she was out of applications and out of options. Even if she got into one of the local militias, there was no way she was going to get a field assignment. She would end up in an office somewhere with some officer talking at her chest at every opportunity.

Her anger got the better of her, and a quick combination of left, right, and a roundhouse sweep brought her opponent down onto his back. Synda instinctively landed next to him, her elbow driving into his padded collar.

“Damn, Synda!” her opponent complained. “You trying to kill me or what?”

“Oh, God, I’m so sorry, Tony,” she said in embarrassment as she scrambled to her feet. She held out her hand to help him up, which he refused. “You’re not hurt, are you?”

“Of course not,” he said, his pride showing. He looked around the gym, making sure none of his friends had witnessed his failure to defend himself against a girl half his weight. “I’m wearing pads, remember?” he said, pointing his gloved hands at his head and shoulder pads. “Why are you so aggressive today, anyway?”

Synda pulled off her sparring gloves and tossed them into the corner. "I got rejected again."

"Why do you keep applying?" Tony asked. "You know they're going to turn you down."

"I really want to be in the fleet. You know that." Synda removed her head gear and tossed it aside as well. "It's all I ever think about."

"Why? People die in the fleet, Synda. And we ain't even at war yet. Remember the Aurora?"

"Yeah, I remember the Aurora. That was an accident though."

"An accident that killed a hundred people." Tony removed his own pads and dropped them on the mat beside him. "Besides, you've got a good job."

"Serving drinks and getting groped by drunk factory workers? Yeah, it's every girl's dream job."

"You make great tips, don't you?"

"Yeah, I do make great tips," she admitted. "Of course, I have to stick my boobs out to here to make those tips."

"At least you've got the boobs," Tony told her. "My sister is flat as a board. She works in that upscale bar down by the financial district—you know—the one where all the brokers go after work. She doesn't make shit for tips. You know what you should do?"

"What?"

"Save up them tips, go back to school. Get a career where you can use your head instead of your tits."

Synda picked up her pads and threw them at him. "I gotta get my tits home and get some sleep before my next shift," she told him with a smile.

"Make it happen with what you've got, girl," Tony told her.

“Later,” she said as she stepped under the ropes and hopped down to the floor. She picked up her bag, wrapped her towel around her neck, and headed for the door. “Hey, Tony,” she called back as she turned around. “Tell your sister to get a boob job. She’ll clean up.”

* * *

Admiral Galiardi sat in his shuttle as it sped across the western portion of the African continent on its way to EDF headquarters at Port-Gentil. The budget vote at UER headquarters in Geneva had gone surprisingly well, and he was now facing the rapid build of the Aurora’s replacement vessel. In order to get a second FTL warship in service as soon as possible, cuts would need to be made in other departments. The problem was in deciding where, as every department in the Earth Defense Force was doing its best to provide maximum results at minimum costs.

According to Fleet intelligence estimates, it would take the Jung at least a year to regroup after the losses they suffered while successfully invading the Alpha Centauri system. They had waltzed into the Centauri system with a fleet of six heavy cruisers and had gone toe to toe with over a dozen ships. Even outnumbered two to one, the Jung ships had eventually defeated the Centauri fleet, destroying every one of their ships before the Jung had begun landing ground troops on Centauri soil.

The EDF’s four Defender-class warships were more heavily armed than any of the Centauri ships had been. The problem was that they were only capable of sub-light speeds, while the Jung ships were able to travel faster than

light. Even at sub-light speeds, the Jung ships were faster. But the Earth ships were heavily armored as well and were able to take a substantial beating. Although that fact had yet to be tested in battle, what limited information they had on Jung weaponry indicated that a single Defender-class warship could easily take on four Jung warships—except, of course, the recently discovered battle platforms that the Jung usually parked in larger systems. All four of their Defender-class ships would be needed to take down a Jung battle platform. Fortunately, such platforms were few, and they were slower than the rest of the Jung ships, making them unlikely to be used in an invasion of the Sol system.

The Aurora, had she survived, might have been able to hold her own against a battle platform. Along with her sister ship, the Celestia, they definitely could have taken one apart. But now the admiral had to figure out how to build another ship in less than a year when it normally would take two years at a minimum. He had toyed with the idea of building several smaller ships, each FTL-capable, and letting the diplomats use them for their peace negotiations with the Jung. That would allow him to finish the Celestia more quickly and maybe even beef up her armaments to some extent. Several fusion-powered laser weapons were nearly ready for testing by the Fleet's special projects division. Although the destructive power of the laser weapons was not as impressive, the speed at which their blows would be delivered made them a nice compliment to the standard rail gun turrets used by Fleet ships. The more he thought about his options, the better the admiral thought their chance might be to defend themselves.

“Admiral, you’re wanted in the communications compartment, sir,” the attendant told him.

Admiral Galiardi rose from his seat and made his way to the front of the passenger compartment, stepping through the hatch at the forward end.

"It's Rear Admiral Duncan, sir," the comm-tech told him as the admiral entered the compartment. "You can take it there, sir," the tech added, pointing to the unused console.

The admiral sat down in front of the console, donning the comm-set as he activated the screen. Rear Admiral Duncan's face appeared on the screen. "Galiardi here."

"Sir," Rear Admiral Duncan began over the vid-comm, *"we just received a comm-runner from the Reliant. She's detected six Jung cruisers just beyond the orbit of Jupiter, about thirty degrees above the ecliptic. It looks like they just came out of FTL. They're headed for Earth, Admiral. ETA is just over three hours. The Reliant has changed course to intercept. They should be in range in about seventeen minutes."*

"Dammit!" Admiral Galiardi cursed. "What the hell happened to one year?"

"I guess our intelligence estimates were wrong," Rear Admiral Duncan said. *"Orders, sir?"*

"Set Fleet alert status to condition two, Marty. Use FTL comm-runners to contact the Volkov and the Zhang-Ti. Have them hightail it inward to support the Reliant if she's attacked."

"Yes, sir."

"And tell the Intrepid to spin up her reactors and prepare to get under way."

"I don't think all her crew has reported in yet, Admiral."

"We'll hold off deploying her as long as we can, but she may have to leave shorthanded."

"Yes, sir."

“Notify the UER and all continental governments as well. They’ll want to activate their militias as soon as possible. It makes them feel like they’re doing something.”

“Yes, sir.”

“One more thing, Marty,” the admiral said. “It may not matter now, but our budget was given the green light.”

“Yes, sir,” Rear Admiral Duncan answered as he rolled his eyes. *“Duncan out.”*

Admiral Galiardi set his comm-set down and sighed. He rose and stepped toward the hatch to return to his seat in the passenger compartment. He looked at the communications technician. The young man’s eyes were wide, and his face was pale with fear. “Buckle up, son,” the admiral said. “Things are about to get bumpy.”

The young comm-tech swallowed hard as he reached for his chest harness. “Yes, sir.”

Admiral Galiardi returned to his seat, fastened his seatbelt, and pulled his chest harness down as well. He hadn’t worn a chest harness since he was a fighter pilot more than thirty years ago, before the first Defender-class ships were even built. As he secured his chest harness, the Fleet condition status display above the forward hatch changed from a green-lit number three to a yellow-lit number two. The shuttle began to rapidly lose altitude as the pilot took his ship down to the deck and accelerated. Things were different now.

* * *

“Shuttle two zero four seven for the Orbital Assembly Platform now boarding at gate five,” the voice announced

over the Fleet Academy spaceport's public address system.

"That's our ride," Luis told his friends. A measure of excitement began to creep over him as he picked up his bag and prepared to head for the boarding gate. "Time to leave this rock."

"I can't believe it," Devyn said. "Two years in space."

"Two years without waves," Kyle complained.

"Don't worry, Kyle," Devyn said. "Tilly will hack the artificial gravity in your quarters, so you can play in zero-G."

"It won't be the same. You don't suppose the Intrepid's got a wave pool?"

"I'm sure they do," Luis laughed, "right next to the golf course."

An alert horn squawked twice from the far end of the terminal.

"What the hell was that?" Kyle said.

"It's an alert horn," Devyn said.

"What's going on?" Tilly wondered as he looked about.

"I don't know," Luis said.

All around them, people stopped whatever they were doing and looked at each other, hoping for an explanation for the alert horns.

"Attention. Attention," the voice called over the public address system. *"Set condition two. Repeat, set condition two. All Fleet personnel, report to duty stations. All civilians should clear the spaceport immediately. This is not a drill."*

All around them, cadets, recent graduates, and civilians were looking at each other in disbelief. Only the senior officers and spaceport personnel seemed to be moving with purpose.

"What the..." Kyle started.

"Holy shit," Luis interrupted.

"Oh, my God," Devyn exclaimed.

“What do we do?” Tilly asked.

“We do like the man said,” Luis told him. “We get to our duty stations.”

“We don’t have duty stations,” Kyle reminded him, “at least not on Earth.”

“Then we get to the Intrepid before she leaves us behind,” Luis said as he headed for gate five. “Come on!”

Luis’s three friends followed his lead, grabbing their own bags and heading for the boarding gate.

“Is shuttle twenty forty-seven still cleared for departure to the OAP?” Luis asked the officer at the gate as he approached.

“As far as I know, yes,” the officer answered.

“Then we need to get on board,” Luis insisted as he handed his orders to the officer. “We’re due to report to the Intrepid.”

“I can’t promise you she’ll still be around when you get there, Ensign.”

Luis looked at his friends, each of whom held their orders in their hands, ready to board the shuttle. Not one of them showed any signs of hesitation. They all wanted to get to their ship. “We’ll take our chances, sir.”

The officer handed Luis back his orders. “Very well, son.” He took the orders from the other three ensigns and stamped them before handing them back. “Good luck.”

“Let’s go!” Luis said as he headed down the boarding tunnel at a fast walk, his friends right behind him.

They moved quickly down the boarding tunnel, ducking as they stepped through the hatch at the far end and into the shuttle. Much to their surprise, the shuttle wasn’t even half full.

“Where’s everyone?” Luis asked the flight tech as he dropped into an empty seat with his bag between his legs.

“We weren’t due to launch for another thirty minutes,” the flight tech told him. “You’re the first to board.”

“Where did the others come from?” Devyn wondered, pointing at the wide-eyed Fleet personnel sitting behind them.

“They boarded in Europe,” the tech answered.

“We have to sit here for thirty minutes?” Kyle asked.

“Hell, no,” the tech answered as he made his way forward. “We’ve gotta refuel before we can take off again.” The flight tech peered through the hatch into the boarding tunnel. “Come on!” he yelled as a few more passengers entered the shuttle.

“Is this for real?” Kyle wondered.

“Do you think we’re really under attack?” Devyn asked.

“If we were, we’d be at condition one,” Luis reminded them. “I suspect Fleet has picked up a Jung ship somewhere in the system.”

“Where there’s one ship, there are more,” Tilly said.

“That’s why we’re at condition two,” Luis told him.

“How long until we get to the OAP?” Devyn asked Luis.

“If we’re fully loaded with fuel, an hour at max burn,” Luis told him.

“Man, I really hope this is all just a big mistake,” Kyle mumbled.

“Me, too,” Luis mumbled to himself.

* * *

“Relieve the gate detail,” Sergeant Surbeck ordered the combat-equipped squad of men that had just arrived at the

guard post near the main gate to the United Earth Republic compound. "Send them back here to gear up and redeploy."

"Yes, Sergeant!" the corporal in charge of the squad answered.

"Sergeant, I have Captain Maur on comms," the sergeant's communications technician reported.

Sergeant Surbeck stepped closer to the corporal managing the comm-system and took the handset from his hand. "Main gate, Surbeck. Go ahead, sir."

"Sergeant, I'm sending two more fully geared squads to your position. Deploy them as you see fit. A pair of tanks will be arriving within the half hour. They will become your secondary gate."

"Understood, sir," the sergeant answered. "Captain, is this the real thing or another drill?"

"It's no drill, Sergeant," the captain answered over the comm-set. *"EDF picked up six Jung cruisers about six AUs out. They're moving to intercept."*

"Any word of their intent?" the sergeant wondered, hoping for good news.

"We'll know in a few hours, Sergeant," the captain said. *"In the meantime, let's prepare for the worst."*

"Copy that," the sergeant answered. He passed the handset back to the corporal.

"Is it for real?" the corporal asked.

"Six Jung cruisers have entered the system," the sergeant said. "It's real." The sergeant stepped out of the guard post and looked at the crowd of protesters. While they had not changed their behavior at the sight of increased readiness on the behalf of his guards, the news cameras had definitely taken notice. Every one of them was pointed at his men, and their respective reporters were all standing between their cameras and the gate in the background,

proving to the world that they were right where it was happening. "Corporal, if we go to condition one, we're going to need to disperse that crowd in a hurry. Pass the word. Make sure everyone is carrying stunners. We don't need to be shooting civilians."

"Yes, Sergeant!" the corporal answered.

Sergeant Surbeck continued scanning the crowd. If the Jung were about to attack, there was every possibility they already had agents on the ground. Those agents could be out there carrying protest signs right now. "Toller!" the sergeant yelled at the corporal leading the squad from the main gate back to the guard post.

"Yes, Sergeant!" Corporal Toller answered as he approached.

"As soon as your squad gears up, I want your shooters on those two rooftops, scopes on the crowd, just in case."

"Yes, Sergeant!" Corporal Toller answered as he turned and continued toward the guard post with the rest of his squad.

Sergeant Surbeck could hear the corporal as he passed the orders to his two best shots, ordering them to pick up sniper rifles. As the sergeant continued scanning the crowd for suspicious activity, he thought about his wife and daughter on the other side of the city. They had gone to visit friends, which put them as far away as he could hope from the UER compound. At least there was that. If the Jung did attack, he was confident that his wife knew what to do. They had talked at great length about the subject of survival during an invasion. She knew what to take, where to go, and what to do when she got there. Most of their families were similarly educated, as it was only prudent. While much of the Earth's population lived in blissful ignorance, believing the nonsense that poured from the mouths of politicians

who called for peace through diplomacy, those who stood guard knew better, as did their families.

Sergeant Surbeck pulled on his body armor and cinched it up tightly around his torso. He then donned his helmet and slung his combat weapon over his shoulder, so it hung in front of his chest at the ready. He looked up at the sky. The beautiful sunset had gone, replaced by the city lights. Rain was coming later in the night. He only hoped that rain would be the worst of what came their way.

* * *

“Mister President,” Agent Hanson said in a low voice as he leaned in close to the president.

President Scott opened his eyes, turned his head, and looked up to his trusted, lead protection agent. “Yes, Mark?”

“Sir, I’m afraid we have a situation,” the agent began.

President Scott noticed the two additional agents standing behind Agent Hanson, each carrying heavier weapons than usual. They were also wearing military issue comm-sets instead of the more discreet earpieces they usually wore. “What is it?”

“EDF has detected a group of Jung cruisers on their way to Earth. They’ve set condition two throughout the fleet.”

“How many ships?” President Scott wondered as he straightened up in his seat.

“I don’t know, sir,” Mark said. “I’ve been instructed to move you to the communications compartment, sir.”

“Of course,” the president agreed, rising from his seat to follow the agent.

Agent Hanson led the president to the stairwell at the aft end of the compartment, the other two agents following behind them. President Scott followed Agent Hanson up the narrow staircase, to the upper deck of the large presidential shuttle, and into the communications compartment just aft of the cockpit.

“William,” the president said, greeting his military liaison. “What do we know?”

“EDF reports that six Jung cruisers dropped out of FTL here,” William explained, pointing at a three-dimensional map of the Sol system displayed on one of the consoles along the side of the compartment. “They were detected a little over an hour ago by the Reliant, who was here. They immediately moved to intercept.” William looked at the wall clock. “They should be in range of the Jung ships shortly.”

“Any word on their intent?” the president asked.

“No, sir. As far as we know, there has been no communication with the Jung ships. EDF is playing it safe and assuming the worst for now. They’ve called in the Volkov and the Zhang-Ti to back up the Reliant, and they’ve ordered the Intrepid at the OAP to spin up her reactors and prepare to get under way.”

“Then they believe this is an attack,” the president surmised.

“As I said, they’re preparing for the worst. However, the EDF knows better than to fire the first shot.”

“Of course,” the president said with a grimace.

“The UER is placing their ground forces on full alert,” William added. “They’re recommending that all nations do the same.”

“Agreed,” the president stated. “Let’s get our people ready. Contact the joint military chiefs and order them to go to full readiness.”

“Yes, sir,” William agreed.

“And pass the word to the backup shuttle,” the president added. “Eli is on board. He should be made aware of the situation.”

“Yes, sir.”

The president turned to Agent Hanson. “My wife...”

“She’s already being secured, sir,” Agent Hanson promised. “We’ll secure your children and their families as well.”

“Thank you, Mark.”

* * *

Eli looked at his watch, then rose from his seat in the backup presidential shuttle. He pulled out his secure comm-unit and tapped some keys as he headed aft, climbing the stairs to the communications compartment above.

“Sir,” the communications technician began when he saw Mister Scott enter the compartment, “we just received word that all forces are going on alert.”

“Yes, I’m aware of the situation,” Eli told the technician, holding up his comm-unit to indicate he had already received a message to that effect. “Our plans have changed. Tell the pilot to drop to the deck, go stealth, and immediately return to the UER compound in Geneva at best possible speed.”

“I don’t understand...”

“Orders from the president,” Eli interrupted, holding up his comm-unit just long enough for the technician to see that there was a text message displayed. “I am to act as his direct advisor to the Republic during this crisis.”

“Yes, sir,” the technician responded. “I’ll notify the pilot immediately.”

“Thank you.” Eli placed his comm-unit back in his pocket and calmly made his way back down the staircase. He offered no sign of emotion as he returned to his seat and fastened his seatbelt. He waited patiently for several moments. Then, without warning, the ‘Fasten seat belts’ sign lit up. A moment later, the large shuttle began to descend rapidly. Eli smiled. His greatest role was soon to begin.

* * *

“Captain, Comms. Message from Fleet Command,” the voice called over the comm-panel in the captain’s ready room.

Captain Christopoulos, commanding officer of the *Intrepid*, the Earth Defense Force’s second-oldest Defender-class warship, pressed the button on his comm-panel. “Go ahead.”

“Action orders, sir. Message reads, ‘All fleet personnel, set condition two. Reliant reports Jung ships inbound. Intrepid is ordered to spin up her reactors and prepare to get under way. Details to follow.’ The message has been authenticated, sir.”

“Very well. Contact engineering. Tell them to spin up the reactors, and call the XO to the bridge. I’m on my way.”

“Aye, sir.”

Captain Christopoulos clicked off his comm-panel and ran his fingers through his thick, gray hair. He stood slowly, allowing his old body to stretch out completely as he stood.

Over the last twenty years, the majority of his career in the fleet had been spent serving on Defender-class ships, first as an engineer, then a bridge officer, and finally as an executive officer. Now, he was wrapping up a two-year assignment as the Intrepid's commanding officer. In all those years, he had never been called into action. He had seen many drills, as well as several space combat exercises, but never had a ship of the line been called upon to perform that for which she had been built.

He had seen action on several occasions. During his previous ten years in the European Navy, he had served on several submarines, eventually ending up in command. He had fired his weapons in anger more than once. He had seen men suffer from horrendous wounds, and he had seen men die. And they were always young. He was in his last year as captain of the Intrepid. In fact, he was expecting to hand over command to his executive officer after the next patrol. He had planned on retiring to a nice, little place in the Greek Isles where he and his wife could enjoy the fresh fish and the Mediterranean sun. He figured that, even if the Jung came, they were unlikely to ever show interest in his tiny island in the sea. Now it appeared that his retirement plans might have to be put on hold.

"Captain on the bridge!" the officer of the deck announced as Captain Christopoulos emerged from his ready room.

"Engineering reports they've begun the reactor startup sequence, sir," Lieutenant Allison reported from the engineering station. "Both reactors should be at full power within twenty minutes."

"Very well," the captain answered as he made his way toward the center of the bridge. "Lieutenant Chara," he

called to his left as he took his place in the command chair, "any more details?"

"Fleet reports the Reliant is about to intercept six Jung cruisers headed for Earth," the comm officer reported as he rotated away from his console to face the captain. "They're just under six AUs out. Fleet is sending us the tactical data now."

"Where's the XO?" the captain asked.

"Right here, sir," Commander Nasser answered as he entered the bridge and went straight to the comm station to look over the communiqués. "Guess we're leaving early."

"Maybe," the captain said. "What's our current crew complement?"

"Three hundred forty-seven," Commander Nasser said. "Another hundred and sixty are supposed to report today—mostly scrub-ensigns straight out of the academy who have been cooling their heels while we finished our refit."

"Any reason we need to wait for them?"

"No, sir. They probably won't know which way to run when the shooting starts anyway," the XO said. "Are we getting under way, sir?"

"Not yet," the captain said. "But I have a feeling that order is coming soon."

"Suggest we go to general quarters now, sir," the commander said. "We haven't held a drill in months, and we've got two-thirds of our crew on board. I'd rather find out ahead of time if we've got any positions that need a warm body in them."

"Good idea," the captain agreed. "Sound general quarters."

"General quarters, aye," the commander acknowledged. "Tactical, sound general quarters. All hands to battle stations."

“Battle stations, aye,” Lieutenant Calloway answered from the tactical station as he activated the alarm.

The bridge lighting dimmed by half, and a red glow came up around the deck and the overheads. An alarm klaxon sounded from the corridors beyond the bridge, echoing throughout the massive warship as the prerecorded call to battle stations was broadcast.

Captain Christopoulos could imagine his crew falling from their bunks and chairs at the sound of the alarm klaxon. After two months in port, those who had stayed aboard had been working half shifts at best. He knew that a sudden call to battle stations would cause some amount of confusion among an otherwise well-trained crew. His executive officer’s recommendation to call general quarters early had been a good one. It was one of the many reasons that Captain Christopoulos was confident that Commander Nasser would be an excellent captain for the Intrepid.

“Tactical map coming up now, Captain,” the tactical officer reported.

“Put it on the main view screen,” Captain Christopoulos ordered.

A map of the Sol system appeared on the center panel of the row of view screens that wrapped around the front quarter of the bridge. A cluster of red triangles could be seen heading into the Sol system from just beyond the orbit of Jupiter. A blue triangle representing the Reliant was rapidly approaching the Jung battle group. Off to the sides of the system were two more blue triangles representing the Volkov and the Zhang-Ti.

“Look at that,” the captain mumbled. “They came in right when our ships were farthest away from their entry point. There’s no way anyone can back up the Reliant in time, not even at full burn.”

“You think they’ve got spies?” Commander Nasser asked.

“Wouldn’t you?”

“You think they know we’re ready to leave port?”

“Doubtful,” the captain said. “We should’ve been out on patrol already, doing a long burn in the opposite direction to reach our first patrol corridor.”

“I thought they would’ve come in from the Centauri side,” Commander Nasser said.

“Probably why they didn’t.” The captain turned toward his tactical officer. “Project their previous track based on course and speed, as well as time of contact.” A red line appeared, leading from the group of red triangles back the way they had come. “You see that?” the captain asked. “We only recon that sector every third pass.”

“Recon Three is overdue to report in,” the comm officer reported. “I saw it on the last Fleet status report.”

“She’s not overdue,” the captain said. “She’s gone.”

“They would’ve taken it out on the way in, so she couldn’t give enough warning for the rest of the fleet to move in to intercept,” Commander Nasser added. “Clever.”

“Not that clever,” the captain corrected. “We’re still between them and the Earth, or at least we will be as soon as Fleet clears us to get under way. Let’s make sure we’re ready when the call comes, Commander.”

* * *

“Mrs. Scott,” the agent began calmly, “I need you to come with me, ma’am.”

The urgent tone of his voice caught Marlene Scott by surprise. “But I’m not quite done...”

“I’m sorry, but I need you to come now, ma’am,” he insisted, gently taking her arm to lead her away from the box she was packing. “I’ll have someone finish this up for you. I promise. But we need to leave.”

“Why? What’s wrong?”

The agent touched his ear. “Moving out now. South lawn in two.”

Two more agents suddenly appeared from the hallway, taking positions on either side of the confused Mrs. Scott.

“I demand to know what’s going on,” Marlene insisted.

“We have a situation, ma’am,” the agent said as they wound down the hallway and across the great house.

“What kind of situation?” Marlene asked as they approached the big glass doors that opened up to the top of the south stairs.

“It’s the Jung, ma’am,” the agent said as they approached the doors.

Marlene stopped in her tracks, her face turning pale. “What?”

An NAU military shuttle dropped in from above, engines screaming just beyond the great glass doors. The noise startled the president’s wife as the shuttle descended to the lawn, disappearing below the top of the great stairs. Four more agents suddenly appeared outside the doors, taking up positions on either side.

The agent touched his ear again. “Coming out,” he said in a soft tone. “Let’s go,” he told the other agents more loudly.

The glass doors swung open, and the agent led Mrs. Scott outside and down the stairs that led to the sprawling south lawn of the Scott estate. In the middle of the lawn, the military shuttle had just touched down, its engines still screaming as their exhaust scorched the perfectly

manicured lawn. Several soldiers in NAU uniforms and dressed in full combat gear had already exited the shuttle and taken up defensive positions around it, their weapons held high and pointed outward away from the shuttle and the house itself.

Marlene followed the agent leading her down the stairs, her heart pounding. She could see his lips moving but could not hear his words over the roar of the shuttle's engines. A million thoughts flashed through her mind as the men led her to the waiting shuttle: her husband, her children, her grandchildren, Nathan. Something terrible was about to happen.

Mrs. Scott was helped into the shuttle and led to her seat where a lieutenant quickly fastened her seatbelt. She looked at him, confused, as he placed a headset over her ears and began to speak.

"We may have to do a bit of maneuvering, ma'am," the lieutenant explained. *"Just stay in your seat and hold onto the armrests and you'll be fine. I'll be right here if you need anything."*

Marlene nodded her understanding, trying to hide her anxiety as the soldiers outside climbed back aboard the shuttle. The ship began to ascend just as the last soldier climbed aboard. It rose slowly at first, turning to the right as it gained altitude. Soon, it began accelerating forward at an alarming rate, dropping down to maintain a constant altitude above the contours of the landscape below as they headed down into the valley below.

Marlene swallowed hard, having never experienced such a wild ride. She had ridden in many shuttles in the past, even a presidential shuttle just after her husband had been sworn in a week earlier as the new president of the North American Union. Those rides had been smooth and easy,

nothing like the jarring, shifting, wild ride she was currently on.

"How are you doing, ma'am?" the lieutenant asked over the comms.

"I've had smoother rides," Marlene told him, trying unsuccessfully to smile.

"Yes, ma'am, I imagine so," the lieutenant said, a broad grin on his face.

He was young and confident, dressed in the duty uniform of his country. Marlene remembered pictures of Nathan during his flight training, dressed in a similar uniform and wearing a nearly identical helmet. He had looked so good in his uniforms, like he belonged. She wondered if this young lieutenant's mother worried about him.

"What about my children?" she asked the lieutenant as the shuttle banked to the left.

"Command is sending teams to pick them up now, ma'am. They'll be fine."

"They said the Jung were here."

"They're in the system, but still hours away, ma'am. There's nothing to worry about. We'll have everyone secure long before they get here."

He was kind to offer assurances to her, but Marlene knew that everything was far from fine. Her husband had never talked much about what would happen if the Jung did invade the Earth, but she could tell that it worried him deeply. She had tried not to think about it much, choosing instead to go about her daily life as if nothing were wrong. She had convinced herself long ago that it was better for her children at the time to see that she was not worried. They had needed to grow up with hope and confidence in their own futures. Now she wondered if she had been wrong.

She wondered if they might have been better served with frank discussions about the realities of the Jung threat.

Of course, now all her children were grown and had children of their own. Nathan had been the last to leave the nest. She wondered if they had prepared their own kids for such an event. Had they followed her example, choosing to pretend nothing was wrong? Or had they been honest with their young ones?

The more she thought about it, the more frightened she became. She told herself to calm down as the shuttle continued to bounce and turn. She told herself that, soon, she would be back with her husband, safe and secure in an underground bunker somewhere in the Winnipeg area and surrounded by her entire family, all of them—except for Nathan.

CHAPTER FOUR

Captain Yahı sat calmly in his command chair at the center of the Reliant's bridge, watching the tactical map displayed on the port-side view screen. The lighting was dimmed, and the edges of the deck and overheads glowed red to indicate that his ship was at battle stations and ready to fight.

"One minute to turn," Ensign Erbe reported from the navigation station in front of and slightly to the left of the captain.

"Comms, any response to our hails?" Captain Yahı asked from his command chair.

"No, sir, nothing," Ensign Donabee answered from the comm station.

"Have you been sending them over all channels?" The captain wondered aloud. It wasn't that he did not trust the young communications officer, but like many on his crew, it was the young ensign's first tour. He had joined the crew a few months back, coming over on a supply ship along with a dozen other late-tour replacements.

"Yes, sir," Ensign Donabee answered. "All frequencies and in all known languages. They *can* hear us, sir. I think they're just ignoring us."

"Stand by to send the following challenge," the captain began. "To Jung ships, from Commander, UES Reliant. You have entered the sovereign space of the United Earth Republic and have refused to answer our hails or state your

intentions. If you do not reverse your course and leave the system immediately, we will be forced to open fire. You have one minute to comply.”

“Coming up on the final turn, sir,” Ensign Erbe reported, his voice slightly anxious.

“Helm, turn into the targets,” Captain Yahli ordered.

“Aye, sir,” Ensign Stewart answered, “turning into the targets.”

“Send the challenge,” the captain ordered his comm officer.

“Aye, sir, sending challenge.”

“Combat, Captain,” the captain called over his comm-set.

“*Go ahead, sir,*” Commander Denker answered over the comms.

“Load and deploy all missile batteries. Deploy and charge all rail guns. Lock one quad on each ship. Weapons hold. Wait for my order before firing.”

“*Aye, sir,*” the commander answered.

“Turn complete,” Ensign Stewart reported. “We are now headed directly at the targets.”

“Weapons range in thirty seconds,” Lieutenant Calloway reported from the tactical station.

“Any response to our challenge?” Captain Yahli asked, holding onto the hope that the Jung would respond favorably and he would not have to open fire.

“None, sir,” the comm officer answered.

“Weapons range in fifteen seconds,” the lieutenant reported.

“Begin deceleration burn,” Captain Yahli ordered. “Let’s not close on them any faster than we have to.”

“Aye, sir,” Ensign Stewart answered, “beginning deceleration burn.”

“Captain,” Lieutenant Legasse called from the sensor station. “The targets are changing formation. They’re spreading out.”

“Any sign they’re preparing to fire?”

“I’m not sure, sir,” the lieutenant admitted. “I see no changes in their power or heat signatures, and optical doesn’t show any changes that would indicate weapons deployment. But to be honest, sir, we’ve never seen these ships in action, so I’m not sure what to look for.”

“Keep an eye on them,” the captain told his sensor operator. “Let me know if you see anything suspicious.”

“Aye, sir.”

“Lieutenant Calloway,” the captain said, “your read?”

“They’re moving into a line abreast, sir.”

“So that each ship has a clear line of fire,” the captain said.

“That would be my guess, sir,” the lieutenant agreed.

“Damn.” The captain stared at the tactical map showing the six Jung cruisers indicated by red triangles as they moved into their new formation. The blue triangle in the center of the display represented their ship.

“Coming into weapons range, sir,” Lieutenant Calloway announced.

Captain Yahi looked at the system map on the starboard view screen. Besides his own ship, the Volkov and the Zhang-Ti were the only other ships that could intercept the Jung forces before they reached Earth. Unfortunately, the Volkov was nearly an hour away, and the Zhang-Ti was even farther out. He looked at his watch. “Combat, Captain,” he called over his comm-set.

“*Combat,*” his XO, Commander Denker, answered.

“Target the center ship. One salvo across its course. Make sure it’s an obvious miss. I want it to be perfectly clear

that it's a warning shot."

"Yes, sir," Commander Denker answered.

"Quad three is firing," Lieutenant Calloway reported. He watched his tactical systems for a moment before reporting. "Clean miss, sir, right across the closest target's course."

"Comms, send the following message. 'Break course and stand down or be destroyed. This is your final warning.'"

"Aye, sir," Ensign Donabee answered.

Captain Yahi took a deep breath and sighed. He had followed the rules of engagement. He had hailed them. He had warned them. He had even fired a warning shot and followed it up with a direct threat. If the oncoming Jung ships did not do as he asked, he would have no choice but to open fire on them, no doubt starting a war that the Earth was ill-prepared to fight. Unfortunately, his orders were clear. He could not allow the enemy ships to continue unchallenged toward his homeworld. The risk was too great.

"Message has been sent, all frequencies and all languages," Ensign Donabee reported. "No response."

"Contacts are firing!" Lieutenant Calloway announced. "Rail guns! Impact in twenty seconds!"

Captain Yahi's brow furrowed slightly. "Open fire, all quads!" A second after he gave the order, the Reliant's eight massive quad rail guns reverberated through the ship's frame in a low rumble as her rails charged and sent meter-sized explosive projectiles hurtling toward their targets in rapid succession. "Lock all missiles on targets and fire at will," the captain added.

"Ten seconds to impact!" Lieutenant Calloway reported.

"Flight! Green deck!" Captain Yahi ordered. "Launch all fighters!"

"Green deck. Launching fighters," Lieutenant Fudala answered from the flight operations station.

The Reliant vibrated as the Jung rail gun projectiles struck her outer hull.

“Comms, launch another comm-runner. Inform Fleet we’re under fire.”

“Aye, sir,” Ensign Donabee answered. “Launching comm-runner. Four runners left, Captain.”

“Taking fire across our bow!” Lieutenant Calloway reported.

“Damage?”

“Minor outer hull damage,” the lieutenant reported. “All systems still functioning properly. Missiles firing.”

Captain Yahi watched as the two forward missile batteries launched four missiles each, sending them streaming off toward the incoming Jung ships. Eight more missiles streaked overhead from the aft batteries in pursuit of the first eight missiles.

“Our rail guns should impact the enemy ships in five seconds,” Lieutenant Calloway reported.

“First wave of fighters is away,” Lieutenant Fudala reported.

“Combat, Captain,” Captain Yahi called over his comm-set. “Target their forward weapons. Let’s reduce the amount of damage they can do to us on approach!”

“*Aye, Captain,*” Commander Denker answered over the comms.

“Quads one through six are continuing to fire on each of the Jung cruisers,” Lieutenant Calloway reported. “Quads seven and eight are targeting the forward rail gun emplacements on the two center contacts.”

“Helm, adjust course to pass between the two center contacts,” Captain Yahi ordered.

“Aye, sir.”

“Combat, set all mini-guns to fire on targets three and four as we pass between them,” the captain ordered. “Time to first pass?” he asked the helmsman.

“Thirty seconds,” Ensign Stewart answered quickly.

“First pass in thirty seconds,” the captain finished as the ship continued to shake from the impact of enemy rail gun fire.

* * *

Miri pulled the family car onto their street in the Vancouver suburbs, her two young children continuing to argue in the back seat over which of them was a better swimmer. Normally, she would have found their incessant arguing an annoyance. Today it served as a distraction. She was worried about her mother’s refusal to put Nathan’s death behind her and move on. As the wife of the newly-elected President of the North American Union, she was going to be a very busy and very public figure. She needed to be at her best and not in a constant state of managed grief.

Miri’s train of thought was suddenly disrupted when a large, black vehicle sped around her on her left, pulled in front of her car, and stopped, blocking the road. Miri slammed on her brakes, a small scream escaping her lips. Once the car stopped, she instinctively turned around to check on her children. Although surprised, neither seemed the worse for the sudden stop. She turned back around, about to mumble some derogatory remarks directed toward the driver of the black vehicle, when she realized that two men in black combat gear were climbing out of the vehicle

that had cut her off. Her eyes widened with fear. "Kids!" she called out. Another man suddenly appeared at her door, pulling it open without warning. Miri gasped in surprise as two more men opened the back doors on either side, reaching for her children. "What are you doing?" she screamed.

"Mrs. Thornton," the man said, holding out his hand. "NAU security. If you and your children will please come with us, ma'am."

"What's going on?" Miri demanded, noticing the ID badge hanging from the man's collar. He looked and acted like most of the security agents she had seen protecting both her parents, but she had never seen them act so aggressively; nor had she ever known them to be so heavily armed.

"There's a situation, ma'am," the agent explained as he helped her from the driver's seat. "We have orders to secure you and your family. We need to move quickly, ma'am."

Miri stepped out of her car, her head turning to see the other two agents removing her children from her backseat. There was another black vehicle, identical to the one that had cut her off, parked behind her with two heavily armed agents standing on either side pointing their weapons behind the second black vehicle. "I don't understand," Miri said, her voice becoming shaky as the urgency of the event scared her further.

"Please, ma'am, we'll explain it all to you on the way," the agent insisted. "For now, we have to go."

"What about my husband?" Miri said as the man led her away from the car toward the first black vehicle. "He's still at the..."

"Hospital, yes. We know, ma'am," the agent finished for her. "Another team will be securing him, you needn't worry."

Miri continued to look around in a panic as the agents moved her and her children into the front vehicle, quickly closing the doors as soon as they were inside. The vehicle sped off down the road, the second vehicle following. She spun her head around and saw that a third vehicle had shown up, and a man in a similar black outfit was getting into the driver's seat of her abandoned car. "Tell me what's going on!" Miri demanded as her children began to cry.

"It's the Jung, ma'am," the agent said calmly. "I'm afraid they're here."

* * *

Admiral Galiardi's shuttle touched down on the brightly lit rooftop landing pad of the Earth Defense Force command center in Port-Gentil, its boarding ramp deploying as its landing gear touched the pad. Before the ramp hit the deck, the admiral appeared in the open hatch, making his way down the few steps as quickly as possible.

"Admiral!" Rear Admiral Duncan called over the noise of the shuttle's engines as they cycled back up to full power to take off again. Rear Admiral Duncan fell in alongside his old friend and commander, Admiral Galiardi, as they made their way to the rooftop entrance, the wind from the shuttle's lift thrusters biting at their backs. "We just got word from the Reliant! She's under fire, sir!"

"What? What happened? Did the Reliant fire first?"

"Technically, no," Rear Admiral Duncan explained. "Captain Yahri followed protocol. Parked himself directly in their flight path, attempted contact, issued warnings. He even fired a shot across their bow."

“Goddamn it, Marty! We can’t afford to operate on technicalities right now!” the admiral cursed as they stepped through the rooftop entrance and made their way down the corridor.

“What the hell did you expect him to do?” Rear Admiral Duncan said. “Step out of the way and say excuse me? They’re warships, Admiral! Jung warships! And they’re coming right at us!”

“Jesus, did they say how bad the fight is?” the admiral wondered as they entered the elevator. “Are all six ships firing on him or what?”

“The message didn’t say. It came by FTL comm-runner,” Duncan said as he pressed the button for the command center located several hundred feet below the main building. “We should be receiving their battle telemetry in about ten minutes, though. That should give us a better idea of what we’re up against.”

“How long until the Volkov joins the fight?”

“At least half an hour.”

“Let’s not take any chances,” Admiral Galiardi said as the elevator doors opened and they stepped out into the security foyer of the underground command center. “Spin up the Lunar Rail Gun Array and have them start a track. If they get too close, I want those guns ready to take them out.”

“Yes, sir,” Rear Admiral Duncan said as he placed his hand on the ID scanner. In less than a second, the light on the scanner bed turned green.

“And contact the UER. Tell them to start evacuating the data cores,” the admiral added as he placed his own hand on the scanner.

“Are you sure you want to do that, Admiral?” Rear Admiral Duncan asked as the admiral’s hand scan was

approved, and the security detail opened the main doors to allow them into the command center. "Maybe our ships will turn them away."

"And maybe those six cruisers are just the beginning," the admiral said. "I'd prefer not to take the chance. If the Jung are only slightly more advanced than us, the data from the Ark will make them unstoppable. We can't take that chance. I want those data cores pulled, packed, and ready for transport as soon as possible. We can always plug them back in later if we survive."

* * *

"Course and speed data coming in from command now," the tracking officer reported from his console. "Tracking array realignment in twenty seconds."

Tension filled the Lunar Rail Gun Array's small control center as the specialists assigned to the facility checked and rechecked their systems to ensure proper operations of the ten massive rail guns positioned on the Earth's moon. The top-secret facility had taken several years to complete and had only been operational for a few months, yet the staff had practiced for this very moment nearly every day since their arrival.

"Tracking array is realigned sir," the tracking officer reported. "Estimated time to first contact based on course and speed is twelve minutes."

"How long until the targets will be in range?" the weapons officer asked.

"Optimum range in fifteen, sir," the tracking officer reported. "But we can fire as soon as we have confirmed

tracks.”

“Very well,” the weapons officer noted. “Have all guns loaded and charged. I want full weapons capability the moment we receive orders to fire.”

“Yes, sir.”

The weapons officer touched his comm-set. “Load master, WEPS.”

“WEPS, go for load master,” the voice answered.

“How many rounds are we up to?”

“Fifteen hundred balanced slugs, sir,” the load master answered.

“Is that all?”

“It takes time to manufacture them, sir, and two of our auto-miners are still down. We’ve got another three hundred slugs that haven’t been balanced yet, but I wouldn’t recommend firing them if we don’t have to. I can’t guarantee their accuracy, as they tend to make the rails wobble a bit during launch.”

“Understood,” the weapons officer said. “We’ll just have to make every shot count.”

“They will, sir,” the load master promised over the comms. *“Our guns may be big and slow, but they are accurate. And a projectile the size of a bus slamming into a target at one hundred kilometers per second packs one hell of a wallop, sir. I suspect one or two hits will make the Jung rethink their strategy a bit.”*

“Let’s hope so.”

* * *

“Core, Hiller,” the young Data Ark technician answered after picking up the comm handset.

“*Yanni,*” the voice called over the comm-set. There was an unexpected sense of urgency in the caller’s voice that caught the technician off guard.

“Yes, yes, this is Yanni. Who is... Reto? Is that you?” he asked as he began to recognize the panicked voice on the other end.

“Yes, Yanni, who else would call you on this line?”

“What is it?” Yanni asked. “What’s wrong?”

“Yanni, listen carefully,” Reto began. *“I need you to take all of the data cores offline.”*

“What?”

“Take them offline and pack them. Get them ready for transport as quickly as possible. Do you understand me, Yanni?”

“Are you mad? The cores have never been taken offline, not in the two centuries since they were first found!”

“Yanni! Listen to me! The transports will be there shortly. The data cores must be ready to move! Can you do this?”

“Yes, yes, of course,” Yanni promised. “I will begin immediately.”

“I need you to make sure the cores are properly handled, Yanni. You must stay with them wherever they go. Do you understand?”

“Yes, of course, but please, Reto, can you tell me what is going on?”

There was a pause, after which Reto said, *“It’s the Jung, Yanni. They have come.”* The comm-set clicked off.

Yanni’s face turned pale.

“What is it, Yanni?” one of the technicians asked, seeing the face of his supervisor suddenly becoming that of a ghost.

Yanni replaced the handset and turned to the other technician. "Take the cores offline."

"Which ones?" the technician asked, not believing what he was hearing.

"All of them."

"What?"

"Do it!" Yanni ordered.

* * *

Chunks of the Reliant's outer hull tore away as projectiles from the Jung rail guns slammed into her on either side as she passed between the third and fourth cruisers in the Jung line. All of the Reliant's rail guns, both her minis and her quads, returned fire, sending their own projectiles into the hulls of the enemy on either side of her. Explosions rocked the enemy ships as the larger, explosive rounds fired by the Reliant's massive quad rail guns buried into the enemy's hulls and exploded.

The bridge of the Reliant shook violently as the assault continued. Alarms sounded from various stations as the crew of the Reliant struggled to keep things under control while their ship ran its first gauntlet. Captain Yahi watched in amazement as his crew, all of whom had never before been under fire, performed their jobs perfectly amid the chaos of battle. He watched the forward view screens, the center screen showing their forward view. The screens on either side of it showed close-up views of the ships they were attacking. The scene was gruesome, at least to a

ship's captain, as large sections were blown away from the enemy hulls by the Reliant's explosive rounds. Although they were not close enough to see much detail, he could imagine Jung crewmen being sucked out into space through the gaping holes in the sides of their ships, struggling vainly for control only to die moments later among the debris that would litter the Sol system for eons to come.

"Damage control reports fire in lateral thruster fifteen!" Ensign Donabee reported urgently as he and three other technicians struggled to keep up with the flow of communications pouring into the bridge from all over the ship. "They're venting the thruster's propellant to space!"

"How long until we pass through?" the captain asked.

"Twenty seconds!" Ensign Stewart answered from the helm.

"Combat!" Captain Yahi called over his comm-set. "When we come out the other side, I want you to fire a full round of missiles into target number four! She appears to be taking the most damage at the moment!"

"*Aye, sir!*" the commander's voice answered over the comm-set.

"Hull breach!" Ensign Donabee reported. "Deck four! Section one zero two!"

The Reliant's deck plan flashed through the captain's mind. He breathed a sigh of relief when he realized it was a cargo bay that had been opened to space. The ship's designers had been smart enough to keep all her critical systems and compartments well away from the outer hull whenever possible. They had no idea if the Jung ships were designed the same way, but he assumed they would be.

He watched the view screens as his fighters dove at the enemy ships, strafing any critical system they could recognize, as enemy guns stabbed at them in passing.

“Ten seconds!” Ensign Stewart reported.

“Flight, call those fighters off target number four and have them concentrate on target number three instead. We don’t want our fighters near that fourth ship when our missiles hit,” the captain ordered.

“Aye, sir!” Lieutenant Fudala acknowledged.

“Five seconds!” Ensign Stewart reported from the helm.

The captain could already feel the enemy rail gun fire lessening. As they passed through the line of Jung warships, they were moving too quickly for the enemy’s big rail guns to track them. He glanced at the starboard view screen, the one showing the fourth target, noticing that his fighters were moving away from the Jung cruiser as per his orders. “Combat, Captain. Stand by to fire missiles at target four!”

“We’re clear, sir!” Ensign Stewart reported with relief.

Captain Yahri watched as the images of the Jung ships on either screen slipped out of the camera frame, revealing the star field behind them. Pieces of his ship’s hull that had been blasted away by the Jung guns floated alongside them, partially obscuring the camera’s view. “Track target four, and put it on view screen three,” he ordered. As soon as the words left his lips, the starboard view screen changed and displayed a new image showing the aft end of the Jung cruiser, the fourth one in the line, as it fell away from them.

“Fire missiles!” the captain ordered.

“Missiles away!” Lieutenant Calloway reported a moment later.

“Hard to port, Mister Stewart!” the captain ordered. “Go to max burn! I want us a few kilometers off the starboard side of target one, same altitude relative to the ecliptic!”

“Hard to port, full burn, aye!” the helmsman acknowledged, more than happy to get some additional distance between their ship and those of their enemy.

Captain Yahi watched as the missiles streaked toward their target on view screen three. "Maintain visual track on target four," he reminded them. "Cease fire on all guns. Retarget them onto target one and stand by."

"Aye, sir," the tactical officer answered. "Missile impact in five seconds."

Captain Yahi watched as the missiles blurred into the image of the shrinking Jung cruiser. Their speed relative to the target was considerable, and in only seconds, they would be too far away from the enemy to see them with anything other than maximum magnification.

A bright flash filled the third view screen.

"Missile impact!" Lieutenant Calloway reported with excitement. "Multiple detonations!"

The captain continued watching, unmoved, as several more flashes lit up the view screen in rapid succession. Finally, the entire screen was whitened out for several seconds.

"Target four destroyed!" Lieutenant Calloway announced with pride. Cheers erupted from the bridge crew, knowing that they had just struck the first blow in the defense of Earth. More importantly, they now knew beyond doubt that their ships were capable of destroying those of their enemy.

It gave them hope.

* * *

Luis watched through the shuttle window as ground crews outside scurried about, urgently attending to the various cargo transports, personnel shuttles, and fighters as they all prepared for action. Tanker trucks were everywhere,

as were ordnance loaders and pilot shuttles. It was amazing to watch, amazing that no one ran into each other.

He cocked his head and looked up at the afternoon sky. Already, dozens of ships were leaving the spaceport in orderly fashion. Large transports rose slowly and made their way forward down the aerial exit corridors. Personnel shuttles rose more quickly as they pulled away at various angles, each heading to their appropriate destinations. Fighters rose from the deck, pitched their noses up, and blasted straight into the sky on their way to orbit in order to rendezvous with orbital tankers and top off their fuel tanks before breaking orbit to position themselves between the Earth and her approaching enemy.

The shuttle's flight tech swung the hatch closed and activated the locking mechanism. He tapped his headset. "Hatch is secure, sir! We're ready back here."

"Finally," Kyle said.

The shuttle's engines came to life. A low rumble at first, the pitch and intensity rose as she brought her air-breathing turbines to full power and lifted off the tarmac.

Luis watched through his window as the shuttle rose quickly, pivoted to port, then rolled slightly toward her port side before pitching up and accelerating skyward. She, too, was headed for orbit, but not for the orbital tankers. They were headed for the Orbital Assembly Platform where they would meet up with their new home, the Defender-class warship Intrepid. He only wondered how long their new home would survive.

Luis and his friends were pushed back into their seats as the shuttle accelerated up and away from the spaceport.

"There's no turning back now!" Tilly exclaimed. "We're headed for the shit for sure!"

Devyn slipped her hand under Luis's, taking a firm hold. Luis looked over at her and saw that her eyes were closed. She looked afraid, unsure. He couldn't blame her. He took hold of her hand and held it tightly. "We'll be okay, Devyn."

* * *

Lee Thornton weaved his way through the crowded hospital emergency department. The department was doubly staffed at the moment, with extra personnel being called in due to the public panic that had already begun to sweep across the globe. He had been on duty for most of the day which, until an hour ago, had been a relatively calm shift.

As he approached the ambulance bay doors at the end of the hall, he could see that the sun was already high in the sky. He should have been at home with his family, sitting down to eat lunch together. Instead, he was trying to find a quiet spot from which to tell his wife he could not come home when she needed him most.

The ambulance bay doors burst open as a team of medics urgently rolled their patient into the corridor from outside. Doctor Thornton spun to his right, rolling away from the oncoming crew, slipping through the doors as they swung back in the opposite direction. Unfortunately, it wasn't much quieter outside at the ambulance dock. Radios blared from the ambulance cabs, and backup alarms sounded as new rigs arrived carrying patients who had been injured or had become ill during the initial wave of panic. As the doctor pulled his phone from his pocket and pressed the speed dial button, he wondered how much busier the

emergency department would become if the Jung really did attack his world.

"Where are you?" his wife's voice called from his phone as he raised it to his ear. He realized she must have been waiting for his call.

"I'm still at the hospital, Miri," he told her as he plugged his other ear with his free hand to hear better over the noise of the ambulances and their crews.

"Haven't they found you yet?"

"If you mean the protection agents, then yeah, they found me."

"Then why haven't you left?"

"I can't leave, Miri," the young doctor said. "They need me here."

"We need you here," Miri told him.

"I know, Miri. I know. But you and the kids are safe. They'll get you to your father. You'll be safe there."

"What about you?"

"I'm fine," he told her. "Two of the agents have agreed to stay here with me until I can leave."

"And when will that be?"

Lee sighed. "I don't know, Miri."

"I need to know you're safe, Lee."

The young doctor looked back toward the ambulance bay doors. Two men in plain, black suits stood there, watching him. "I'm safe," he insisted. "I've got two agents following me around. Besides, it's not like they're going to attack hospitals." The phone went silent for several seconds. "Miri?"

"Call me when you can," she told him.

"I will."

"Promise me."

"I promise."

"I love you," Miri told him.

"I love you, too," Lee answered. "Kiss the kids and tell them I love them."

"Doctor Thornton!" a voice called urgently from the ambulance bay doors. "We need you inside!"

"Gotta go," the young doctor said as he clicked his phone off and headed back into the hospital.

* * *

Technicians rolled the heavy carts quickly down the corridors between the racks of the Data Ark's data cores. Eight carts made their way down the main row, stopping in front of their respective equipment stacks.

"All right!" Yanni yelled at the dozen technicians gathered in the room. "There are eight carts, each with eight storage boxes. Each box is designed to hold eight data cores. That's five hundred twelve cores. Each slot in each box is clearly marked, as are each box and each cart. It is important that every data core goes into the proper slot. So check your carts and make sure you're parked in front of the correct stack." Yanni watched as four people moved their carts to exchange places. "Really?" he asked. "Come on, people! Get it together! We need to be rolling out of here in ten minutes! This is all of humanity's knowledge from before the plague! That's several thousand years of science, history, and culture we have to protect, so let's not screw anything up! And remember, be sure to wait for the light on your stack to turn red before you start pulling cores. Understood?" Yanni looked out at the faces of the

technicians gathered around the carts, waiting to begin their task of pulling cores from the data stacks.

Every single face looked exactly like he felt: terrified. He raised his hand to his comm-set and tapped it. "Take them all offline," he ordered. A few seconds later, the green lights at the top of each of the eight data stacks began to switch from green to red in succession. As each one changed, the technicians at the stack began pulling out data cores the length of their arms and inserting them into their specially designed transport cases. He had no idea where the cores were being taken to, only that he had been ordered to go with them, wherever that may be, in order to ensure they were handled properly. He wasn't certain he was ready for the task, and he was confident he didn't want to know where they were going.

* * *

"Turn complete, Captain," Ensign Stewart reported from the Reliant's helm. "We're at full burn. We should overtake target one in three minutes."

"Roll onto our port side as we approach," Captain Yahi ordered. "I want to bring as many guns as possible onto the target."

"Aye, sir."

"Tactical. Open fire with all rail guns as soon as they have firing solutions on target one," the captain added.

"Aye, sir," Lieutenant Calloway answered.

"Combat, Captain," the captain called over his comm-set.

"Yes, sir," Commander Denker answered from the Reliant's combat control center.

"Let's send some missiles at the other targets. If we continue to harass them as well, they might not catch on to our strategy."

"Yes, sir," the commander acknowledged.

"We're now running with our topside facing the upcoming target, Captain," Ensign Stewart reported.

One by one, the Reliant's forward rail guns opened fire again as the Jung cruiser at the far end of the line came into each gun's field of fire. Within a minute, all of the Reliant's guns had come into action, pounding the target with hundreds of projectiles with every passing second. As her guns engaged, so did the enemy cruiser's guns, exchanging projectiles with her attacker at more than half her rate.

"All rail guns are engaged with target one," Lieutenant Calloway reported. "We're taking fire from target one's rail guns. Missiles are firing on the other targets, but they're knocking them down with their point-defenses."

"Targets are moving, Captain," Lieutenant Legasse reported. "They're changing formation."

"One minute until we're fully alongside target one," Ensign Stewart reported.

"Changing formation?" Captain Yahli asked.

"Targets two and four are climbing relative to the ecliptic. Targets five and six are descending," Lieutenant Legasse elaborated.

"They're trying to get a firing angle on us," the captain surmised.

“They figured out our strategy?” Lieutenant Calloway wondered.

“More likely they’re just trying to overwhelm us with rail gun fire,” the captain noted as the ship rocked from the incoming enemy rail gun fire.

“Missile launch!” Lieutenant Legasse reported from the sensor station. “Multiple launches, from targets two and five!”

“Combat! Mini-rail guns to point-defense,” the captain ordered over his comm-set.

“*Aye, sir,*” Commander Denker answered.

“Captain, with our minis on point-defense, we’re not going to put enough firepower on target one to take her out quickly.”

“Understood,” the captain said.

“Targets are still changing formation,” Lieutenant Legasse said.

“Best guess?” the captain asked.

“I think they’re trying to surround us, sir.”

“Flight, recall our fighters,” the captain ordered. “Tell them they need to get on board quickly before we leave them behind.”

“*Aye, sir,*” Lieutenant Fudala answered.

“Combat, Captain,” the captain called over his comm-set.

“*Go for combat,*” Commander Denker answered.

“Commander, I’m recalling our fighters,” the captain explained. “As soon as they’re aboard, I’m going to full burn to put some distance between us and the Jung. We’ll fight a running battle until help arrives. Stand down the missiles for now. They’re just picking them off with their point-defense systems anyway. Meanwhile, concentrate our guns on the ships closest to us. Target their point-defense systems, as

well as their heavy guns. If we can weaken them enough, we might be able to slip in some nukes and take whole ships out."

"*Aye, sir,*" Commander Denker answered.

The captain held on to his chair as the Reliant continued to shake from the incoming rail gun fire.

"All surviving fighters aboard, sir," Lieutenant Fudala reported.

"Helm," the captain called. "Full burn. Let's see if we can get some distance between us and them."

"Full burn, aye," Ensign Stewart acknowledged.

The captain braced himself as the ship began to accelerate. For her size, the Reliant could still accelerate at a respectable rate. Unfortunately, they had no idea how well the enemy ships could perform. "How many did we lose?" he asked Lieutenant Fudala at the flight operations station.

"Twenty-eight of fifty," the lieutenant reported, a grim expression on his face.

"Damn," the captain said. "Their defenses are good."

* * *

Yanni and his fellow technicians quickly rolled the loaded carts out of the cargo elevator and down the corridor to the Data Ark's loading dock. As he and the first cart reached the open loading dock doors, Yanni stepped aside and let the other technician push their cart on his own. He looked back at the train of seven carts moving slowly down the corridor. "Quickly!" he ordered, waving them forward with his arms. "The truck is waiting!"

“Yanni!” a voice called from outside on the loading dock.
“Yanni!”

“What is it?” Yanni asked as he stepped out onto the loading platform.

“Where is the truck?” the other technician on the first cart asked.

Yanni looked about the brightly lit loading dock, as well as the adjacent parking lot, finding no signs of a waiting truck. “Where is the truck?” he asked over his comm-set.

“The cores are not being transported by truck,” his supervisor answered over the comm-set.

Yanni was about to speak when a black, unmarked shuttle swooped down over their heads, coming to a hover directly over the loading dock parking area, her turbines screaming. The shuttle immediately began taking fire from the guard towers located along the Data Ark facility’s inner fence line.

Yanni covered his face against the dust and debris thrown into the night air by the shuttle’s turbines as he backed away quickly, retreating through the loading dock’s large cargo door. He peered out beyond his fingers, shielding his eyes against the swirling dust as he saw two ropes drop out of the aft cargo door of the shuttle. It rotated to put its nose toward the nearest guard tower. No sooner had the bottoms of the ropes hit the pavement than men in black combat gear slid quickly down them. Men standing in the shuttle’s side doors fired energy weapons, the likes of which Yanni had never seen, at the guard towers, blowing them apart and killing the men in them with ease.

“We’re being attacked!” the technician on the loading dock exclaimed as he followed Yanni back inside. “They’re trying to steal the...”

Yanni flinched and ducked behind the first cart of data core cases as three points in the technician's chest burst open in rapid succession, sending blood and tissue flying out the exit wounds in the man's back and cutting him off mid-sentence. The man's body shook with each impact, and he fell to his knees, a look of shock on his face as his body fell backward.

"*Yanni!*" the supervisor's voice called over Yanni's comm-set as it hung loosely around his neck. "*What's going on there?*"

Yanni turned his head to see the two technicians manning the last cart of data cores holding guns, one of which had fired the shots that killed the man. The two men then turned their weapons on the rest of the technicians, picking them off one by one as they tried to flee. Two of them ran toward the shooters, having nowhere else to go, and were instantly cut down. The others ran out the loading dock cargo door straight into the sights of the attackers who had descended from the black shuttle still hovering over the loading dock parking lot. They, too, were cut down with ease, but with energy weapons fire.

Yanni remained crouched behind the first cart, frozen with fear and confusion as the battle outside between the attackers and the approaching security personnel raged on. The two technicians on the last cart, the ones who had killed all his coworkers... *They're Jung spies?* Yanni couldn't believe what he was thinking, yet the evidence lay before him, bleeding out in the hallway and on the loading dock.

"Give me the codes for the cases!"

Yanni nearly screamed, his hands shooting up in the air from his position behind the boxes. "Oh, God! Please don't kill me!" he cried out.

"Stand up, Yanni!" the man called.

Yanni stood slowly and found himself staring into the intense eyes of one of the technicians who had killed his coworkers. He knew the man as Dolph. He knew both of the men, as he had been their direct supervisor for several months now. "Dolph, what are you doing?" Yanni asked, stumbling on his words.

"Give me the codes, or I will kill you where you stand," Dolph added coldly.

"You're working for the Jung?" Yanni asked. "Why?"

"The codes, Yanni," Dolph repeated. "I will not ask again."

"Just give him the codes, Yanni," Dolph's partner begged.

Yanni could sense a different tone in the second man's voice. "Why would you do this?"

"Our families, Yanni," the second man pleaded, "for the safety of our families."

"But if you give them all our knowledge, you will make them invincible..."

"Oh, wake up, Yanni!" Dolph insisted. "The Jung have already conquered the entire core. They are *already* invincible. Do you really think the EDF can stop them with four ships? The Jung have dozens of worlds and hundreds of ships. Sooner or later, they will conquer the Earth as well."

The second man could see the pleading in Yanni's eyes. "Please, Yanni, you have to see the truth. Life under Jung rule will not be so bad..."

"ENOUGH!" Dolph screamed, raising his weapon higher and taking aim at Yanni's face. "You have three seconds..... two....."

Yanni closed his eyes and tried to keep from crying, from begging for his life.

"One....."

A dozen or more gunshots rang out. Yanni screamed, his eyes still closed as he turned away from the shooters. As the echo from the shots died, he heard boots running toward him.

“GET DOWN!” someone ordered.

Yanni opened his eyes and saw four security guards running at him carrying automatic weapons. He looked down and witnessed Dolph and his partner lying crumpled, face down on the floor in unnatural positions, pools of blood growing ever wider beneath their unmoving bodies. There were gaping wounds in both their backs.

“Yanni! Yanni! Can you hear me!” his supervisor called over the comm-set. *“We’re being attacked! Tell your people to stay inside!”*

Yanni never heard his supervisor’s cries.

“I SAID GET DOWN!” one of the guards repeated as he passed by Yanni, headed for the cargo door.

Yanni dropped to his knees behind the cart once more as the guards took positions on either side of the cargo door and opened fire on the attackers outside who were advancing from the loading dock. Automatic weapons fire rang out incessantly as the guards defended the data cores.

One of the guards was suddenly thrown backward toward Yanni from his firing position by the door. The man stumbled and fell onto Yanni, knocking him onto the dead Ark technicians who had been working for the Jung.

Yanni struggled to get upright, the wounded guard practically lying in his lap. Blood gushed from a wound in the guard’s side. Yanni tried to stem the flow of blood with his free hand, but it just kept coming.

“Oh, God. Oh, God,” he repeated. He looked at the wounded man’s face. His eyes were cold and lifeless. Yanni felt for a pulse at the man’s neck and found none. He

moaned and pushed the guard over to the side and off of him. Yanni's hands were covered with blood.

Another guard fell to the energy weapons fire from the attackers.

"Pick up a gun and fight!" one of the two remaining guards yelled.

Yanni looked at the dead guard next to him, his weapon still slung over his shoulder. Yanni pulled the weapon away from the man, sliding the strap under his arm. He stared at the weapon, unsure of what to do with it. He looked at one of the other guards as he ejected his empty magazine, replaced it with one from his belt, pulled back on the bolt, and continued firing. Yanni looked at the weapon again, finding the button to eject the magazine. He pushed it, and the long metal rectangle dropped out of the gun. Yanni pulled a fresh magazine from the dead guard's belt and pushed into the weapon, pulling back the bolt just as he had seen the other guard do.

Yanni moved to the doorway just as another guard fell from enemy fire. Hiding behind the door frame, he pointed his weapon out the door, closed his eyes, and held down the trigger. The weapon began spitting shell casings in the air as rounds spewed angrily out its barrel. The weapon reverberated in his hands, shaking his arms and shoulders in the process and swinging upward as it fired. The noise was deafening, far worse than he had expected. Yanni felt like he was firing a cannon that shot a hundred rounds per second. Even the last surviving guard on the other side of the cargo door seemed surprised by the noise. In five seconds, his weapon stopped firing, having spent all of its ammunition.

There was a strange quiet. Yanni realized that the attackers had stopped firing. He looked across at the guard

on the other side of the cargo door. The guard also looked surprised, shrugging his shoulders. They both peered cautiously around the door frame at the now poorly lit loading dock outside. The area lot was littered with the bodies of their attackers, possibly as many as eight of them, lying dead in pools of their own blood. The black, unmarked shuttle was also gone. Yanni couldn't believe what he was seeing. In the distance, he spotted the black shuttle speeding away, low over the dark countryside along the edge of the mountains.

The other guard already stood in the open, gazing at the corpses of their attackers in disbelief. "No way." The guard crouched down in fear as the loading dock was suddenly flooded with light once again. Another shuttle slid into view from over his shoulder, its engines screeching as it came in to land on top of the dead attackers. This shuttle, however, had Earth Defense Force markings on her side.

Yanni also came out as two fighters streaked low overhead in pursuit of the fleeing shuttle. A dozen armed EDF troops dropped out of the sides of the shuttle, just aft of her door guns, as it touched down. They spread out in all directions as they moved to secure the area from further attack.

Four men approached confidently. They were dressed in heavy combat armor and carried assault weapons over their shoulders.

"Lieutenant O'Conner, EDF Marines!" one of the men introduced himself as he approached Yanni and the surviving Ark guard. "Which of you is Yanni?"

Yanni reluctantly pointed to himself, inadvertently allowing his weapon to point at the lieutenant in the process.

The lieutenant leaned to one side to avoid getting shot as he reached for Yanni's weapon, grabbing it just over the magazine. "I take it combat isn't your normal line of work."

"No, sir," Yanni muttered, still in shock from the gun battle.

"I've been told you're in charge of these cores. Is that true?"

"Uh, yes, sir," Yanni answered.

"Let's get them loaded then, shall we?"

"Yes, sir."

"You might want to answer your comm-set," the lieutenant added. "I think someone is trying to call you."

Yanni reached for his comm-set which had been knocked down around his neck during the preceding events, and pulled it up to his ear. "Yes, Reto. I'm here," Yanni answered over the comm-set.

"Yanni, thank God. Are you all right?"

"Yes, I think so," Yanni answered as he looked himself over.

"Is everything okay down there? Are the cores okay?"

Yanni looked over the first cart of cases, the one that had been in the line of fire. There were several nicks from flying debris and a lot of external scorching from the energy weapons fire, but he saw no external signs of damage. "They seem to be fine, sir."

"Good work, Yanni. Good work. You stay with them, Yanni. Do not let those cores out of your sight!"

"No, sir, I won't," Yanni promised.

"Good luck, my boy."

"Uh, thank you, sir." Yanni looked down the hallway as several more workers came charging out to help load the cases onto the waiting EDF shuttle. Yanni cringed at the sound of a distant explosion. He turned to see a bright

fireball rising up into the night sky from a distant crash site as the two EDF fighters pulled up and turned in opposite directions, having just shot down the fleeing, black shuttle.

“Make a hole,” someone yelled, causing Yanni to step aside.

A man wearing a military flight suit, safety harness, and flight helmet approached Yanni.

“Are these the data cores?” the man in the flight helmet asked.

“Yes, sir,” Yanni answered. “Where are you taking them?”

“Classified,” the crew chief answered. “Is this all of them?”

“No, there are seven more carts in the hallway,” Yanni told him, pointing inside.

“Keep them coming,” the crew chief told Yanni. “We need to get them loaded and get out of here, ASAP. There could be more Jung forces in the area.” The crew chief motioned to two of his crewmen, who then came up behind him to start loading the cases from the first cart. The two crewmen stepped up and grabbed the first case off the cart, one man on each end, and lifted it up with a jerk. The case beeped loudly, causing the crewmen to pause, looks of concern on their faces.

“Why is it beeping?” the crew chief asked Yanni.

“You have to handle them more gently,” Yanni told him.

“I thought they were packed in protective cases,” the crew chief asked.

“They are,” Yanni insisted. “That’s why it’s beeping. Those are thousand year-old data cores. We don’t know how abrupt handling might affect them.”

“Carefully,” the crew chief warned his men.

“Just move them smoothly, no jarring or shaking,” Yanni added.

“What else do we need to be worried about?” the crew chief asked.

“They should not be exposed to extreme temperatures, high humidity, sudden shock, electrical charges, electromagnetic fields...”

“What the hell are the cases for?” the crew chief wondered. “Don’t they protect them from any of that?”

“Like I said, those are thousand year-old data storage devices. If you’re not careful with them, the data you’re protecting could be lost forever.”

“Do you know how to care for them?” the crew chief asked.

“Yes, of course.”

“Then climb aboard!” the crew chief ordered.

“What?”

“You’re coming with us, pal.”

“Me? But I’m just the night Core Supervisor...” Yanni suddenly remembered his supervisor’s words. *I need you to make sure the cores are properly handled, Yanni. You must stay with them wherever they go.* The words echoed in his head over and over. He climbed aboard the shuttle as the two crewmen began loading the rest of the cases. He helped the men inside the shuttle as they stacked the cases carefully, securing them as they were loaded. Within minutes, all sixty-four cases were neatly arranged on the floor of the shuttle, stored on special loading pallets connected to the deck. Without ceremony, the two crewmen outside and the crew chief climbed back aboard and closed the hatch.

One of the other technicians pushed Yanni down into his seat. “Buckle up!”

Yanni looked around, taking note of the shoulder harnesses the other technicians were pulling from the walls

of the shuttle to wrap around their torsos. He found his own harness, pulling it around either side of him and securing it in front of him as the shuttle's engines spun back up to full power. As he tightened his harness, the shuttle leapt off the ground and began to accelerate slowly as it climbed. Yanni looked at the stacks of cases in the middle of the shuttle's cargo deck. The indicator lights on the cases were all green, indicating that there were no conditions currently threatening the integrity of the cores.

Yanni glanced out the window of the shuttle at the Swiss Alps as they passed below him, growing smaller and smaller as they continued to climb. "Where are we going?" Yanni asked the technician sitting next to him.

The technician looked Yanni over, noticing the copious amounts of blood on both his clothing and his hands. He then looked at his crew chief. "Chief?"

"What the hell?" the crew chief said. "He's going to know soon enough."

Yanni looked at the man again.

"OAP," the technician told Yanni.

"What? You mean in orbit?" Yanni asked, his eyes wide.

"Uh, yeah, that's what the 'O' stands for."

Yanni swallowed hard. He had never left Switzerland. He had never even flown in a plane before. Now he was going into space along with all of humanity's pre-plague knowledge.

CHAPTER FIVE

“Heat exchanger three is offline,” the Reliant’s damage control officer reported over the comms. *“We’ve also got hull breaches in compartments one forty-seven through one fifty-three. Engineering reports main thrust port four is damaged, as well as the aft starboard maneuvering pod. If we take much more damage aft, we may have a hard time maneuvering when the time comes to turn and take them head-to-head again.”*

“Understood,” Captain Yahri answered as the bridge of the Reliant continued to shake from the constant pounding of the enemy rail gun fire. “Lieutenant Calloway, how long until the Volkov reaches attack range?”

“Thirty minutes, sir,” the lieutenant answered.

“Incoming message,” Ensign Donabee reported. “It’s from Fleet Command, sir, via laser comm. They’re ordering us to draw the Jung closer to Earth, within range of the LRGA.”

“Not going to be a problem, I suspect,” the captain mumbled. “Acknowledge the order.”

“Sir, won’t they come into the LRGA’s field of fire regardless?” Lieutenant Calloway wondered.

“From this angle, the moon is on the far side of the Earth,” Captain Yahri explained. “On their current trajectory, they could still change course and approach the Earth from the opposite side just before they came into range. Fleet just wants us to keep them on their current heading to

ensure they'll pass on the same side as those guns." The captain turned to his helmsman. "Helm, cut the mains and coast."

"Mains to zero thrust, aye," Ensign Stewart answered.

"If we stop accelerating, and they continue their burn, they'll close the gap and surround us," Lieutenant Calloway warned.

"Can't be helped. We need to protect our main drive if we're going to get out of the way of those guns at the last moment," the captain explained. "Mister Stewart, pitch us up ninety degrees so all our guns can get clear firing lines."

"Pitching up ninety, aye."

The captain watched the main view screen as the stars began to slide from top to bottom as the Reliant pitched her nose upward in relation to her flight path. He could feel the concussion of numerous rail gun rounds as they struck the Reliant's hull. Coming closer and closer, they made their way from the aft end of the ship to her topside as the massive ship pitched upward.

"Combat, Captain. Concentrate our rail guns on each ship's forward guns. If we can take them out, they'll be forced to coast so they can rotate and bring more guns into play. That might keep them from gaining on us for a while."

"Aye, sir," the commander answered over the comm-set. "*Targeting their forward guns.*"

"Tactical, how long until we're in range of the Lunar Rail Gun Array?" the captain asked.

"Ten minutes, sir."

"Damage control, Captain," the captain called over the comm-set.

"*Damage control. Go ahead, sir,*" the damage control officer responded.

"Can we take ten more minutes of this?"

"At our current angle, doubtful. Too many critical systems exposed. Even if we do, we probably won't have any working guns left by then. However, since they won't have an angle on our propulsion systems, we should be able to make a run for it when the time comes."

"Understood," Captain Yahli answered. "Keep us together as long as you can."

"Yes, sir."

"It's working, sir!" Lieutenant Legasse reported from the sensor station. "Three of the Jung ships have stopped accelerating and are pitching over to bring more guns on us."

"Three of them?" the captain asked.

The lieutenant watched his display for several more seconds before answering. "Yes, sir, only three of them. Targets one and six are still accelerating. In fact, they're accelerating faster than before."

"Damn," Captain Yahli cursed under his breath. "Combat, Captain. Targets one and six are accelerating. They're going to try to attack us from either side. When they do, you'll need to disengage the other three contacts at least temporarily and concentrate our fire on those two targets. Keep the other three busy with missiles if you have to, but try to take out as many gun emplacements as possible on targets one and six as they come alongside."

"Yes, sir," Commander Denker answered over the comm-set. *"Sir, recommend we pitch over another ninety, so we're flying backwards. That will allow us to bring more rail guns to bear on targets one and six as they pass. It will also make us a smaller target for the other three cruisers."*

"What about our missiles?"

"Our forward missile batteries can zero in on the trailing targets. We'll let the other two get closer, then go to full

burn and decelerate just as we get into range of the LRGA. That will bring them in close enough to sneak some missiles past their point-defenses. We might even get lucky with a few nukes at that range."

"Good idea, Commander," Captain Yahri agreed. "Helm, bring our bow onto targets two, four, and five."

"Aye, captain, pitching and rolling," Ensign Stewart answered.

Captain Yahri again felt the concussion of enemy rail gun fire shift, walking farther forward as the Reliant rotated and rolled. Within a minute, the UES Reliant was flying backwards, her forward guns constantly firing at the Jung cruisers chasing her toward Earth. The captain could hear the chatter of his bridge staff as they communicated with rest of the ship. He could hear the chatter of damage control parties and firefighting teams as they reported to the damage control officer about their struggles to keep the ship alive and fighting, even as the enemy ships tried to destroy them. It occurred to him that he had no idea how many of his crew had been injured thus far. He knew they had lost twenty-eight pilots, but he had obtained no casualty count for the ship itself. He eased his mind, if only temporarily, with the thought that, because his chief in damage control had not felt it necessary to report, it had not yet risen to high numbers, at least not enough that it might impact the ship's overall combat readiness.

"Targets one and six will come alongside in three minutes," Lieutenant Legasse reported. "Estimate they'll have firing solutions in one minute."

"Time to LRGA range?" Captain Yahri asked his tactical officer.

"Seven minutes, sir," Lieutenant Calloway answered.

“Combat, Captain,” Captain Yahli called over the comm-set.

“*Go ahead, sir,*” Commander Denker answered.

“As soon as our side guns get a firing solution on targets one and six, open fire. Target their point-defense systems.”

“*Yes, sir,*” the commander answered.

* * *

“We have good tracks on six contacts,” the Lunar Rail Gun Array’s tracking officer reported, “five hostiles and one friendly. They’ll be in firing range in six minutes.”

“That *one* would be the Reliant,” the weapons officer answered as he examined the tracking display. “Let’s concentrate our fire on either side of center. Overlapping conical patterns on all guns. Try to keep our fire out of the center for the first minute. That will give the Reliant a chance to break off and get the hell out of our firing solution.”

“And if she doesn’t, sir?” the tracking officer wondered.

“Then she’s going to get pounded just like the rest of them,” the weapons officer said coldly.

“Sir?”

“Can’t be helped. Her captain knows what he’s flying into, Lieutenant. If he can get out of the way, he will. But those enemy ships are headed our way, and if we don’t take them out before they get here, we’re all fucked, not just that one ship.”

The lieutenant swallowed hard, thinking about the men and women on the Reliant. If they failed to get out of the way in time, it was doubtful any of them would survive. The

LRGA's ten rail guns were designed to fire massive projectiles at incredible velocities. The projectiles would fragment into thousands of smaller, yet still significantly sized, projectiles farther downrange on their way to the target area. They would blanket the area with enough kinetic energy to turn a ship, or even ships, into dust in minutes. It was a frightening thought. All the lieutenant could bring himself to say was, "Yes, sir."

* * *

"Taking fire from targets one and six!" Lieutenant Calloway reported as he held onto the tactical station to keep from falling.

Captain Yahri held on tight. The Reliant shook even more violently as hundreds of projectiles pounded away at either side of his ship. "Now! Full burn!" he ordered.

"Full burn, aye!" Ensign Stewart answered as he activated the main engines and brought the throttles up swiftly.

The Reliant continued to coast backwards toward Earth as her eight massive engines on her aft end began to glow a soft amber. The glow quickly grew in intensity until the glare was white-hot and massive, obscuring her entire back end from view. The two Jung cruisers on either side of the Reliant began to slip past her as she started to decelerate sharply, drawing closer to the other three pursuing vessels.

"Mains at full thrust!" Ensign Stewart reported.

Captain Yahri could feel the ship shake under the stress of her engines as they burned at full power, slowing the

massive ship at a surprising rate. “Combat, fire all missiles on targets one and six!” the captain called over the comm-set. “Send as many multi-warhead nukes as you can at them, Commander!” There was no response from Commander Denker in combat. Captain Yahli was unconcerned, as he knew that his executive officer was busy carrying out his orders at the moment, and there was no time to spare. Within seconds, the targets on either side would slip far enough away that their point-defense systems would have plenty of time to intercept and destroy the Reliant’s missile barrage.

“Missiles away!” Lieutenant Calloway announced from the tactical station. “Eight missiles to each side! Impact in three seconds!”

“Starboard camera! Main view screen!” the captain ordered. The main view screen switched just as the Reliant’s missiles struck the enemy ship slipping past her on her starboard side. The target’s point-defenses managed to take out four of the Reliant’s incoming missiles, but the other four got past, one of which carried sixteen miniature nuclear warheads that had begun to spread out just moments after the missile had left its launch rails. Four of the tiny warheads missed their target, having spread so far apart that they sailed right over the cruiser. The other twelve were a different story and reported as such in brilliant flashes of white light.

“Direct hits!” Lieutenant Calloway shouted.

“Port target?” the captain wondered.

“Three missiles struck target six, sir. None of them nukes. She was farther away than target one. She’s taken damage, but she’s still in the fight.”

“Damn. Combat, fire four more nukes into target one!”

"Aye, sir!" Commander Denker answered over the comm-set, jubilation in his voice. The Reliant was about to register her second kill. *"Firing four nukes at target one."*

"Target one has lost all power and maneuvering, sir!" Lieutenant Legasse reported from the sensor station. "She's drifting into the LRGA's firing solution!"

"Target six is rotating!" Lieutenant Calloway reported from the tactical station. "She's turning around to decelerate!"

"She's trying to stay with us," the captain mumbled. "She wants to pound us."

"Missiles away," Lieutenant Calloway reported. "Impact in five seconds."

Captain Yahli watched the main view screen, which still showed the view from the Reliant's starboard camera. Four detonations flashed, obscuring all view of the drifting enemy cruiser. When the flashes subsided, there was nothing but chunks of debris spreading out in different directions as they continued to drift toward the LRGA's field of fire.

"Range on targets two, four, and five is closing rapidly!" Lieutenant Calloway reported.

"Time to LRGA range?" the captain asked.

"Three minutes," Lieutenant Calloway answered.

"Maintain your course and burn," the captain ordered, "but slip down in altitude relative to the targets. Take your time, son. Don't make it look intentional. Then, on my command, pitch our nose down and to starboard, so we'll descend relative to the LRGA's firing solution. If we wait until the last second, those ships won't have time to get out of the way before they run into the LRGA's field of fire."

* * *

“Targets will be in range in three minutes!” the LRGA’s tracking officer reported.

“It will take two minutes for our rounds to reach them,” the weapons officer stated. “All guns stand by to commence firing in one minute.”

“Aye, sir,” the range officer acknowledge. “All guns standing by to fire.”

The weapons officer took a deep breath and let it out slowly. He had been assigned to the Lunar Rail Gun Array for two months—just after she had become operational. While they had already fired the guns several times during training exercises, he had expected to get far more practice before actually using them in combat, especially at their maximum range for accurate targeting. Those approaching targets were still so far out that it took time for the sensors to return a targeting image from them. That meant they had to aim their weapons based on where they expected the targets to be several minutes later, when their projectiles would be in the vicinity of their targets. It was for this reason they chose to fire their rounds in a conical pattern in order to maximize their chances of a successful hit. Unfortunately, it also increased their chances of striking the Reliant. He kept telling himself that the Reliant’s captain knew this and would do what he could to get out of the way of friendly fire. What they were seeing on their tracking displays was thirty seconds old, and for all he knew, the Reliant had already moved out of the way. At least he hoped so.

He looked at the time display on the wall as it counted down the last two seconds to the time he had already chosen to fire. “All guns,” he said and then paused, “fire!”

The ten massive rail guns on the surface of the moon began firing, the vibrations from their rails causing lunar dust to vibrate and bounce, floating up several inches from the surface before settling back down and being bounced up again. Blue flashes traveled up each gun's rails in a split second as the rails propelled the projectiles into space. Within seconds, a few dozen rounds had been launched. All of those rounds would break apart in another minute, spreading out into a field of a thousand smaller projectiles, each with enough kinetic energy to pass completely through the hull of any ship unlucky enough to find itself in the path of destruction.

Deep within the Earth's moon, inside the LRGAs fire-control center, the weapons officer couldn't help but smile, knowing that at least one, if not several, of the Jung ships would be obliterated in less than two minutes. If they were lucky, all of them might fall into their trap. Great pains had been taken to keep the presence of the LRGA a secret, disguising the project as a tracking station designed to provide earlier, more accurate warning of an incursion into their system. The deception had been so successful that most personnel had arrived on the moon still expecting to be working at a tracking station. He had thought he was on his way to join up with the Volkov on patrol, when he found himself on the moon in command of guns that he previously had not known existed. The running joke at the time had been that an assignment to the lunar tracking station was punishment for low scores at the academy. Now, his command to fire might very well be the one that saved the Earth.

“Contacts!” the tracking officer reported with surprise. “Coming in from the far side of the moon!”

“What?” the weapons officer cried, his smile instantly fading. “Where?”

“Behind us, sir!”

The weapons officer quickly looked at the tracking display, noticing the four icons on the opposite side from the other five enemy targets they were already firing on.

“Four Jung frigates!” the tracking officer reported. “Coming in low on our horizon!”

“Cease fire on guns one, two, nine, and ten. Have them come about and engage the new targets! Quickly!”

“Targets are firing!” the tracking officer reported.

“Guns one, two, nine, and ten have disengaged and are rotating!” another technician reported.

“Thirty-two missiles inbound!” the tracking officer cried out with great alarm. “Fifteen seconds to impact!”

The weapons officer looked at the status displays for all the guns located along the top edge of the wall. The two guns on either end of the array were not even one-quarter of the way around in their attempt to retarget the new contacts. “Oh, my God,” he mumbled. “They’ll never make it in time.” He looked at the expressions of his staff, every one of which were looking back at him with pale faces and wide-eyed fear. “They must have known all along,” he said softly. “Somehow, they must have known.”

They were the last words he would ever speak.

Pairs of Jung missiles slammed into the ten massive rail guns on the surface of the moon, their detonations tearing the guns apart. The powerful explosions hurled pieces of the

guns several kilometers downrange before they slammed back down onto the lunar surface.

The other twelve missiles split off into six pairs, each finding their targets with precision. Power stations, mining facilities, fabrication plants, even housing and flight operations were all targeted.

The last pair of missiles found their target as well, piercing the outer walls of the command structure, exploding from within. The fireball flashed inside the building as it consumed the oxygen, then quickly disappeared as the structure blew apart and the vacuum of the lunar surface instantly smothered the flames.

* * *

“Target six is entering the LRGA’s firing solution!” Lieutenant Calloway reported from the Reliant’s tactical station.

“Put target six on screen and magnify!” the captain ordered. The sixth Jung cruiser appeared on the view screen, her engines blazing as she attempted to match the Reliant’s rate of deceleration and remain close. A large chunk of the cruiser’s starboard upper hull blew away, followed by several flashes of light from deep within her as secondary explosions were ignited. Then another chunk flew away, and another. Within seconds, the Jung cruiser came apart in a rapid series of explosions as more projectiles from the LRGA tore through her. Finally, a projectile found her reactor, and she exploded in a brilliant flash of light.

“Helm, pitch down and starboard!” Captain Yahi ordered.

“Pitching down and starboard, aye!” Ensign Stewart answered smartly as he began the maneuver.

“How long until the other targets reach the kill zone?” the captain asked.

“Thirty seconds!” Lieutenant Calloway reported.

“They’re pitching down to change course,” Lieutenant Legasse reported from the sensor station.

“Do they have time?” the captain asked.

“No, sir! They weren’t decelerating! They were still coasting bow first!”

“They’ll have to pitch down before they burn!” Ensign Stewart added. “Their only chance is to pitch over stern first and burn angled downward like us! It will take them fifteen seconds just to flip over!”

“Yes!” Captain Yahi exclaimed. The trap had worked just like Admiral Galiardi had planned all along. The EDF was about to destroy six heavily armed Jung cruisers without losing a single warship. He only hoped the remaining three Jung cruisers would not have time to transmit a warning to other ships that might come at a later date.

“How are we doing?” the captain asked. “Are we going to clear the kill zone?”

“Yes, sir!” Ensign Erbe answered from the navigator’s station. “But not by much!”

“Fifteen seconds!” Lieutenant Legasse announced. “They’ve almost rotated,” he added.

“Too little, too late,” the captain said to himself.

“Targets have fired their main drives to begin deceleration!” the lieutenant added. “Ten seconds to the kill zone!”

“Tactical map to port view screen. Put the last three targets up on the main screen, split windows.” The captain looked up as his request was granted. The port view screen showed the tactical map with the estimated flight path of the three remaining Jung cruisers cutting across the bottom

edge of the LRGA's field of fire. He looked at the images of the three enemy ships that, at any moment, would be cut to pieces just like the first one.

"Five seconds to kill zone," Lieutenant Legasse reported. "Three.....two.....one.....zero."

Captain Yahi and the entire bridge crew stared at the main view screen, waiting for the destruction of their pursuers to begin. A second passed, then two, then three. Ten seconds later, the captain turned to the sensor operator, a concerned look on his face. "Double-check your calculations," he ordered.

The lieutenant did as requested. "I don't understand, sir. They should be in the kill zone already. Scanning the area."

Captain Yahi waited, holding his breath for several seconds.

"Oh, my God," Lieutenant Legasse said, shock on his face. "There are no more projectiles."

"What?" Captain Yahi asked.

"They've stopped firing, sir," the lieutenant said.

"Remaining ships are firing missiles!" Lieutenant Calloway reported from the tactical station. "Twenty-four missiles inbound! Time to impact: one minute!"

"Combat! All mini-rail guns switch to point-defense mode!" the captain called over his comm-set. "Lock missiles on all targets. Full nuclear! Fire at will! Repeat! Fire at will!"

"Point-defenses firing!" Lieutenant Calloway reported. "They're getting in close again! They're firing their guns as well!"

"Sensors! Scan the LRGA!" Captain Yahi ordered. "Helm, flip us back over, bow to our flight path and full burn! We need distance!"

"Pitching back over! Bow to flight path and full burn, aye!" the helmsman answered as he took action.

“Captain! The LRGA is gone!” Lieutenant Legasse exclaimed in disbelief.

“What?”

“I’ve got four more targets coming out from behind the moon! Jung frigates!” He turned away from his sensor displays to face his captain. “They must have taken out the guns on the moon, sir.”

“Damn it!” Captain Yahi exclaimed. “How did they know?!”

“Four missiles made it past our point-defenses!” Lieutenant Calloway reported. His complexion turned pale as he realized their fate. “Impact in ten seconds!”

“All hands brace for impact!” Captain Yahi ordered.

Four Jung missiles struck the Reliant from behind, two directly in her stern drive section, one in her upper maneuvering pod, and one in the underside of her hull. The two that struck her engines instantly knocked them out, their fires dying in the resulting explosion as pieces of her engine nozzles went flying out in all directions. The upper maneuvering pod came apart and exploded, pieces of its housing slamming into the topside of her hull and causing secondary explosions within. The last missile, the one that struck her underside, found one of the massive ship’s propellant tanks, the explosion igniting the tank’s contents. The force of the explosion broke the ship in half just behind her midsection, with multiple secondary explosions breaking her aft section into two more pieces. Seconds later, eight more missiles slammed into both her forward and aft sections, which were already separated by nearly a hundred meters of open space. After the blinding flashes of light cleared, there was nothing recognizable left of the UES

Reliant. Only pieces and bodies scattering about in all directions.

* * *

“Admiral! We’ve lost all contact with the LRGA!” one of Admiral Galiardi’s senior officers working in the Fleet command center reported. “No comms, no telemetry, nothing!”

“New contacts!” the officer in charge of tracking reported. “Coming out from behind the moon. Jung frigates.”

“Oh, my God, they’ve taken out the LRGA,” Rear Admiral Duncan exclaimed, a look of shock on his face. He turned and looked at Admiral Galiardi. “How could they have known?”

“Goddamn it, Marty, we’ve always known there were spies among us!” Admiral Galiardi said. “I guess now we know it goes even deeper than we thought, possibly to this very room!”

“It could be anyone,” Rear Admiral Duncan admitted.

“Contact the Reliant. Tell her to go to full burn and wait until the Volkov arrives to reengage the enemy.”

“Yes, sir...” Rear Admiral Duncan was cut off mid-response by the squawk of an alarm horn. He looked at the massive tactical display map on the front wall of the Fleet command center. The icon representing the Reliant went from green to orange for a moment, then faded away completely. “The Reliant,” he mumbled. “She’s gone.”

Admiral Galiardi sighed, controlling his frustration at the sudden turn of events. “Contact the Volkov,” he ordered his communications officer. “Warn them they are going into battle alone. They must prevent those ships from reaching Earth.”

“Yes, Admiral,” the communications officer answered.

“What about the new contacts?” Rear Admiral Duncan asked.

“We’ll launch the Intrepid. She’ll have to deal with them on her own.” The admiral sighed again. “They knew exactly when and where to hit us—right when our patrols were too far out to rally together at the same time.” The admiral shook his head. “They knew everything about us. Everything.”

“It’s not over yet, Mike,” Rear Admiral Duncan told his old friend.

Admiral Michael Galiardi looked at his friend. “You’re damn right it’s not.”

* * *

“Incoming message from Fleet Command,” Lieutenant Chara reported from the Intrepid’s comm-center on the left side of the bridge.

Captain Christopoulos stepped closer to his comm officer’s station as he paced the bridge of the Intrepid. He peered over the comm officer’s shoulder to read the message. “Sound the word. All decks prepare to get under way. Notify the XO in combat.”

“Yes, sir,” the lieutenant answered.

“Helm,” the captain said, straightening back up. “How are we looking?”

“All systems are online,” Ensign Hunt answered. “Reactors are hot and ready for full power. We’re ready for departure, sir.”

“Very well,” the captain said as he moved to his command chair and sat down. “Comms, notify the OAP that

we're leaving immediately. Helm, retract all moorings and take us out when ready."

"Aye, sir. Sounding mooring alarms."

The starboard boarding tunnel that led from the Orbital Assembly Platform to the Intrepid's port boarding hatch shook as personnel ran through the clear tube on their way to their ship.

"Move it! Move it!" the officer of the deck standing just inside the boarding hatch yelled to the people in the boarding tunnel. The last few men and women ran down the tunnel and into the ship, and the officer pressed the button to close the Intrepid's main port boarding hatch.

The boarding tunnel connected to the Intrepid's port side began to retract back toward the OAP's core as the mooring clamps all around the Intrepid simultaneously released their grip on the Defender-class warship. The Intrepid began to move slowly forward, carefully inching her way out of the OAP's surrounding framework that barely fit around the Intrepid's massive hull.

"Approaching OAP framework threshold," Ensign Hunt reported.

"As soon as we clear the OAP, increase our rate of acceleration," Captain Christopoulos ordered. "I want to break orbit and go full burn for the moon as soon as possible. We've got four Jung frigates inbound from her far side, and I'd like to dispatch them before they get a clear shot at the Earth."

“Yes, sir,” the young helmsman answered. “We’ll be clear to begin our burn in three minutes.”

“Flight, as soon as we clear port, I want to launch long-range interceptors to harass those frigates. I don’t want them thinking they can just waltz in at their leisure.”

“Yes, sir,” Lieutenant Tonnes acknowledged.

“Combat, Captain,” Captain Christopoulos called over his comm-set.

“*Captain, go for combat,*” Commander Nasser answered over the comm-set from the Intrepid’s combat control center.

“Commander, establish a lock on those frigates as soon as you get a clear line of sight. We’ll start with conventional warheads, test their point-defense intercept capabilities. No use wasting nukes until we know the chances of them getting through the frigates’ defenses. If they are too good, we’ll move in close and slug it out. Intel says we have the advantage on armor, so we’ll use it if we have to.”

“*Aye, sir,*” the commander answered.

“Thirty seconds to burn,” Ensign Hunt reported from the helm.

Captain Christopoulos watched the main forward view screen as the OAP’s massive framework that surrounded his ship slipped past their view, falling away as they continued to drift forward across its threshold.

“We’ve cleared the threshold,” the helmsman reported. “Burn in fifteen seconds.”

“Put up the tactical map on the port view screen,” the captain ordered. “Maintain an up-to-date tactical feed from Fleet Command. I want to know the status of those last three Jung cruisers at all times, as we may have to deal with them as well.”

“Aye, sir,” the Intrepid’s new tactical officer answered, his voice shaky.

The captain turned to his new tactical officer. “First tour, Lieutenant?”

“Yes, sir,” the lieutenant admitted nervously.

“What’s your name, son?”

“Eckert, sir. Lieutenant Andrew Eckert.”

“You’ll do fine, Lieutenant Eckert,” the captain told him, trying to boost the young officer’s confidence. “This tactical situation is pretty straightforward: four frigates coming over the moon and three cruisers about an hour out from Earth. The frigates shouldn’t be a problem, and by the time we finish them off and turn toward those three cruisers, the Volkov will already be on them. We’ll just be backing her up, and three Jung cruisers are no match for two Defender-class warships, now are they, son?”

“Yes, sir. I mean, no, sir, they’re not.”

“Just keep your eyes and ears open, and shout out anything you see that you don’t think I’m aware of. That’s why you’re here.”

“Yes, sir,” the lieutenant answered.

Captain Christopoulos could tell by the sound of the lieutenant’s voice that his words of encouragement had done little to boost the young man’s confidence, but he also knew that a few minutes of combat would help him get going.

* * *

“Orders from Fleet, sir!” the Orbital Assembly Platform’s communications officer reported. “All unassigned fleet personnel still on the OAP are to report to the Celestia for duty immediately.”

The officer of the watch looked at the comm officer.
“They’re going to take her out?”

“I don’t know, sir,” the comm officer admitted. “The orders just say to send them to her, sir.”

“Very well,” the officer of the watch said. “Pass the word to all decks. Repeat the message every few minutes until the Celestia either departs or Fleet tells us otherwise.”

“Yes, sir.”

CHAPTER SIX

High above the Earth, a flash of light appeared against the background of distant stars. A moment later, another flash appeared, and then another. Within seconds, a dozen flashes had appeared. Each flash streaked forward slightly as it appeared, revealing an object that rapidly grew larger as they approached high orbit over the planet.

“Admiral!” the lead tracking officer called. “New contacts! Twelve Jung ships just appeared in high Earth orbit, opposite side from the OAP!”

“Twelve?” the admiral exclaimed. “What type of ships?”

“Four heavy cruisers, four frigates, and four ships that we have never seen before,” the tracking officer exclaimed. “They’re massive, not as large as the battle platforms, but much bigger than...” The commander stopped mid-sentence. He turned to face the admiral, a look of disbelief on his face. “I think it’s an invasion force, Admiral.”

“Why didn’t we see them approach?” the admiral asked, irritation in his voice.

“They must have just come out of FTL, sir,” the tracking officer surmised.

“Their FTLs are not that accurate,” Rear Admiral Duncan insisted.

“Apparently they are,” the admiral commented, his irritation turning to frustration. “Despite what our

intelligence showed.”

“None of our extra-solar sources reported Jung ships coming out of FTL this close to a planet,” Rear Admiral Novikoff, the commander of Fleet intelligence, defended. “In fact, every witnessed transition has occurred farther out, like those cruisers.”

“Well, now we know otherwise,” the admiral mumbled.

“New contacts are separating,” the tracking officer reported. “They’re splitting off into four groups. Three ships per group, sir: the big one, a cruiser, and a gunboat.”

“What are they doing?” Rear Admiral Duncan wondered.

“They’re going to spread out, surround the planet,” the admiral said. “If I were invading a world, that’s what I’d do: hit everything at once from all around the globe.”

“We should contact the Intrepid,” Rear Admiral Duncan said. “She is still closer to the Earth than the moon. She can turn around and attack the new contacts.”

“Eight warships?” the admiral said. “She could handle the gunboats fine, but the four cruisers as well? No, the Intrepid has to protect the OAP until the Celestia can make her escape, and those frigates coming from the moon will have a clear line of fire in minutes.”

“But sir, those ships...”

“We’ll have to deal with them from the surface,” the admiral said, cutting off his friend. “Have our guns and missiles engage the cruisers and gunboats. Launch our fighters and order them to attack the transports. With so much firepower as escorts, I suspect they have little in the way of their own defenses.”

“Will that be enough?” Rear Admiral Duncan wondered.

“Probably not,” Admiral Galiardi admitted. “But maybe we can slow them down a bit until we can get one of our ships in position.”

“And if they start sending down troops?” Rear Admiral Duncan asked.

“Pass the word to all nations to expect incoming forces. Each nation’s military will have to deal with whatever Jung forces invade their territories. Their command centers will coordinate through us so we can keep all nations apprised of the global situation as it changes.” Admiral Galiardi looked at Rear Admiral Duncan. All hope appeared to have left his friend’s face. “We knew it would come to this, Marty. We knew it all along. We just didn’t want to admit it.”

* * *

“She’s not there!” Kyle exclaimed as he looked out his window on the shuttle.

“What?” Devyn said in disbelief. “What do you mean, ‘She’s not there’?”

“Bay number one is empty!” Kyle answered. “She was in bay number one. I’m sure of it!”

“Maybe they just moved her out,” Tilly said as he leaned in closer to Kyle to see for himself.

Luis moved his head about the small window next to his seat, trying every angle in a hope of spotting the Intrepid. “I don’t see her anywhere.”

“Hey!” Devyn called out to the shuttle’s crew chief. “Ask the pilot where the Intrepid went!”

The crew chief touched his comm-set button on his helmet to communicate with the shuttle’s flight crew.

“They can’t be too far out yet, can they?” Kyle asked.

“Are you kidding?” Luis said. Sometimes his friend’s lack of knowledge about spaceflight amazed him. “We left an hour ago. They could be halfway to Mars by now.”

“The Intrepid left port ten minutes ago,” the crew chief told them. “She’s headed for the moon.”

“Can we catch up to her?” Devyn asked.

The crew chief shook his head. “We don’t have the fuel.”

“Shit!” Kyle cursed in frustration.

“Can we get more fuel at the OAP and then go after her?” Devyn suggested.

“No can do,” the crew chief explained. “OAP says that all unassigned personnel are to report to the Celestia immediately.”

“The Celestia isn’t finished,” Luis exclaimed. “Can she even fly?”

“We’re assigned to the Intrepid,” Devyn told the crew chief, “all four of us.” She looked behind her as several more passengers raised their hands as well to indicate that they, too, were assigned to the Intrepid.

“Sorry, sir,” the crew chief told her, “not anymore.”

* * *

“Numerous new contacts!” Fleet Command’s tracking officer reported. “All four battle groups are launching smaller ships.”

“Type and count, Commander,” the admiral reminded him.

“Several different types,” the tracking officer reported as he listened to the chatter from the tracking stations over his comm-set and sorted out the details as they were reported to him. “Fighters, bombers, landing craft... We count at least fifty ships and rising.”

“All national defense command centers are linked in with us, Admiral,” Rear Admiral Duncan reported. “You now

effectively command all Earth forces from all nations: land, sea, air, and space.”

Admiral Galiardi took a deep breath. He knew that such a command was possible, as he had been the primary architect of Earth’s defense strategy. Even so, the sudden increase in responsibility was daunting. He looked at his friend. “Are all your people in place, Marty?”

“Yes, sir,” Rear Admiral Duncan assured him. “You tell me what you want to happen, and my people will figure out which national asset is best suited for the task and activate it.”

The admiral let out a long, slow breath. “Very well. Are all our surface-to-orbit defenses ready?”

“Yes, sir.”

“All surface-to-orbit rail guns, open fire on the cruisers and gunboats. Lock all surface-to-orbit missiles on the troop carriers. Launch one wave and reassess.”

“Yes, sir,” Rear Admiral Duncan acknowledged. He turned away and starting giving orders to his subordinates over his comm-set in order to turn the admiral’s orders into actions.

Admiral Galiardi looked at the tactical display on the wall. There were now hundreds of red icons of various shapes and sizes spreading out from the twelve original contacts that had appeared above their world only ten minutes ago. The enemy had come in at just the right moment and from several different angles. This was not an invasion of overwhelming force as they had witnessed in the Alpha Centauri system. This was a well-planned, multi-pronged attack designed to achieve maximum results with minimum forces. He almost laughed at the thought, as the efforts of the Jung, while tactically impressive, were unnecessary. They could have come in all at once at the

same point, and they would not have had the firepower to stop them. By splitting their forces in such ways, they were actually making themselves somewhat weaker. They were giving the people of Earth a fighting chance. He was sure, however, that it was not their intent.

* * *

Yanni sat on the long bench seat next to the EDF troops in the shuttle as it approached the Orbital Assembly Platform. He dared not look out the window behind him, as he had never been in an airplane, let alone a spacecraft. The moment they had achieved orbit and weightlessness had set in, he thought his lunch was going to come back up for all to see. Instead, he stared at the stack of data core cases secured in the middle of the compartment, reminding himself how important his assignment was in the grand scheme of his world. He was to ensure the safety of all the world's pre-plague knowledge and history, or at least make sure it was handled in such a way that it was not damaged during its transport.

The inside of the shuttle suddenly darkened, as if a dark cloud had passed overhead, blocking out the light of the sun. His eyes widened as he looked about.

"We're landing at the OAP," the shuttle's crew chief said to him as he floated past, noticing the fear in Yanni's face.

Yanni closed his eyes, finding it unsettling to see someone floating about in such an unnatural fashion. Without warning, there was a loud clunk that rocked the shuttle. Yanni almost yelled out in fear, but noticed that no one else aboard the shuttle seemed concerned. He felt a wave of gravity sweep back over him, his hair settling back down onto his head and his pant legs hanging straight once

more. He had read that the artificial gravity produced on spaceships was not fully that of Earth and wondered exactly what percentage of normal gravity he was feeling at the moment. It seemed light to him.

“Careful when you get up, kid,” the crew chief told him, this time walking past. “The gravity is lighter up here. Get up too fast, and you’ll jump up and hit your head on the ceiling.”

Yanni swallowed hard. He looked around and saw that, while the others were unbuckling their flight harnesses, none of them stood. He unbuckled his shoulder straps but waited on his lap belt for the moment.

A minute later, the lighting inside the shuttle reverted back to the plain, white lighting used when the ship was not in flight. The other men all stood, preparing to disembark. Yanni unbuckled his lap belt and stood, remembering to rise slowly. Despite his best efforts, he still felt as if his feet were about to come off the deck of the shuttle and instinctively reached one arm up to keep himself from rising into the overhead.

The man next to Yanni smiled. “Don’t worry. It’s only this light on the flight deck. It’s nearly normal when you get inside. Just don’t jump in the hangar, or you’ll go flying.”

“Really?” Yanni answered. “Why is it so much lighter on the flight deck?”

“Makes it easier to handle cargo, and it’s easier for the shuttles to take off and land. The outer transfer airlocks are only ten percent gravity. It’s twenty-five in here.”

“What is it inside?”

“Seventy-five, I think,” the man told him as the rear cargo ramp came down.

“Let’s go, people!” the crew chief yelled. “We’ve got to move this cargo to the Celestia, now!”

Yanni stood silently, watching as the crews moved the cases containing the data cores from the shuttle to the waiting carts outside. All he could think about was that the Celestia was the sister ship of the ill-fated Aurora, and as far as he knew, she wasn't even half finished. Again, Yanni wished he had eaten a lighter lunch.

* * *

Workers out on the tarmac at the North American Fleet Academy Spaceport ran for cover as alert sirens blared in the distance. Ground crews scrambled to get the last of the shuttles off the ground before it was too late. The sound of something moving through the air at an incredible speed roared in the distance, causing many people to pause and look upward. They reacted in surprise when a massive explosion on the far side of the spaceport rocked the ground under them. More explosions followed as precision Jung ordnance rained down on them from orbit. The blasts walked their way across the spaceport, striking buildings, storage tanks, parking lots, and the mostly empty tarmac. The remaining shuttles began launching, regardless of the fuel state, in the hopes of escaping the horrific bombardment. One cargo shuttle accidentally maneuvered into the path of an incoming weapon and was blown out of the sky a mere one hundred meters above the spaceport, sending a shower of burning debris and fuel raining down onto the fleeing workers below.

Within a minute, the bombardment was over. Little of the spaceport remained standing, most of it a pile of burning rubble. Screams of the injured could be heard in between the roar of the burning fires and the secondary explosions of fuel tanks and stored ordnance. The afternoon sky overhead

was blackened by the rising smoke, and the sirens of approaching fire and rescue vehicles could be heard in the distance.

A worker rose from behind the tow vehicle where he had taken cover. His face was covered with dust and soot from nearby fires, and his overalls were torn and bloodied where flying pieces of debris had cut through both his clothing and skin. He looked himself over briefly. He suffered from several deep lacerations and a burn on his arm where burning fuel had caught his clothing on fire. He was amazed that he was still alive.

He looked out over the devastation: the craters, the burning wreckage of vehicles that had not made it to safety, and the shuttles that had never gotten off the ground. The bodies of his fellow workers were everywhere and in various states of dismemberment, their blood staining the tarmac beneath them. Many scrambled to help the injured survivors while others stood like him, staring at the carnage before them. This was unbridled aggression. This was the face of war. "My God," he exclaimed.

* * *

"Admiral," Rear Admiral Duncan called, "the cruisers have begun orbital bombardment of surface targets, starting with the Fleet Academy spaceports."

"Get all ships off the ground, Marty, before we lose them all."

"Most of them are already in the process of launching, sir. The fighters all took off a few minutes ago."

"Good," the admiral said. "Get those shuttles up as well. Short-hop them to nearby fields or parking lots if you have to; just get them out of harm's way. If we lose all our

shuttles, we won't be able to support our warships in orbit even if we stop this invasion."

"Yes, sir."

"What about those troop landers?" the admiral asked, pointing at the tactical display. "Where are they headed?"

"Most of them appear to be following the fighters and bombers in. They are headed primarily for main seats of government."

"What about our facility? How are we doing on the surface?"

"We're taking our first strikes now, sir. They've already taken out our rail guns, but our missiles have all launched, and our fighters are already on their way up."

"Good," the admiral said. "It's a lot easier to replace buildings and guns than it is fighters and missiles. Any word on the Celestia?"

"The data cores arrived at the OAP a few minutes ago and are being moved to the Celestia now. The officer of the watch on board says they are at twenty-five percent of their overall fuel capacity. They're spinning up their reactor now, but they will need at least thirty minutes before they can depart."

"I wanted that ship out of there as soon as the cores were on board!" the admiral said.

"They don't even have a pilot yet, Mike. Give them some time," Rear Admiral Duncan said.

"Time is something we do not have, Marty. You tell that man that he doesn't need his reactor to be at full power in order to leave. As soon as he's got enough power flowing, he can thrust out of there and move away. Once his reactor is up to sufficient levels, he can fire up his mains and get under way."

"Yes, sir."

* * *

Four Jung frigates, their sunward sides glistening, came up over the moon's horizon and accelerated toward Earth. A minute later, the four ships cut their main engines and rotated ninety degrees, bringing themselves into a sideways flight attitude in order to bring all missile batteries to bear. In perfect unison, all three missile batteries on each of the four frigates fired four missiles. The barrage of missiles streaked away from the frigates in a perfect line abreast and began slowly spreading out into a wider, more uneven line.

The Jung frigates slowly rotated their noses back onto their flight paths once again and began to disperse slightly as well while they continued on their course toward Earth.

"Multiple targets!" the Intrepid's sensor operator announced. "Tracking forty-eight high-speed objects launched from the frigates leaving the moon! Probable missile launch!"

"Can you identify their targets?" Captain Christopoulos asked.

"I'll need a minute," the sensor operator said.

"Combat, Captain," the captain called through his comm-set.

"*Captain, go for combat,*" Commander Nasser answered.

"Load all missile launchers with fragmenting interceptors and target those forty-eight incoming targets. As soon as you launch the first wave of intercepts, load anti-ship and fire the second wave on the frigates themselves."

"*Aye, sir.*"

"Objects have been positively ID'd, sir. They're missiles."

“Their targets?”

“The OAP, sir, every single one of them.”

“Time to impact?”

“Twenty minutes, sir.”

“Missiles away,” the tactical officer reported.

Captain Christopoulos glanced at the forward view screen as sixteen of his own missiles streaked away from the Intrepid en route to intercept the incoming enemy missiles. “Time to intercept?”

“Ten minutes,” the tactical officer reported.

“Comms, notify the OAP and contact Fleet Command. Let them know we are attempting to intercept and destroy the incoming missiles. We’ll deal with the frigates as soon as we take out that first wave of ordnance.”

* * *

Luis moved quickly through the massive corridors that ran between the OAP’s many hangar bays. He wove in and out of the technicians and platform personnel along the way. Kyle, Devyn, and Tilly followed closely behind.

“Do you have any idea where you’re going?” Devyn wondered as she followed Luis through the chaos.

Luis stopped at a map display attached to a column along the side bulkhead of the corridor. He quickly scanned the map. “The cargo boarding tunnel is closest!” he announced. Without waiting for approval from his friends, he turned and started running again, following the directions from the map.

As Luis turned down a corridor, he nearly ran into a line of carts carrying large cases that were rushing toward the Celestia’s cargo boarding tunnel. The carts were being hurriedly pushed by flight personnel wearing patches from

the European Fleet Academy. As they passed, Luis did a double take at the pale, slender, nervous-looking civilian that seemed to be following the carts as well.

A moment later, they arrived at the entrance to the Celestia's cargo gate and headed down the long boarding tunnel. The tunnel was filled with men and women pushing carts of equipment and supplies into the ship as quickly as possible. Others were moving away from the ship along the outer edges of the tunnel.

"Whoa! Hold up!" the lieutenant at the Celestia's cargo hatch said, holding up his hand.

"We missed our ship. We were told to report to the Celestia instead," Luis told him as he panted.

"Rating?"

"Huh?"

"What's your rating? What are you trained for?"

"Tactical," Luis answered between breaths.

"Environmental systems," Devyn reported.

"Engineering," Tilly answered as the lieutenant pointed to him next.

"Weapons maintenance," Kyle said.

"You three enter here," the lieutenant ordered, pointing at everyone except Luis. "You, Ensign, are at the wrong gate."

"What?" Luis looked confused.

"You need to go back out, go up four levels, and head forward to the personnel boarding gate. They need you on the bridge," the lieutenant explained.

"Why can't I just board here?" Luis asked.

"This ship isn't finished," the lieutenant told him. "There's no inside passageway that connects the main drive with the command deck."

"What?" Luis said.

“Most of the forward section is still unfinished. There’s a lot of unpressurized, open space between us and the command deck,” the lieutenant explained, “which is where you need to report.”

“Can she even fly?” Kyle wondered.

“How the hell do we operate a ship that...” Devyn began.

The lieutenant held up on hand, palm forward to cut her off mid-sentence. “She can fly,” he assured them, “and we’ve got pressure suits to get from engineering to the command deck.”

Alert sirens began sounding from the OAP end of the boarding tunnel, causing them all to look back down the tunnel.

“Alert! Alert! This station is under attack! All unnecessary personnel report to the hangar deck for immediate evacuation! Damage control teams, man your stations!”

Luis looked at his friends, fear and uncertainty in their eyes. They all looked exactly like he felt at the moment.

“Don’t just stand their staring at each other!” the lieutenant said. “Get to your posts!”

Luis looked at his friends again. “Good luck.” He turned and ran back down the boarding tunnel as his friends entered the ship.

Luis could hear the lieutenant yelling instructions at the fleet personnel entering the ship as he headed back out the cargo boarding tunnel.

“Stay away from hatches marked with red paint! Those lead to unpressurized areas...”

The lieutenant’s voice faded away as Luis neared the end of the tunnel. He again noticed the pale, frightened civilian as he followed the carts down the tunnel toward the

Celestia. The poor man looked even more frightened than he had in the corridor a minute ago.

Luis found himself back in the OAP. He looked about, finding an access ladder farther down the corridor. He made his way across the corridor and down somewhat until he reached the ladder. As he stepped up to the ladder, he noticed the gravity change line on the deck at the edge of the tunnel. He reached out and grabbed the ladder, feeling the sudden lack of gravity on his hands as they passed the line on the deck. He had heard about the zero-gravity ladders but had never used one. He looked up. The ladder went up at least a few hundred feet, connecting several levels of the massive assembly platform. He stepped across the line, pulling his body into the ladder as he floated, weightless, in front of the ladder. Remembering what he had heard about using zero-G ladders, he pulled himself sharply upward and let go, keeping his hands on either side of the ladder to guide himself as he floated upward. A few more pulls got him ascending at an acceptable rate. By the time he was passing the second level above him, he found himself wishing he had the time to go all the way to the top and then back down, as the OAP was the only place that had such ladders.

As Luis passed the third level up, he began sliding his hands along the ladder rail to slow his rate of ascent enough to grab the ladder rungs and bring himself to a stop at the correct level. After carefully positioning himself, he turned and faced away from the ladder. With left foot and left hand on the ladder, he stepped out and placed his right foot on the deck. He could feel the gravity pull his foot down, and he pushed off the ladder, transitioning smoothly from zero gravity to near normal gravity.

He turned to his left and continued forward. The corridor was narrower on this level, and the ceilings were lower. He made his way forward, weaving between the people hurrying to report to their stations in response to the alert horns that still sounded, or to get to the hangar deck for evacuation. He found the personnel boarding gate that led to the Celestia's command deck and followed two others, a man and a woman, down the tunnel. It was much longer than the cargo boarding tunnel, as the Celestia was narrower in her forward section than she was aft. The other difference was that the upper two-thirds of the tunnel were clear, giving him a full view of the ship as he approached her. The Celestia was smaller than the Intrepid by at least a third, and she was much sleeker. Her curves were gentle, tapering inward at her midsection before suddenly jutting outward at her massive main drive section on her aft end. Her exterior looked complete, her hull true and clean. She did not sport the usual light and dark grays of the other fleet ships, only a flat medium gray undercoat that appeared somewhat uneven in sections, as if its application was unfinished. He could also see into the forward end of the outboard sections of her main drive, into the deep, forward caverns that shrouded her deceleration thrust ports, as well as her forward torpedo tubes. She didn't even have her name or designation painted on her hull yet.

Luis made it to the boarding hatch, falling in behind two other fleet personnel, both of whom were reporting for duty on board the partially completed ship. On the ship's hull, to the left of her boarding hatch, someone was finishing up a quick stenciling job. The technician finished applying the black paint and pulled away the stencil, revealing the words 'Celestia: CV-02'. It was hardly official, and it lacked the customary logo that was unique to each ship in the fleet,

yet its mere presence spoke of the pride that her makeshift crew was already taking in their ship.

One by one, the fleet personnel in the line reported their area of expertise to the officer at the hatch and received their instructions. Most were assigned to the bridge, with two of them assigned elsewhere in the command deck.

“Delaveaga, tactical,” Luis declared.

“Report to the bridge,” the ensign at the hatch told him as he entered his name in the ship’s crew roster. “End of the corridor, turn left.”

* * *

The backup presidential shuttle touched down on one of the many landing pads at the airfield of the United Earth Republic’s headquarters in Geneva. Eli Scott, the eldest son of the new President of the North American Union, and his chief of staff looked out the window at the terminal in the distance, noting the increased security, as well as the presence of armored vehicles. Combat airships roamed the night skies overhead, their powerful searchlights sweeping the compound below them looking for threats to the security of the Earth’s main seat of government.

The attendant appeared at the door and moved closer to Eli. “Sir, the flight crew was wondering what your orders were.”

“Tell them we wait,” Eli said.

The attendant looked at him, trying to hide his confusion. “Yes, sir.” He turned to head back when Eli moved his left hand, revealing a small weapon in his right. Eli raised the weapon and took aim at the man, firing a small probe into him. The attendant fell to the floor, spasmed once, and went unconscious.

Eli rose, looking behind him toward the doorway to make sure no one had seen the man fall. He disconnected the nearly invisible wire that had transferred the incapacitating shock from his weapon to the probe, leaving it in a pile on the floor next to the man. Next, he pulled a large, plastic zip tie from his pocket and secured the man's hands together. He repeated the process for the attendant's feet before moving to the door at the back of the compartment.

Eli ascended the stairs to the shuttle's upper level in routine fashion, entering the communications compartment just as he had done earlier in the flight. There were two technicians on duty. He nodded at the one nearest him so as not to raise alarm. He raised his silent weapon, first firing a probe into the nearest technician, then another into the second. Both men were down before they knew what had happened, and there had been no more than a thud to be heard by the flight crew farther forward.

Knowing that the flight crew would not open the door for anyone other than the attendant, Eli removed a small device from his pocket. He pressed the device against the cockpit door and held it firmly in place as he activated it. A small, but powerful, laser from inside the device quickly and silently bored a hole in the door. As soon as it did so, the device injected an odorless gas into the cockpit.

The indicator light on the device turned off, signifying that it had completed its function. Eli tossed it aside and headed aft again, taking a seat at the communications console. He retrieved one last device from his pocket. He pulled a small cord from the device and plugged it into the console. After keying in some instructions, he pressed the transmit button before rising from his seat to bind the two unconscious communications technicians.

* * *

“Main gate! Surbeck!” the sergeant responded over the comms. The crowds outside the gate were chanting and yelling at the top of their lungs as they waved signs and banners over their heads.

“Sergeant! We just received word! EDF in Port-Gentil is under attack. Jung ships in orbit have dispatched landing ships that are headed our way. Attack is imminent! I repeat: attack is imminent!”

“Understood! Any idea what direction they’ll be coming from?”

“We’ll keep them from landing on top of us with our rail guns! Watch for an attack from outside the perimeter!”

“What about these goddamn demonstrators?” Sergeant Surbeck asked.

“Warn them of the attack! Order them to disperse! You are weapons free at this point, but check your targets before you fire! Let’s keep the number of civilian casualties low! We have enough trouble on our hands right now!”

“Understood, sir!” The sergeant handed the handset back to the comm operator. “Son of a bitch,” he cursed. He turned to the corporal standing nearby. “Give me the PA mic and pump me through the main gate speakers,” he ordered.

“Yes, sir,” the corporal answered, handing him the microphone.

“Attention! Attention!” the sergeant announced over the loudspeakers. “We have just been informed that Jung forces are en route to this location! All civilians are ordered to disperse and seek shelter immediately! I repeat: disperse and seek shelter immediately!” He looked at the crowd. They did not appear to be dispersing. Instead, they had

become more vocal and possibly even more violent in their protests.

“I don’t think they believe you, Sergeant,” the corporal said.

“You are in danger if you remain! We cannot guarantee your safety! Disperse and seek shelter immediately! This is your final warning!” He looked again. A few people looked confused. A few others had put down their signs and were moving away. However, the vast majority of the protesters continued on with increased fervor. “Unbelievable,” he mumbled.

“They just don’t get it, do they, Sergeant?” the corporal said with amusement.

Air raid sirens began blaring in the distance from the UER compound behind them. Sergeant Surbeck turned and looked toward the main buildings, then back at the crowd of protesters still pressed up against the main gates, their signs dancing in the air above their heads as they chanted anti-military slogans at the top of their lungs.

“Sergeant!” the comm operator called out. “Command says we’ve got incoming!”

Sergeant Surbeck spun around. “Take cover!” he yelled to the men at the gate. He grabbed the handset from the comm operator and keyed his local command channel that communicated with only the men under his command. “All main gate stations! Incoming ordnance! Take cover! Take cover!” A distant whistle pierced through the sound of the chants and yells, becoming louder with each passing second. “INCOMING!” the sergeant yelled as he crouched down inside the reinforced guard post. An explosion rocked the ground as the first precision weapons fell from orbit and struck the United Earth Republic compound. Glass shattered and sprayed across the sergeant and his men as they

remained low and tucked against the heaviest concrete wall. The first explosion lit up the entire main gate area as it leveled the nearby administrative building. The second explosion destroyed the security barracks and operations center while the third one hit the motor pool. Secondary explosions from the fuel storage tanks rocked the area.

The sergeant peeked through the opening that had been filled with security glass a moment before. The crowd was gone, except for a few civilians who lay bleeding on the ground, hit by flying debris. "I guess they get it now," the sergeant mumbled as another whistle was heard. More explosions shook the area as at least six more weapons struck the compound. The sergeant remained tucked down low, praying that the next bomb didn't strike his gate.

* * *

Eli came down the stairs from the upper floor of the backup presidential shuttle. He returned to his seat in the forward cabin, stepping over the still unconscious attendant along the way. He looked outside the window at the distant buildings as they exploded one by one, the result of the Jung orbital bombardment. He smiled.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The presidential shuttle touched down on the secure landing pad in the courtyard of the North American Union capitol building in Winnipeg. Armed guards in full combat armor roamed the grounds and patrolled the nearby rooftops as combat helicopters circled farther out.

President Scott quickly disembarked moments after the shuttle touched down. Flanked by protective agents and armed guards, he moved quickly across the pad and down the walkway leading to the main building.

“Mister President,” General Bergeron greeted as he met the president halfway.

“What’s our status?” President Scott inquired as they continued toward the building.

“The Jung started orbital bombardment a few minutes ago. So far, they’re concentrating on military targets. They’ve attacked all the EDF academy spaceports and ground-based defenses. They’ve also targeted the UER compound in Geneva.”

President Scott looked visibly shaken at the news of the UER bombardment. He had left Geneva only a few hours ago. “Has anyone heard from Eli? He was in the backup shuttle.”

“No, sir. The backup shuttle dropped down below radar just after we received word about the Jung entering the system. We assume the pilot was trying to stay off radar just in case there were Jung operatives on the surface.”

“Yeah, we did the same thing,” the president said. “It was a hell of a ride.”

“Yes, sir, I’m sure it was,” the general agreed.

“What’s next?” the president inquired as they entered the building.

“All our forces are on alert, and we launched most of our fighters and tankers just before the bombardment began. We didn’t want to get caught with all our forces on the ground. Fleet Command reports that the Jung are landing forces. There are more than a hundred ships coming our way: fighters, bombers, landers, you name it.”

“Why us?”

“It’s not just us, sir,” the general explained as they went through the security checkpoint outside the entrance to the underground command facility. “They’re landing forces on all the major continents.”

“You said more than a hundred?”

“A hundred and counting when I left. That could be up to several hundred by now.”

“At least we have a plan, General,” the president said as they stepped into the elevator.

“Yes, sir, we do,” the general assured him as the elevator doors began to close. “But first, we have to get you secured.”

* * *

Marlene Scott looked out the window of the shuttle as it sped along just above the tree tops. “Do we have to fly this low?” she asked the agent sitting next to her.

“Yes, ma’am, to avoid detection.”

“How much longer until we arrive in Winnipeg?” she asked, trying to hide her nervousness.

“About ten minutes,” the agent said, looking at his watch.

The shuttle suddenly banked hard to port, its engines screaming as it turned. Mrs. Scott’s eyes went wide, her fear no longer hidden. “What’s going on?”

The agent listened intently to his ear piece. “Understood,” replied. “Ma’am, Winnipeg is under attack from orbit. They believe hostile forces are incoming. We have to divert to another location for now.”

“Oh, God,” she gasped. “What about my husband?”

“He’s secure in the underground command center, ma’am. We’ll get you to him just as soon as it’s safe.”

“What about my children, my grandchildren...”

“They’re all being rounded up and taken to safety, Mrs. Scott.”

She looked out the window as the shuttle continued its turn. In the distance, she could see flashes of light and columns of smoke coming from the city in the distance as weapons launched from ships in orbit exploded. One question kept running through her mind. *Why?*

* * *

The elevator doors opened, and President Scott and his entourage stepped out into the security foyer. The lights flickered several times unexpectedly, and the room shook slightly as if from an earthquake.

President Scott stopped in his tracks. “What the hell was that?” The room shook again. This time the lights went out for several seconds before they came back on. “What’s going on?”

“We need to get you inside, sir,” General Bergeron said. “Now.”

President Scott followed his general's advice and headed deeper into the facility, passing by the large, vault-like door to the main command center. Inside stood rows of consoles being monitored by military officers and technical experts. On the far wall was a view screen containing a map of North America that displayed the location and status of all NAU forces, as well as the Jung forces coming down from orbit over the continent. The president had not yet been given the tour of this secure facility, as his time in office had been short thus far, but he knew of its existence, as well as its purpose. They were all locked in a command center located several hundred feet below the surface of Winnipeg.

"Report!" the general called out as they entered the command center.

Colonel Jaffey immediately turned to address his commanding officer, as well as his commander-in-chief. "Mister President, General. The capitol building has taken a direct hit, sir."

"You mean..." the president began, pointing upward.

"Yes, sir."

"Damage?" the general asked.

"We've lost all contact with the capitol building itself. Exterior cameras located outside the compound show that the building is completely destroyed."

"I assume there is an alternate way out of this facility," the president said.

"Yes, sir," the general answered. "There are still two more exits. One comes up a mile away in the basement of one of the transit district buildings. The other is at the end of an underground tunnel that comes up outside the city, in a barn, actually."

"And if those are destroyed as well?"

“Unlikely, sir. But we also have our own tunnel-boring machines down here. We can tunnel our way out on our own if necessary.”

“Good to know,” the president stated. He looked at the map display. “I assume the blue markers are ours and the red ones are the Jung.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Have they landed?”

“No, sir,” the Colonel answered, “not yet. They’re on approach. We believe they are softening up their targets first by bombing them from orbit. Next, their low-level bombers will begin striking secondary targets. After that, we expect they’ll be landing their troops.”

“Where?”

“Based on their current targets, we believe they are concentrating on major seats of government, military assets, and ports of entry along the east coast, the west coast, and the Gulf of Mexico.”

“They’re trying to cut us off from the rest of the world,” the general realized.

“That was Admiral Galiardi’s assessment as well,” the colonel said. “The same thing appears to be happening on other continents. The admiral believes that the Jung want to remove our ability to help one another fight them.”

“But we have aircraft, shuttles...” the president began.

“Those won’t last long, sir,” General Bergeron said. “The Jung have us outnumbered. Maybe not now, but a few more of those big carriers is all it would take to quickly overwhelm our forces. By isolating us from one another, they can more easily control each segment of the population.”

“But why?” the president wondered.

“They’re not looking to exterminate us, Mister President,” the general said. “They mean to use us: our

industrial base, our population, our resources... All to increase their own strength. They mean to conquer us completely.”

“And the best way to do that is to remove both our ability and our will to fight,” the colonel added.

“Then we must fight them now while we can,” the president said with conviction.

“Yes, sir,” General Bergeron agreed, “that’s our plan.”

* * *

The whine of the shuttle’s engines increased sharply as they went to full power. Without warning, the protective agent sitting next to Mrs. Scott reached over and pulled the shoulder straps down out of the top edge of her seat, fastening them to her lap belt one by one.

“Secured!” the agent called over his discreet communications system.

“What is going on?” Marlene asked, her eyes wide.

“Hang on,” the agent instructed as he pulled his own shoulder straps down and secured them.

The shuttle pulled into a steep climb and accelerated, pushing them back in their seats. Mrs. Scott clutched her armrests tightly as the shuttle banked hard to starboard and dove.

“What’s wrong?!” she cried out.

“Jung fighters have locked onto us,” the agent told her. “The pilot is taking evasive action.”

A series of *thwumps* emanated from the aft end of the shuttle, after which it snap rolled onto its port side and broke into a hard left turn. Marlene looked out the window. A string of bright lights trailed behind them.

“What are those?”

“Flares,” the agent reported, “to attract heat-seeking missiles.”

The shuttle snap rolled back the other way, pulled its nose up sharply, and turned back to starboard. She heard more *thwumps* from aft. An explosion outside rocked the shuttle, knocking it over and into another dive. Mrs. Scott screamed.

“That was too close!” the agent said. “How long until our fighters arrive?” he asked someone through the communications device in his ear.

The shuttle pulled out of its dive, pitched up slightly, and began rolling over several times in rapid succession as more *thwumps* sounded. The rapid rolling of the shuttle pushed Mrs. Scott upward against her shoulder straps. She felt like she was about to fly out of her seat. The rolling stopped abruptly, and the shuttle turned hard to port and dove once more. Another explosion rocked the ship, nearly shaking them out of their seats. Again Mrs. Scott screamed.

A strange sound, like large rocks striking metal, danced across the top, aft end, and port side of the shuttle, vibrating the entire ship. A loud roar came from the forward end of the shuttle as the two of them were thrown forward, straining against their shoulder straps. Mrs. Scott’s normally perfect hair was thrown forward, whipping about her face uncontrollably as the shuttle decelerated hard. A shadow darkened the cabin momentarily as it passed over them. Mrs. Scott glanced out the starboard windows and saw the twin engines of one of their attackers as it flew past and turned to its right, rolling as it pulled away. Immediately afterward, another shadow passed overhead. She looked to starboard again and saw the familiar sight of NAU fighters chasing after the Jung ship, their cannons blazing as they gave chase.

The shuttle rolled back to starboard and went into a climbing right turn. Again the sound of rocks striking metal, this time walking across the side and top of the cabin and heading forward. A tremendous roar filled the cabin as it was ripped open only a few rows forward of Mrs. Scott and her protective agent. Two staffers in the seats beside the opening were ripped apart from weapons fire, their blood and tissue sent flying about inside the cabin by the violent torrents of air.

The protective agent instinctively reached out with his arm across Mrs. Scott's torso, leaning in front of her to protect her from the flying debris as well as the bits and pieces of the wounded passengers. The shuttle rolled to the left without warning and began another turn. The agent's free arm flailed in the air as he tried to grab hold of the damaged seat back in front of them to steady himself. Mrs. Scott grabbed the agent with both arms, pulling him closer to help steady him.

Through the gaping hole in the shuttle's cabin ahead of her, Mrs. Scott could see another Jung fighter streak past them, two more NAU fighters following closely behind. There was another explosion outside, which again tossed the shuttle about. Several loud clunks accompanied objects striking the outside of the shuttle. Just as the clunks stopped, another even bigger one sounded and shook the shuttle. The aft end of the shuttle slid sharply sideways. A moment later, the whine of the shuttle's engines abruptly stopped.

The sign at the front of the shuttle's cabin began displaying a message she had never seen before. 'Prepare for Crash Landing.'

"Oh, my God," she exclaimed as the shuttle fell from the sky.

The agent pushed himself away from her, realizing the shuttle was about to go down. "Listen to me! Sit straight back! Press your head into the headrest! Hold the armrests firmly. Airbags in the seats and overhead will deploy on impact!"

She glanced at the agent. He meant well, but she could see the fear in his eyes as well. And this was a man who was trained for such situations. She worried about her husband. Who would care for him? Who would keep his life and home in order so he could do his work? Who would counsel their children when the demands of parenthood overwhelmed them? Who would continue to put flowers on Nathan's memorial in their yard?

The shuttle's engines sputtered, then suddenly sprung back to life. They screamed as they powered up and fought to slow their rapid descent. She could feel them moving forward as the acceleration forced her back into her seat more firmly. The shuttle felt like it was flying again, but barely.

She glanced out the side windows, noticing the tree tops as they jutted up on all sides of the shuttle. Something struck them on the right side, and the shuttle spun to the left. Immediately, something hit them astern and they spun back the opposite direction.

She felt herself thrown forward against her chest restraints, the sound of tearing metal and cracking wood filling her ears. Everything around her went white as her face and torso rammed up against deployed airbags. She felt a sudden pain in her abdomen, another sharp pain in the right side of her head.

Then everything went black, and silence fell upon her.

* * *

A communications technician rushed across the busy command center of the underground NAU facility, making his way over to Colonel Jaffey. He whispered into the colonel's ear. A solemn look fell upon the colonel's face as he turned toward President Scott.

"Mister President," the colonel began, "I've just been notified that contact has been lost with Mrs. Scott's shuttle."

The president looked at Colonel Jaffey, his face hiding his concern, but his eyes betraying him. He opened his mouth to speak, but nothing came from it.

"Four NAU fighters intercepted them about ten minutes outside of Winnipeg, but the Jung fighters had already damaged the shuttle. Our pilots reported that the shuttle crashed in the forest."

"Any sign of survivors?" General Bergeron asked, knowing that it was what the now speechless president would have asked.

"The pilots cannot tell. It's too heavily wooded. There's a lot of smoke, and trees in the immediate area have caught fire. We've dispatched rescue shuttles, but they may have a difficult time getting rescue men down to the crash site. It may only be accessible by ground."

The president cleared his throat and pulled himself together. "Do what you can. I need to know, one way or another. I need to know."

"Yes, sir," the colonel answered, stepping back from the president.

President Scott looked up at the map display. One of the smaller, blue triangles that had been approaching Winnipeg now had an orange circle around it and was no longer moving. That triangle represented his wife's shuttle. Somewhere in those woods, she was stranded, probably

injured, possibly even dead. And there was nothing he could do about it. He wondered if she might still be safe if she had not been forced to move to the NAU capital in Winnipeg.

He had never really wanted to be president.

* * *

Admiral Galiardi studied the world-wide tactical map displayed on the massive, main view screen on the command center's far wall. Over the past ten minutes, hundreds of smaller red triangles had made their way from the larger triangles representing the Jung troop ships in orbit. The triangles clustered around every seat of government on the planet, as well as numerous key military installations. Their goal was clear: destroy the Earth's defenses and the leaders that commanded them. One by one, green dots on the map that represented government capitals turned red, indicating their fall to Jung forces. There was no ceremonial handing over of assets, no waving of a white flag in surrender; they had simply lost all communication with those governments, after which, their fall was usually confirmed on the Earth-Net by images of Jung troops landing uncontested, destroyed government buildings in the background.

"Jesus, Marty," the admiral swore, "are they even fighting back?"

"The Jung weapons are far more accurate than we were originally led to believe," Rear Admiral Duncan said. "They must have had agents on the ground for years to develop such a complete target list. By the time Jung forces start landing here, our national military forces won't have much left to defend with."

"What about our forces?" the admiral wondered.

“We managed to get one flight of missiles off before they struck our launchers on the surface. We’ve lost most of our surface-to-orbit guns as well.”

“Did we do any damage to those ships?”

“We knocked out two gunboats, one cruiser, and one transport. The other three transports have moved into higher orbits, out of the reach of our surface defenses, but we’re pretty sure they’ve already offloaded. We also damaged one cruiser, and she’s moved higher as well. However, she’s still able to launch weapons at the surface. It just takes a little longer for them to reach us.”

“Recall our fighters from orbit and have them engage targets in the atmosphere. Let’s see if we can’t protect our remaining surface-to-orbit guns. Those fighters can’t do much to the cruisers anyway.”

“Yes, sir.”

“How far out are those other three cruisers?” the admiral wondered.

“Just under an hour, sir,” Rear Admiral Duncan answered. “The Volkov should be in weapons range of them any minute now.”

“Let’s hope she can hold out until the Zhang-Ti joins the fight. If they can neutralize those three cruisers, we might have a fighting chance here.”

* * *

Synda raised her head from her pillow, her eyes squinting at the bedroom lights that had just snapped on and awakened her.

“Synda! Get up!” her roommate Nikki yelled as she stormed into the room.

“What time is it?”

“Who cares?”

Synda glanced at her alarm clock on her night stand. “It’s only one? What the hell, Nikki? You know I work nights,” Synda complained.

“Don’t you know what’s going on?” Nikki said. “The world’s coming to an end, and you’re sleeping?”

“What the hell are you talking about?” Synda asked as she turned over and partially sat up, resting on her elbows.

“The Jung! They’re bombing everything! They’re landing troops!”

“What?”

Nikki picked up the remote off Synda’s nightstand and turned on her small viewer in the corner. Images of blown-out buildings, people running in fear, injured victims lying about, rescue vehicles and military transports rushing past: the scenes flashing across the viewer revealed a state of absolute chaos from locations around the world.

“Oh, my God,” Synda said in disbelief. “We’re being invaded?”

“Now are you going to get up?” Nikki asked as she stormed out of the room.

Synda watched the viewer, turning up the volume as more images of death and destruction flashed across the screen. “...experts estimate that it is only a matter of time before Jung troops begin landing in all major cities on every continent. Civil authorities in all major population areas are urging citizens to stay indoors and to stay away from all windows and doors. In the event that you come in contact with Jung forces, do not offer resistance. Martial law has been declared in all areas that have reported to this agency. Local militias have been alerted and have already engaged Jung ground forces...”

Synda heard something fall in the living room and muted her viewer. “Nikki?” She became concerned when she got no response from her friend and rose from her bed. She went to the door, then stopped short when she heard another crash. She peeked slowly around the door frame, but pulled back sharply when she saw the leg of a man in the living room. The man had been wearing combat boots and dark gray pants. Thoughts raced through her mind. *A Jung soldier?* She doubted that, as the news had only estimated that they would come down to the surface. It had to be some jerk taking advantage of the chaos, breaking into people’s apartments, or worse yet, raping young women. *You came to the wrong apartment,* she thought. Synda looked about her room, grabbing the nearest heavy object—a trophy for winning second place in a mixed martial arts tournament at her local gym. She moved close to the door frame, preparing to lunge at the unknown intruder. Her muscles tensed as she raised the large trophy, preparing to use it as a weapon.

Synda stepped out in one smooth motion, the trophy held high and ready to swing with all her might. She stopped short when she saw the man standing next to her roommate. Nikki was handing the man a bag stuffed full of clothing to carry. “You’re taking your trophy with you?” Nikki asked. “Seriously?”

“Huh?”

“Don’t you think you should put some clothes on first?” Nikki suggested as she headed back to the other room to continue gathering her things. “Or do you plan on taking on the Jung in a T-shirt and panties?”

Synda dropped the trophy to her side.

“Hi, I’m Eddie.” The man waved. “I’m with her,” he added, pointing back in the direction of Nikki in the other

room.

“Synda, nice to meet you,” Synda said.

“Are you coming with us?” Eddie asked.

“Coming where?”

“We’re heading out to my mom’s in the country,” Nikki said as she came back into the room with another bag. “You have to come with us.”

“Why?”

“Because if the Jung come here, it will be safer there,” Nikki insisted.

“But on the news, they said to stay put,” Synda said.

“Oh, please,” Nikki said as she went toward the kitchen. “Don’t be stupid! Get your things! You’re coming with us!”

“She’s probably right,” Eddie said.

“Okay then,” Synda agreed. “I’ll just go and put some clothes on.”

* * *

“Missile intercept in five seconds,” Lieutenant Eckert reported from the Intrepid’s tactical station.

Captain Christopoulos watched the tactical display on the main view screen calmly. Their fragmentation missiles had split into multiple warheads at the precise moment to ensure proper dispersal before interception.

“Two.....one.....intercept.”

Half the missiles launched by the four Jung frigates coming from behind the moon disappeared from the screen. The captain watched for several seconds as three more faded away, but there were still more than twenty missiles on their way to the Orbital Assembly Platform and the Celestia.

“Twenty-seven targets destroyed,” the lieutenant said.

"Time to missile intercept at current range?" the captain asked.

"Five minutes."

"Combat, Captain," the captain called over his comm-set. "Fire another round of fragmenting intercepts at the remaining incoming Jung missiles. Let's see if we can knock out the rest of them."

"Aye, Captain," Commander Nasser answered over the comm-set.

"How long until our first round of missiles reach those frigates?" the captain asked.

"Three minutes, sir," the tactical officer responded. "Second round of fragmenting intercepts launched. Sixteen missiles away."

The captain glanced at the screen as the missiles sped away from the Intrepid on their way to intercept the incoming missiles. "Combat, Captain," he called over the comm-set.

"Captain, go for combat," the commander answered.

"Commander, load another round, wait one, and fire again. I want to have time to maneuver out of the path of those missiles before we end up taking one in the nose."

"Aye, sir. As soon as we get off another round at those frigates, we'll reload and fire on the incoming targets a third time. That will do it for our frag-intercepts, though."

"Might as well fire them all now, Commander," the captain explained. "We won't get another chance. Be ready with our rail guns to take on any that get through."

"We'll try, sir," the commander promised. *"But that's like trying to hit a bullet by throwing a handful of pebbles."*

"It's all we've got," the captain said, clicking off his comm-set.

“Thirty seconds until our missiles reach the frigates, sir,” Lieutenant Eckert reported. “Frigates are firing point-defenses.”

“Captain, message from Fleet,” Lieutenant Chara reported from the comm-station. “The Reliant has been destroyed.”

“Damn! How many of those cruisers are still headed our way?” the captain asked.

“Three, sir,” the sensor operator reported.

“Well, at least Yahii took out half of them. How long until the Volkov engages?”

“Any minute now, sir.”

“Five seconds to intercept of the frigates,” Lieutenant Eckert reported.

Captain Christopoulos watched the tactical display on the main view screen. He wanted nothing more than to see all four of those red triangles over the moon disappear. One by one, the oblong, green icons representing his missiles winked out as the point-defense systems of the enemy frigates ripped them apart.

“Impact.”

Five oblong, green icons reached their targets, two of them striking the outermost red triangle, the other three striking the second to the left. The one on the left disappeared instantly along with the icons for the torpedoes that had destroyed her. The other red triangle, the one on the right, was still there even after the missiles had disappeared. A moment later, that triangle disappeared as well.

“Two frigates destroyed!” the lieutenant reported happily. “Firing another round of ship-to-ship now.”

Sixteen more missiles streaked away from them on the view screen.

“Three minutes to second wave intercept on the incoming missiles,” the tactical officer added.

“Contacts!” Ensign Kono reported from the sensor station. “Probable missile launches. The frigates are firing again! Transferring tracks to tactical.”

“Are they firing at the OAP?” the captain asked, worried that he had no more intercept missiles left.

“No, sir,” Lieutenant Eckert reported. “The two remaining frigates are firing on us! Count: twenty inbound. Time to impact: seven minutes!”

“Comms, notify Fleet Command that we’re under fire,” the captain ordered.

“Aye, sir,” Lieutenant Chara acknowledged.

“Helm, stand by to rollover onto our port side. If any of those missiles get past, I want to bring as many of our rail guns as possible onto them as they pass us by.”

Ensign Hunt quickly entered a string of commands into the maneuvering control computer in preparation to execute his captain’s orders. “Standing by to roll to port.”

“Two minutes to second wave intercept,” Lieutenant Eckert reported. “Third wave of frag-interceptors launching. Sixteen missiles away.”

The captain waited a beat to let the missiles get well clear of the ship before maneuvering. “Now, Mister Hunt. Roll to port, and then pitch down ninety degrees relative to our flight path.”

“Rolling to port and pitching down, aye,” the helmsman answered as he executed the roll maneuver and prepared to pitch the Intrepid’s nose downward.

“How long until our second wave of ship-to-ship missiles reaches those frigates?” the captain asked.

“Four minutes, forty-eight seconds,” Lieutenant Eckert answered from the tactical station.

“Roll complete,” Ensign Hunt reported. “Pitching down ninety.”

“One minute until second wave of frag-intercepts reaches the remaining incoming missiles,” Lieutenant Eckert reported.

Captain Christopoulos tapped his comm-set hanging on his left ear to initiate a call. “Combat, Captain.”

“*Captain, go for combat,*” Commander Nasser answered over the comm-set.

“Keep our big guns on the frigates. Spin up all point-defenses and target the rest of the missiles bound for the OAP,” the captain ordered.

“*Yes, sir, but we’re going to need our point-defenses shortly to ward off the missiles targeting us.*”

“Understood,” the captain acknowledged. It was a calculated risk, but one he had little choice but to take. He knew that the Celestia was trying to get under way in order to take the data cores from the Ark into hiding. If they had to take a few missile impacts in order to protect her, they would. They had guns, they had missiles, and they had armor. The Orbital Assembly Platform and the Celestia did not.

* * *

Luis headed down the corridor that led through the thick layers of the Celestia’s hull to the command deck inside. The corridor was also only partially painted, with bare metal showing in many places. Much of the overhead piping and conduit was also unpainted, and there were entire sections of wall plating missing, leaving internal systems exposed. More than once, Luis found himself instinctively moving to

the opposite side of the corridor to steer clear of exposed wiring terminals.

Luis stepped through the inner pressure hatch at the end of the corridor, then turned left and headed forward at a brisk pace. He passed several compartments, including the command briefing room and several officers' quarters. The corridor curved gradually to the right, following the curvature of the inner hull. Luis followed it around until he came to the port entrance to the Celestia's bridge. He stepped inside and found chaos. Technicians were scrambling to get critical systems flight-ready. Fleet personnel were trying to figure out how to use the stations that were functional. At the center of the chaos was a young lieutenant commander who looked slightly overwhelmed. Luis made his way to the man. "Sir," he called out, only to be ignored, as the officer continued giving orders to others. "Sir!" Luis repeated.

"What is it, Ensign?" the lieutenant commander finally said.

"Ensign Delaveaga reporting for duty, sir," Luis announced as he snapped a salute.

"Lieutenant Commander Kovacic," the officer introduced as he returned the ensign's salute with a distinct lack of enthusiasm. "What's your rating?"

"Uh, tactical, sir," Luis stumbled, surprised to see a lieutenant commander and not a captain.

"Great, you're our new helmsman."

"Uh, I'm not rated as a pilot, sir," Luis reminded him. "I'm a tactician... You know—weapons, battle tactics..."

"I know what a tactical officer does, Ensign," the lieutenant commander interrupted, appearing slightly irritated. "But tactical officers also have to pass basic flight. You did pass basic flight, didn't you, Ensign?"

Luis's eyes shifted back and forth. "Uh, yes, sir, I did."

"Then shut up and sit your ass down in the helmsman's seat," the lieutenant commander ordered, pointing at the flight console at the forward end of the bridge. "I suggest you start by familiarizing yourself with the flight controls. We depart in fifteen minutes." The lieutenant commander patted Luis on the back. "Welcome aboard, Ensign."

"Uh, yes, sir," Luis responded nervously. He looked around the unfinished bridge. Besides the main flight consoles at the front of the bridge, only two other stations appeared to be operational: the sensor operator's station to port and the comm station at the rear of the bridge. The tactical station located just behind the command chair also looked like it might be functional, although it was not currently powered up.

Luis made his way forward until he was standing in front of the command chair. He looked at the long flight console that stretched across the middle-forward section of the bridge. There were two flight seats, one on either side of a large center pedestal. He grabbed a passing technician. "Which one is the helm?"

The technician looked at Luis oddly. Luis just looked back, his body language pleading for help. "Navigation," the technician said, pointing to the chair on the left. "Helm," he added as he pointed right.

"Thanks," Luis mumbled as he released the technician. He stepped to the right of the helmsman's seat on the right side of the center console and sat down, staring at the console as he rotated to face forward. He quickly located the basic flight controls. "Main drive, maneuvering, docking thrusters, navigational display, attitude display..." He continued running through the controls on the console, mumbling them to himself. The main spherical view screen

that wrapped around the front half of the bridge and up over their heads snapped on, revealing the view outside the ship. The sudden sensation of being surrounded by the exterior view on all sides gave Luis a start. All around him was the facility's massive truss work that formed a tunnel around the Celestia. Originally designed to assemble the much larger Defender-class ships like the Intrepid, it stretched far beyond the Celestia's bow. At the end of the tunnel was open space. Below them, through the truss work, was the Earth, rotating slowly beneath them. His mind momentarily wandered to the billions of people on the surface below who were about to have their lives changed forever.

Luis's pulse began to race, and his stomach felt like it was tied in knots. He could feel himself breaking out in a cold sweat. He was going to have to figure out how to fly this ship, and he only had fifteen minutes in which to do so.

* * *

"Admiral," Rear Admiral Duncan began, "we have confirmation that the Jung are now targeting civilian infrastructure: communications, power generation, sewage treatment, transportation systems... Sir, they're also starting to randomly bombard major cities."

"They want to break our will to fight," Admiral Galiardi said, the grim reality evident on his face, "deprive us of the essentials of life." The admiral looked at his friend and sighed. "I suspect they've used this tactic before."

"We need to recall the Intrepid," Rear Admiral Duncan said.

"The Intrepid must continue to defend the OAP until the Celestia makes her escape," Admiral Galiardi reminded him.

“Infrastructure can be rebuilt. If the Jung get their hands on those data cores, there may be no stopping them.”

“Sir, with all due respect, we don’t even know there *is* technology in those cores that the Jung don’t already have...”

“Do you really want to take that chance?” the admiral asked, his expression becoming even more serious.

“Then why not just let the OAP and Celestia be destroyed along with the cores from the Data Ark?”

“Because that knowledge may be our only chance,” the admiral insisted. “Look at that board, Marty,” he said, pointing at the tactical map. “We’re losing this battle. If that data survives, there is still hope—hope that some information contained within those cores will enable us to eventually win the war. No, we don’t want it to fall into the hands of the enemy, but we don’t want to lose it either, at least not if we don’t have to.”

“But, sir, they’re targeting our cities,” Rear Admiral Duncan pleaded. “Innocent people are dying. The Intrepid may be able to stop that. At the very least, she could slow them down until help arrives.”

“What help?” Admiral Galiardi challenged. “How many ships are still on the tactical map, Marty? Fourteen? Fifteen? Sixteen?”

“Our ships can take a beating, sir. We’ve already destroyed five of their ships...”

“And lost twenty-five percent of our battle force in the process. We know our resources, and they’re limited. The Jung have many more ships out there, and they will come. If we don’t get the Celestia and those data cores away now, we never will. The people of Earth will have to hold on for now. The Intrepid can return and engage the Jung forces in orbit once the Celestia makes good her escape.” The

admiral looked his subordinate in the eyes, a determined look on his face. "Those are my orders."

Rear Admiral Duncan looked at his friend. "I hope you're right, sir. I hope it's worth the sacrifice."

"It is, Marty. It is."

* * *

"Five missiles still on course for the OAP," Lieutenant Eckert reported from the Intrepid's tactical station.

"Helm, adjust course. Put us in the path of those missiles," Captain Christopoulos ordered.

Ensign Hunt shared a glance with his partner, Ensign Villa, who sat at his left at the navigator's station. "Aye, sir. Moving into the path of the incoming missiles."

"Combat, Captain," the captain called over the comm-set.

"Captain, go for combat," Commander Nasser answered.

"Direct all point-defenses to those five incoming missiles." The captain turned to look over his shoulder at his tactical officer. "Time to impact?"

"One minute!" the lieutenant answered excitedly.

"You've got one minute to take those missiles out, or we're taking the impacts ourselves," the captain said over the comm-set.

"Aye, sir! We'll do our best, but one minute is not much time," Commander Nasser answered.

"Just make it happen, Commander," the captain ordered as he switched off his comm-set.

"Point-defenses are firing!" Lieutenant Eckert reported. "Forty seconds to impact!"

"We are now directly in their flight path, sir," the helmsman answered.

“One missile down!” the lieutenant reported. “The other missiles are spreading out!” he added with surprise.

“Incoming missiles have fired their engines again,” Ensign Kono announced from the sensor station.

“Are they increasing their speed?” the captain asked.

“No, sir!” the sensor officer responded. “They’re maneuvering, sir, spreading out. I think they’re trying to steer around us.”

“They know we’re not the correct target,” the captain said, surprised.

“They’re probably being controlled from the frigates that fired them.”

“Are we jamming?” the captain asked.

“Yes, sir!” Ensign Kinross reported from the electronic countermeasures station. “Since the moment we left the OAP! But if they’re using laser-based control telemetry, there’s not much we can do about it other than get in between the missiles and their controllers.”

“Will that help?”

“Doubtful, sir,” Ensign Kinross answered. “Without control telemetry, they’d probably revert to their original target instructions. That’s what ours do.”

“Two down!” Lieutenant Eckert reported from the tactical station. “Thirty seconds to impact.”

“Helm, do your best to block as many of them as you can,” the captain said.

“The last three are spreading out farther,” the sensor officer reported.

“Helm, commit us to the center missile!” the captain added. “Combat, all guns on the starboard missile.”

“*Aye, sir!*” the commander answered.

“Captain,” the helmsman called out, “if they’re targeting the starboard missile, I may be able to block the other

two..."

"Twenty seconds!" the lieutenant reported.

"Stay on the center missile!" the captain ordered. "It's the safest bet right now."

"Three down!" Lieutenant Eckert reported.

"Combat, Captain!" the captain called over the comm-set.

"We're already targeting the port missile, sir!" his executive officer reported, having anticipated his captain's tactics.

"Good job, Commander!" the captain said over the comm-set. "Just keep those guns on that missile no matter what!"

"Aye, sir."

"Ten seconds to impact!" Lieutenant Eckert reported.

"All hands! Brace for impact!" The captain grabbed the sides of his command chair as the comm officer activated the warning alarms and played the prerecorded message to alert the entire ship that they were about to be struck by a missile. "Stand by to roll ninety to port!" Captain Christopoulos ordered.

The Intrepid's rail guns continued firing their fragmenting point-defense rounds, forming a virtual wall of fragment that crossed the port missile's path slightly ahead of her. In a few seconds, the weapon would fly right into the curtain of kinetic energy and be ripped to pieces.

The other missile slammed into the top of the Intrepid, just aft of her midsection. It penetrated the ship's hull and buried itself deep within her before detonating. The force of the explosion ripped a large hole in the side of the ship, sending pieces of the hull, the inner decks, and a dozen of

the Intrepid's crew flying out into space. A moment later, three secondary explosions occurred from within the ship, creating momentary fireballs that quickly disappeared in the vacuum of space.

At that moment, all of the Intrepid's rail guns stopped firing.

The lighting on the Intrepid's bridge flickered as the explosions rocked the ship. The lights finally went out completely. Battery-operated lights kicked on a moment later.

"Hull breach, amidships, just aft of section forty-two! Main power is down!" Lieutenant Chara announced as reports from damage control streamed into his comm-set. The bridge shook as more secondary explosions vibrated throughout the Intrepid's hull.

"All guns have stopped firing!" Lieutenant Eckert reported from the tactical station.

"Where's that last missile?!" Captain Christopoulos demanded.

"I don't know, sir!" Ensign Kono exclaimed. "I've lost all sensors!"

The lights suddenly flickered back to life, causing the captain to look about the bridge briefly as illumination returned and systems all around him began to come back online.

"Main power is back up!" Lieutenant Chara reported.

The captain turned to his tactical officer with a sense of urgency. "Our guns?"

"They're firing again, sir!" Lieutenant Eckert answered.

"I've got the target again!" Ensign Kono announced from the sensor station. "It's past us! Range: twenty-five hundred

meters and increasing rapidly!”

“Keep our guns on that target!” the captain ordered.

“Sir, it’s too late,” Lieutenant Eckert reported. “The target is moving too fast! We can’t hit it from behind; our rounds will never catch it!”

“Damn it!” the captain yelled. “Comms, notify the OAP that they’ve got one missile inbound. Impact in...?”

“Ten minutes,” the lieutenant added.

“Yes, sir.”

“Helm, do we still have maneuvering and propulsion?”

“Yes, sir.”

“I don’t suppose there’s any way we could overtake that missile?”

“No, sir,” Ensign Hunt answered. “By the time we turned around...”

“Yeah, that’s what I figured,” the captain mumbled. “Continue on course for those last two frigates. Bring our nose back on our flight path.”

“Aye, sir,” the ensign answered.

“Combat, Captain.”

“*Captain, go for combat,*” the commander answered.

“Commander, let’s make sure those last two frigates answer for that missile.”

“*Aye, sir,*” the commander answered. “*Our next wave should hit in one minute. We’re already reloaded and are ready to retarget after we get the results from our previous wave.*”

“Very well,” the captain said, clicking off the comm-set. Captain Christopoulos sighed. That one missile was all it would take to destroy the Orbital Assembly Platform. If the Celestia didn’t get out of there soon, she would go down with it.

* * *

Synda pulled on her pants and stepped into a pair of athletic shoes. After quickly tying them, she picked up a shoulder bag from the floor of her bedroom and began stuffing random items of clothing into it. She went to her dresser and dumped all the money from her tips box into the bag before zipping it up and slinging it over her head and across her opposite shoulder, so that the bag hung comfortably behind her. She grabbed her personal communit, tucked it into her pocket, and grabbed the door knob.

A deafening explosion blew the door open and sent Synda flying backward across her small room, tossing her onto her unmade bed. Chunks of the wall flew in all directions, landing on everything, including her and the bed. Her bedroom window blew outward, sending shards of glass raining into the streets below.

Synda lay on the bed, motionless. Her eyes opened, then immediately squinted closed again due to the dust and debris on her face and eyelids. Her ears rang, and all sound was muffled and distant, like her ears were stuffed with cotton. She coughed and spit debris out of her mouth. Another nearby explosion shook the room, and the floor shifted and fell nearly a meter. She felt herself sliding off the bed toward its foot. Another explosion rocked the entire building. This time, the floor fell slightly to the left, causing her to roll over as she continued sliding downward. She reached out as she fell off the right corner of the bed onto the floor and caught the leg of the bed, causing the bed to slide slightly on the deep-pile carpet. Her nightstand had toppled over, and its contents lay strewn about the floor as it shook yet again from another distant explosion.

Synda found herself face down on the bedroom floor, which was now sloped downward toward the door and slightly to her left. Her eyes darted about as she tried to get her bearings and figure out what was happening. There was a loud crumbling sound coming from behind her that suddenly intensified. She felt a rush of air draw over her from head to toe, followed by swirls of dust coming back from her toe to her head. The crumbling sound gave way to a distant crashing sound. That's when she noticed that her room was suddenly filled with an unusual amount of daylight.

The building shook some more, and Synda scrambled toward the wall ahead of her. The building shook again, causing her to scream. She felt the floor drop some more, and the bed began sliding away from her. She continued scrambling until she reached the door to her bathroom. The door frame was no longer at a perpendicular angle to the floor. She could feel the floor falling even farther as she grabbed the door frame, pulling herself into the bathroom as the bedroom floor fell out from under her.

The bathroom floor was level, but everything in her bathroom had been knocked out of place. Water was spraying from a broken line under the sink. The floor was wet. The room also had an unusual amount of daylight streaming in through the open door. She got on her feet and turned around to face the door. Her mouth fell agape as she stepped to the edge of the bathroom. Before her there was nothing. Half the building was gone, lying several stories below her in a massive pile of rubble on the ground. Somewhere down there, along with the other occupants of the building, were her roommate, Nikki, and her date, Eddie.

"Oh, my God," was all that came to her. "Nikki," she mumbled to herself. "NIKKI!"

Synda looked at the city stretched out before her in disbelief as more explosions went off in the distance. The blasts were moving away from her and toward the city center. Columns of smoke rose in a near perfect line. At the bottom of each column lay piles of rubble and more buildings in various states of destruction.

The loud roar of jet turbines caused Synda to duck as several enemy airships streaked overhead. *Jesus, those are troop ships*, she thought as she watched them fly past, *Jung troop ships*.

Synda looked around outside. There was no way down. She headed for the bathroom window. Its glass had also been blown out by the first explosion. She picked up the plastic garbage can and smashed the remaining shards of glass from the window pane to get them out of her way. Satisfied that the window frame was clear, she tossed the can aside and leaned out the window. One meter below her was a ledge that ran along the edge of the outside wall. Four meters to her right was the fire escape, the one that had been outside her bedroom window. *Oh, God*, she thought, *there's no way I'm going out on that ledge*. The building shook again, and the floor creaked and groaned, shifting downward slightly and toward the door. Without thinking, she climbed out the window and stood on the ledge, stiffening with her back as close to the wall as possible. She inched her right foot over slightly, and then her left, stopping to take a breath afterward. The building shook again, and she felt herself starting to fall forward toward the ground many stories below. The building shifted, taking a slight lean toward the missing half. The sudden change in angle, however, kept her from tumbling, and she now found herself leaning against a rather unstable wall.

The angle made it easier to move without falling, and she quickly shuffled her way over to the fire escape.

She climbed over the railing and headed down the metal stairs on the outside of the slightly leaning building. The stairs creaked and groaned as she made her way down the first few flights. They shook, and it felt like they might come loose from the building and collapse at any moment.

As Synda started down the fourth flight, the wall began to pull away from the fire escape. Just as she got her feet onto the next platform, the wall above the flat surface she had just been on fell completely away, crashing to the ground on the other side of the still upright portion of the brick building. She continued down the last few staircases, praying all the while that they would not collapse under her. She got to the bottom platform and pulled the lever to drop the ladder, but it refused to budge. She kicked at it with her foot but to no avail. The remaining wall shook and began to topple over. As the entire wall leaned over, Synda grabbed the handrail and jumped over the side. She landed on the now angled and still falling wall and slid down the last few meters to the sidewalk below as the wall fell to the ground, adding itself to the pile of rubble that was once her apartment building.

Synda rolled around in pain on the hard walkway for several moments after her escape. She had cuts and scrapes all over her arms, and blood leaked from a gash on her head. Her joints ached from the fall, and her pants were torn as a result of her slide down the side of the collapsing building. More aircraft roared overhead. More Jung landers. Only this time they were moving more slowly, as if they were about to land. She could hear sirens in the distance, as well as loud speakers blaring unintelligible instructions to the public at large.

She managed to get to her feet again, surprised to discover that she had not broken anything. She turned and looked back at the massive pile of rubble that had once been her apartment building. Somewhere buried in that pile of rubble was her friend. They had lived together for nearly five years, having gotten the apartment together straight out of secondary school. Having grown up in the suburbs, they had wanted to experience life in the big city. They had wanted excitement. Unfortunately, they had gotten it.

Synda ran around the collapsed building that had moments ago been her home. "NIKKI!" The pile of rubble was enormous. Large slabs of concrete and brick lay at various angles, some precariously so. She rushed toward the pile, calling out her friend's name over and over again as she attempted to climb the sides of the pile. As she stepped up onto a slab of concrete, the slab began to teeter to the side, forcing her to step back. "NIKKI!"

Synda stood still for several moments, her head turning from side to side as she searched for any sign of hope that her friend had somehow survived. All around her people were running away in fear, headed seemingly nowhere. Every fiber of her being was telling her to run away, far away, before it was too late, but she couldn't leave her friend behind.

Another Jung lander flew low overhead, causing her to duck instinctively, and Synda's desire to survive began to take over. Her friend was most likely dead, and if she didn't leave now, Synda would probably be next. She looked around. There were at least five or six landers in the air, and they were hovering in all around her, some only blocks away. With no obviously safe direction, she decided to head for the edge of the city. If she could get there and slip out of town, she might be able to find safety in the countryside. A

barn, a shack, even under a bridge somewhere—anywhere would be safer than the city at the moment.

She climbed back down off the pile of rubble and made her way down the street, stepping carefully over debris along the way. For now, she stuffed away her feelings, her grief for her friend, her fear for her parents, and her fear for her own well-being. She knew they would only get in her way. She could think about such things later. Now it was time to escape. Now it was time to survive.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Once more, Captain Christopoulos found himself staring at the tactical map while icons representing their missiles blinked out of existence, one by one, as the point-defenses of the two Jung frigates headed toward them tore the missiles apart. With every icon that winked out, he felt his hopes fading. They had a full load of missiles and rail gun ammunition, but he wanted to save as many missiles as possible to use on the cruisers currently bombarding the Earth from high orbit.

Finally, one missile made it through and found its target.

“One hit!” Lieutenant Eckert reported from the Intrepid’s tactical station.

The captain watched the screen, waiting for the icon representing the enemy ship to die away. Instead, an orange circle appeared around it, indicating that it was damaged. “Report.”

“Target one has taken a hit on its port bow,” Ensign Kono reported. She studied her sensor readouts on the console in front of her for a moment before continuing. “She’s in a slow lateral spin, sir, and she’s venting propellant. I’m showing an increase in heat buildup within the ship, as well as a decrease in the output of her power plants. She may have fires burning inside.”

“Or she may have lost some of her heat exchangers,” the captain said, hopefully.

“Captain! Message from Fleet! The Celestia will be departing in five minutes. Our targets are the only ships that currently have a clear line of sight on her departure. We are ordered to destroy the frigates before the Celestia departs at all costs.”

“What the hell do they think we’re trying to do?” the captain grumbled. “Tactical, how long will it take our missiles to reach those frigates from our current range?”

“Two minutes,” Lieutenant Eckert reported.

“And rounds from our main rail guns?”

“Just under three minutes, sir.”

“Combat, Captain,” the captain called over the comm-set. “Pound the targets with our main guns to soften them up. Target their point-defenses as best you can. Ninety seconds after you open fire, target both frigates and launch another spread of missiles... Make half of them nukes.”

“*Aye, sir,*” Commander Nasser answered over the comm-set.

“Let’s see if one ship can handle sixteen missiles at once,” the captain muttered. He was determined to see to it that neither ship would escape alive.

“Main guns are firing,” Lieutenant Eckert reported. “Sir, eight nukes? Isn’t that overkill?”

“Assuming all of them get through their point-defenses, perhaps,” the captain answered. “Don’t worry, Lieutenant. We’ve got plenty of them.”

“Of course, sir.”

The captain checked the time display over the main view screen. “Helm, be ready to come about and go to full burn. I want to get back to Earth as quick as possible.”

“Yes, sir,” Ensign Hunt answered.

“New contacts!” Ensign Kono reported. “Probable missile launch from contact two! Transferring tracks to tactical.”

“Twelve missiles inbound,” Lieutenant Eckert reported from the tactical station. “Time to impact: two minutes, twenty seconds.”

“Hold off on our point-defenses,” Captain Christopoulos ordered. “We need to get our missiles away first. Helm, be ready on that turn, and don’t forget to keep our port side away from the enemy.”

“Yes, sir,” Ensign Hunt answered.

“Point-defenses are locked on and ready, Captain. Awaiting your firing order.”

“Sensors, find me the nearest targets in Earth orbit. I want to be ready to shoot as we come about.”

“Aye, sir,” Ensign Kono answered.

The captain looked up at the time display again.

“Combat is launching missiles. Sixteen away, eight of them nukes,” Lieutenant Eckert said.

“As soon as they reach the outer edge of our defense perimeter, activate our point-defenses and put them on those incoming missiles.”

The captain watched the tactical display as the sixteen icons representing their next wave of missiles moved toward the enemy ships. In less than a minute, both ship’s missiles were going to pass each other in the cold vacuum of space. Both ships would be firing their point-defenses in a desperate struggle to destroy the other’s incoming missiles. However, the Intrepid had the advantage. With one of the enemy frigates unable to fire, the Intrepid could fire more missiles and had a greater number of mini-rail guns with which to defend herself. It would only take one missile to disable the other frigate, and if that one missile was a nuke, the engagement would be over. “This is going to be the longest two minutes of our lives,” he mumbled.

* * *

“Sir, message from OAP control!” Ensign Souza, the Celestia’s acting comm officer reported. “They have an inbound missile!” he added as he turned to look at the lieutenant commander. “It will impact the platform in seven minutes!”

“Are the reactors hot?” Lieutenant Commander Kovacic asked.

“Engineering reports reactor one is at twelve percent and climbing,” the ensign reported. “Reactor two is at eight percent and climbing.”

“What about the other two reactors?”

“We can’t initiate the next one until reactor two is above ten percent.”

“Engineering, bridge,” the lieutenant commander called over the comm-set, not wanting to waste time relaying through the comm officer. “How long until both reactors are at twenty-five percent?”

“Uh... ten minutes, maybe?” the unsteady voice answered over the comm-set.

“Are you sure about that?”

“No, sir, I’m not,” the voice admitted.

Luis turned his head, recognizing the voice of his friend, Tilly.

“I’ve never started an antimatter reactor before, sir,” Tilly apologized, *“at least, not by myself, not a real one anyway.”*

“That’s okay. Keep an eye on them and don’t blow us up.”

“Yes, sir.”

“And let us know when both reactors are above twenty-five percent.”

"Yes, sir."

"How many people do we have on board?" the lieutenant commander asked Ensign Souza.

"Twenty-six, sir," he answered. "Eighteen fleet and eight civilians."

"Civilians?"

"Yes, sir. Three of them are technicians that were building the ship. They insisted that we needed them on board."

"They're probably right," Lieutenant Commander Kovacic agreed. "What about the other five?"

"One is from the Data Ark. He came aboard with the cores. He says he was ordered to stay with them. The other four are civilian scientists from the special projects division. They have orders from Admiral Yamori to be on board as well." Ensign Souza looked at the lieutenant commander. "Is that going to be enough people to run the ship, sir?"

"It'll have to be. It's not like we're being given much choice." The lieutenant commander looked at the young ensign manning the comm station. His eyes were full of fear and self-doubt. "Don't worry, Ensign. We'll be fine."

"Yes, sir," he answered, trying to smile.

"Are any more people reporting in?" the lieutenant commander asked.

"No, sir, not for several minutes now."

"Tell them to close her up and prepare to get under way."

"Yes, sir," the ensign reported, happy that he had something to do to keep his mind off their situation.

"Ensign Delaveaga," the lieutenant commander said, "you get that helm figured out yet?"

"Uh... yes, sir. I believe so, sir."

"Just make sure you are ready to take us out when those reactors reach twenty-five percent."

“Uh, yes,” Luis answered as he searched his console frantically. “Just one thing I haven’t quite figured out yet...”

The lieutenant commander stepped down next to Luis. “What is it, Ensign?”

Luis looked around, a bit embarrassed. “The mooring clamps. How do I release them?”

The lieutenant commander reached down to Luis’s console and pressed several buttons. “When you’re ready, press that one,” he explained, pointing at a button on the console’s main touch screen.

“Thank you, sir,” Luis said. “The simulations were always in ground-based fighters.”

“No mooring clamps,” the lieutenant commander said as he straightened back up.

“No, sir, no mooring clamps.”

“Don’t feel bad,” the lieutenant commander told him. “The only reason I knew is because I was studying the console earlier, before any of you got here. I thought I was going to have to try and fly us out.”

* * *

Captain Christopoulos watched the tactical display on the main view screen as the twelve enemy missiles reached the Intrepid’s defense perimeter. One by one, the icons representing the missiles began disappearing from the display until, finally, all twelve of them were gone.

“All incoming missiles destroyed!” Lieutenant Eckert declared happily. “Standing down point-defenses.”

The captain didn’t respond, just continued to watch the screen as the icons that represented the Intrepid’s missiles neared their targets. One by one, they also began to disappear.

The last operational Jung frigate near the moon fired her rail guns, sending out an endless stream of fragmenting projectiles at the Intrepid's missiles currently on their way to destroy her. The Jung frigate's guns danced back and forth and up and down as they tried to maintain a steady wall of projectiles in the path of the incoming missiles.

The missiles came at the frigate and her disabled partner in two rows of eight, separated by an ever widening gap as each group vectored onto their respective targets. As the missiles flew through the operational frigate's point-defense engagement zone, they began taking hits from the projectile fragments. One by one, the missiles were torn apart by the kinetic energy carried by the fragments. Sixteen missiles became fifteen, and fifteen became fourteen. Within seconds, there were only ten missiles, then eight, then five.

The captain of the Intrepid watched as his missiles blinked out of existence—all of them, except for three.

"Three missiles have made it past their point-defenses!" Lieutenant Eckert announced. "Impact in five!"

"Put the targets up on the main view screen, full magnification!" the captain ordered.

The tactical display on the main view screen was replaced by a magnified view of the pair of Jung frigates, the moon behind them. Two explosions appeared on the screen, one on each of the Jung frigates. The two explosions were followed immediately by a bright flash that blotted out their view of the second frigate and most of the first. The flash was short-lived. When it faded away, it revealed a broken

and dying vessel with secondary explosions still reporting from deep in her hull.

“Combat! Captain! Main guns! Pound them!”

The Intrepid’s six massive main rail guns began firing, sending vibrations throughout the ship. The captain watched the screen as pieces of the two enemy ships began tearing away. The projectiles from his guns slammed into the targets with incredible force. It was almost too painful to watch, as the projectiles gouged away at the sides of the two ships. Within a minute, the first target, the previously disabled vessel on the left of the view screen, was ripped apart by secondary explosions from deep within. Shortly thereafter, the second target met a similar fate.

The bridge was silent other than the sounds of various systems and the background chatter of messages coming in from all about the ship. None of them had ever witnessed such destruction, and they were in awe of what they had done to their enemy.

“Helm, come about and head for Earth, full burn,” the captain ordered calmly.

“Coming about for Earth. Full burn, aye,” Ensign Hunt reported as he tapped commands into his console to execute his orders.

“Put the tactical map back up and show me some targets,” the captain added. “Comms, notify Fleet Command that we’ve destroyed the four frigates coming from the moon and are returning to Earth to engage Jung forces in orbit...” The captain paused as he looked at the tactical map and picked out his next target. “Starting with the targets nearest the OAP.”

“Aye, sir,” the comm officer acknowledged.

“Combat, Captain,” the captain called over the comm-set.

"Captain, go for combat," Commander Nasser answered.

"Full spread of missiles into that troop ship. Launch a second wave at her escorts as soon as possible. All nukes."

"Captain, isn't that troop ship already empty?" the commander inquired respectfully.

"Maybe, but we don't know that for sure. There may be a command and control platform for the ground forces on there as well. Besides, she's also the closest of three ships to the OAP. In a few minutes she'll have a line of sight on them, and we need to keep the Celestia's escape a secret if possible, or they'll just chase her down later."

"Understood, sir."

"How long will it take for our missiles to reach the targets in Earth orbit?" the captain asked.

"Five and a half minutes if they burn the entire time," Lieutenant Eckert reported.

"Make sure they do," the captain ordered. "How long until that missile reaches the OAP?"

"Four minutes, fifteen seconds." The young tactical officer looked at the captain. "That's going to be cutting it pretty close, sir."

"Yes, it is," Captain Christopoulos agreed.

* * *

"Time to impact?" Lieutenant Commander Kovacic asked his comm officer.

"OAP control says four minutes!" Ensign Souza answered from the Celestia's comm station at the aft end of the bridge.

"Alert the OAP that we're departing. Tell them to retract all boarding tunnels in thirty seconds. Make sure we're buttoned up before they retract those tunnels."

“Aye, sir.”

“Helm, prepare to release all mooring clamps and thrust forward.”

“Don’t we need the reactors to be at twenty-five percent first?” Luis asked.

“Only for the mains,” the lieutenant commander explained. “Maneuvering can run on half that, and docking thrusters can run on battery power, for that matter.”

“But without the reactors...” Luis began.

“They’ll be at greater than twenty-five percent by the time we’re clear enough to light up the mains,” the lieutenant commander insisted.

“All boarding hatches are secured,” Ensign Souza reported. “Engineering reports all finished compartments show stable pressure and are ready to get under way. Reactors one and two are at eighteen and twelve percent, respectively.”

“You see? They’re coming up already,” the lieutenant commander assured Luis.

It wasn’t enough to make Luis smile. The lieutenant commander seemed somewhat arrogant and a bit too self-assured. He reminded Luis of his late roommate from the Academy, Nathan. He only hoped the lieutenant commander was luckier than his friend had been.

“Boarding tunnels are retracting,” Ensign Souza reported. “OAP reports we are clear for departure.”

“Helm, release the mooring clamps and thrust forward.”

“Aye, sir,” Luis answered. He swallowed hard and pressed the button that the lieutenant commander had shown him. He could feel the clamps release with a *clunk*. The ship felt like it shifted slightly sideways, as the view of outside on the main view screen appeared to dip to one side. “Thrusting

forward,” he announced as he activated the docking thruster.

The image on the main view screen began to slowly move as the Celestia slid forward through the long assembly framework that surrounded the ship. The ship appeared to be drifting closer to the framework along their left side, forcing Luis to counter with a tiny amount of thrust to port. The ship drifted back to starboard, and he applied counter-thrust to hold them in the center as they continued to drift forward down the tunnel of trusses.

“Faster, if you please,” the lieutenant commander said.

Luis fired more forward thrusters, slightly increasing the Celestia’s forward speed.

“That’s it. Don’t be shy,” the lieutenant commander added. “Faster is better.” He turned his head back to the comm officer. “Time to missile impact?”

“Three minutes, sir.”

“Time to clear the OAP?” Lieutenant Commander Kovacic asked Luis.

“Uh...” Luis had no idea how to determine the answer to the lieutenant commander’s question.

“Press the display to place a mark at the point where we’d be clear,” the lieutenant commander explained. “Then ask the flight computer the time to that point at current speed.”

Luis did as the lieutenant commander had instructed. “Ha, look at that,” Luis exclaimed. “Uh, two minutes, twenty-seven seconds, sir.” He looked at the lieutenant commander.

“Like I said, I had some time to fiddle around with it before you came,” the lieutenant commander said. “Faster, Ensign. Faster.”

“Yes, sir.” Luis added more forward thrust. The surrounding framework began to pass by them more quickly than before. Luis could feel his pulse quickening as their rate of travel out of the assembly tunnel felt uncomfortably fast to him.

“Faster, Ensign.”

“I think this is fast enough, sir,” Luis said nervously as he recalculated their time to clear the OAP. “We’ll be out in a minute, ten, now.”

“Very well,” the lieutenant commander relented. “Reactor levels?” he asked the comm officer.

“Twenty and sixteen,” Ensign Souza reported from the comm station. “Two minutes to impact.”

Luis could see the end of the assembly tunnel rapidly approaching on the main view screen. “We’re almost out, sir!”

“Sir, message from the Intrepid!” Ensign Souza said. “She’s instructing us to wait until her nukes detonate, then do a thirty-second escape burn at full power. They want us to shut down everything after that until we hear from them again.”

“They want us to cold-coast?” Luis said, remembering the terminology from basic flight training at the academy.

“He’s making a screen for us,” the lieutenant commander realized. “Acknowledge the message, Ensign.”

“Aye, sir.”

The lieutenant commander turned back to Luis. “The nukes will scramble their sensors for at least half a second, maybe more. If we burn at full power then shut down, they won’t see us unless they are actively searching for us, which they won’t be as long as the Intrepid is attacking them.”

“But sooner or later, we’re going to have to do a longer burn,” Luis said, “or we’ll never make it out of the system.”

“I’m sure they’ll ask us to do another burn eventually.” Lieutenant Commander Kovacic turned back to the comm officer. “Reactor status?”

“Twenty-four and twenty,” Ensign Souza reported.

“We’re clear!” Luis announced as the last ring of the assembly tunnel passed over them.

“Prepare to leave orbit,” the lieutenant commander ordered.

“Course?” Luis asked.

The lieutenant commander took a small piece of paper out of his pocket and handed it to Luis. “Enter that course, then dispose of that paper,” he instructed calmly with just enough volume for the two of them to hear.

Luis looked at the lieutenant commander. “Uh, yes, sir.” Luis took the paper, opened it, and punched in the course. He then looked around for a way to dispose of the paper as instructed, but found nothing of use. Finally, he stuck the piece of paper in his mouth and began chewing.

“Sensors are up!” Ensign Schenker announced as he took his seat at the sensor console on the left side of the bridge.

As he continued chewing, Luis glanced at the sensor operator on his left, who had just come onto the bridge a moment before. He recognized him as the ensign who had checked him in at the forward boarding hatch.

“Holy crap! The Intrepid just blew the shit out of that troop ship!” Ensign Schenker announced with surprise. “I count at least seven detonations!”

“Put it up on main view screen!” the lieutenant commander ordered.

The image on the main, spherical view screen that wrapped around the front half of the bridge of the Celestia switched to a different camera and instantly zoomed in on

the distant ships off their starboard beam. Secondary explosions were still tearing apart the remaining larger pieces of the troop ship's broken hull.

"Damn," Lieutenant Commander Kovacic muttered.

Luis watched as he finished chewing the piece of paper and swallowed hard. He had never witnessed the destruction of another spaceship. None of them had. It was an exhibition of power, but it was also a reminder of exactly what would happen to them if they didn't escape, and soon.

"One minute to missile impact," the ensign reported.

"Reactors?"

"Twenty-eight and twenty-four."

"Stand by on the main drive," the lieutenant commander reminded Luis. "And be sure you throttle up gradually. The inertial dampeners won't be at full power yet. We don't want to end up as goo against the back wall."

Luis checked his instruments and displays just as he had done countless times over the last minute. The mains were ready to burn with the press of a single button. "Yes, sir. No goo, sir."

The bridge of the *Celestia* was enveloped by a blinding, white light coming from the main view screen.

"Kill the viewer!" the lieutenant commander ordered, covering his eyes. "Light the mains and throttle up easy!"

Luis squinted, shielding his eyes from the blinding light as he pressed the button to ignite the main engines. Even at only ten percent of their main power, he was thrown back in his seat by the sudden surge forward. He looked back over his shoulder as the main view screen shut off. Lieutenant Commander Kovacic was picking himself up off the floor and trying to get into the command chair. Everyone else on the bridge had been lucky enough to have been sitting when

Luis fired the main engines. "Sorry, sir!" Luis apologized. "I didn't think ten percent would be that powerful."

"No problem!" the lieutenant commander assured him. "My fault. I should've been clearer. Keep throttling up, nice and easy, Ensign."

"Aye, sir." Luis throttled up the main engines, trying to maintain a slow and steady rate of acceleration.

"Time!" the lieutenant commander called out.

"Fifteen seconds!" Luis answered, checking the burn clock. "Twenty seconds!"

"Stand by to kill the mains!" the lieutenant commander ordered.

"Twenty-five seconds!" Luis reported.

"Kill the mains!"

Luis cut off all power to the main engines. The relief was apparent, as he felt like someone had lifted a massive weight from his chest. "Mains are shut down."

"Roll us over and pitch down so we're showing them our belly," the lieutenant commander ordered. "It's the thickest part of the hull and radiates the least heat. It will also hide the glow from our reactor caps."

"Aye, sir," Luis answered. "Rolling over and pitching down." Luis carefully calculated the angle of their course in relation to the Earth in addition to the vector from which the Jung cruisers were approaching his homeworld. Once he was satisfied that he knew how much to roll and pitch the ship, he entered the parameters into the flight computer and started the maneuvering cycle.

"Let's get everything shut down quickly!" the lieutenant commander ordered. "Engineering, bridge. Take the reactors down to standby mode, but don't take them completely offline. We may need them to come up to full power in a hurry."

"Yes, sir," Tilly answered, *"reactors to standby."*

"Maneuver complete, sir," Luis said with relief. "I angled the ship just like you ordered, so we're showing our belly to both the Earth and the inbound Jung cruisers."

"Good work, Ensign," Lieutenant Commander Kovacic said. "Go ahead and power down the maneuvering systems for now. We want to be as cold as the space around us."

One by one, nonessential systems began shutting off all around the bridge.

"Bring up one of the ventral cameras on the main view screen," Lieutenant Commander Kovacic ordered.

The main view screen snapped back to life, revealing the OAP as it rapidly fell away from them, leaving the Earth behind it. Just before it became too small to see, the last missile, the one that had gotten past the Intrepid, struck the platform and exploded.

"Magnify," the lieutenant commander said solemnly. He almost wished he hadn't. The missile had struck at the heart of the Orbital Assembly Platform and had ignited her stored propellant. The resulting secondary explosion sent pieces of the assembly tunnels scattering in all directions as twisted hunks of metal. Pieces that had been propelled toward the Earth by the explosion left fiery trails. Soon, the rest of the station would meet a similar fate as it too reentered the atmosphere.

"Sir," one of the civilian technicians said, "if we're going to run cold, we need to turn off the main view screen. We're going to be running mostly on batteries, and that display system uses a lot of power that would be better saved for other systems."

Lieutenant Commander Kovacic said nothing for several seconds.

"Sir?"

“Kill it,” he responded. “Comms, check with engineering and make sure everything is shut down and the reactors are on standby. I want us to blend in with the cold of space.”

“Yes, sir,” Ensign Souza acknowledged.

“And remind him to stand ready. We may have to fire them up again on short notice.”

* * *

Captain Christopoulos watched as the icon representing the Celestia changed from a solid blue to a blue outline, indicating that her position was only an estimate. “Good, she’s gone cold.”

“Nuclear flashes are fading, sir,” Ensign Kono reported from the sensor station. “The targets will have full sensor capabilities in ten seconds.”

“What’s our nearest target?” the captain asked.

“The frigate that was escorting the troop ship, sir,” Lieutenant Eckert replied.

“Combat, Captain. Main guns on the frigate. Load all missile launchers with nukes. Lock them on that frigate and fire when ready.”

“*Aye, sir,*” Commander Nasser answered over the comm-set.

“New contacts!” Ensign Kono announced. “Eight high-speed targets. Probable missile launch!”

“From the frigate?” the captain asked.

“No, sir, from the cruiser just cresting the horizon. Transferring tracks to tactical.”

“Time to impact: five minutes,” Lieutenant Eckert reported.

“Combat, Captain. As soon as you get those nukes away, send a full spread of conventionals at the cruiser on the

horizon. Then reload with nukes again.”

“Yes, sir.”

“We need to make our turn, sir,” Ensign Hung warned.

“Is that cruiser still firing on the Earth?” the captain asked.

“Yes, sir,” Ensign Kono answered. “She’s high up, and she’s damaged, but all her weapons are still good. I can’t determine her surface targets from this far out, but she’s still firing. Best guess—she’s firing on South America right now.”

“Helm, bring us on a counter orbit to the contacts,” the captain ordered. “We need to take them head-on, so we can close quickly. We need to stop that cruiser from firing on the surface.”

“Aye, sir,” Ensign Hunt answered. “Coming to port and decelerating to orbital velocity. Taking the targets head-on, counter orbit.”

“How long will it take us to settle into orbit?”

The navigator looked at his displays. “Two minutes, forty-seven seconds, sir.”

“Counter orbit will make those incoming missiles hit us sooner, Captain,” Lieutenant Eckert warned.

“Revised time of impact?”

“Just over two minutes. Preparing to spin up point-defenses.” The tactical officer looked at his displays. “Missiles are launching. Sixteen nukes away. Time to impact with the frigate: ninety seconds.”

* * *

“The Orbital Assembly Platform has been destroyed,” Rear Admiral Duncan said. “The missile struck her

propellant storage. She's in pieces, most of which are headed into the atmosphere."

"And the Celestia?" Admiral Galiardi asked as he stared at the large tactical display on the far wall of Fleet Command's underground command center.

"She escaped unscathed. The Intrepid covered her escape with several nuclear flashes. It essentially blinded the sensors of the three Jung ships in orbit nearby, so they couldn't witness her escape."

The admiral looked at Duncan, bewilderment on his face.

"They only did a thirty-second burn," the rear admiral explained, "just long enough to break orbit and head out into the system. They went dark before the flashes cleared. They're cold-coasting until we tell them to burn again."

"If those ships start actively scanning, they'll find her, cold-coast or not," Admiral Galiardi said.

"The Intrepid already shot down the troop ship. She's engaging the other two ships now, keeping them busy to allow the Celestia time to coast clear."

"Christopoulos is smarter than he looks," the admiral said. "If he can take down the other two, the Celestia is clear from this side. But what about those three cruisers out there? If they happen to be looking in our direction at the moment the light from the Celestia's burn reaches them, the Jung will know she escaped."

"The Zhang-Ti will join the Volkov in five minutes, sir," Rear Admiral Duncan said. "Surely two of our ships can defeat three Jung cruisers. Hell, the Reliant took on six all by herself and still managed to take down several of them."

"That's a big gamble," the admiral said.

* * *

“Coming into orbit now, Captain,” Ensign Hunt reported from the Intrepid’s helm.

“Time to incoming missile impacts?” Captain Christopoulos asked.

“One minute,” Lieutenant Eckert answered.

“Mister Hunt, go to full burn and pitch up. We need to climb into a higher orbit as quickly as possible.”

“Full burn on the mains, pitching up, and climbing to a higher orbit,” Ensign Hunt answered.

“Revised time to impact at current rate of acceleration is forty-two seconds.”

“Combat, Captain! Load a full spread of nukes and prepare to launch on the cruiser as we pass. Lock all quads on the frigate and pound them.”

“Loading nukes and preparing to launch,” Commander Nasser answered over the comm-set. *“Locking all quads on the frigate and firing.”*

“Twenty seconds until our missiles reach the frigate,” Lieutenant Eckert reported. “Point-defenses are firing on the incoming missiles.”

“Incoming missiles have powered up their propulsion systems, Captain,” Ensign Kono reported from the sensor station. “They’re trying to climb with us.”

Captain Christopoulos looked at the forward view screen as the Earth’s distant horizon fell slowly away from them, sinking lower and lower down the screen. “Keep climbing,” he mumbled.

“Ten seconds to impact on the frigate,” the lieutenant reported. “Thirty seconds until the cruiser’s missiles reach us.”

The captain looked to the tactical display on the left view screen. The icons representing the incoming missiles began to slowly blink out of existence as the Intrepid’s point-

defense rounds fragmented and intercepted the incoming missiles from the cruiser.

“Direct hit on the frigate!” Lieutenant Eckert reported from the tactical station behind the captain.

The captain’s attention was still fixed on the incoming icons on the tactical display as the count of incoming missiles continued to drop. Five icons, then four, then three.

“Three missiles have breached our perimeter,” the lieutenant announced. “Impact in fifteen seconds.”

Captain Christopoulos continued watching the tactical display without responding. The three icons representing the incoming missiles continued to close on the center of the display where the Intrepid was located. “All hands prepare for impact,” he ordered in routine fashion. A few more seconds passed and the icons continued to approach the center of the map. “Damage to the frigate?”

“She took two missiles in her bow,” Lieutenant Eckert reported. “She lost all forward maneuvering and half her point-defenses are down.”

“Continue pounding her with our quads,” the captain ordered calmly, his eyes still fixed on the tactical display. The three icons began to move back, no longer closing on the center of the display.

“They can’t make the turn in time,” Ensign Kono stated in amazement. “They can’t climb fast enough.” She looked at the captain. “How did you know, sir?”

“I didn’t,” the elderly captain admitted. He touched his comm-set. “Combat, launch all missiles on the cruiser and reload with conventionals.”

“Launching all missiles on the cruiser and reloading, aye,” the commander answered over the comm-set.

“Sixteen nukes away,” Lieutenant Eckert reported. “Time to target: one minute.”

“Missiles have passed behind us, sir,” Ensign Kono reported.

“Cancel the impact alert,” the captain ordered. “Helm, kill the mains and pitch back down. Fire deceleration thrusters and bring us back down to previous orbital altitude.” The captain smiled. “We may have to try that trick again on the next group.”

“Secondary explosions in the frigate, sir,” the sensor officer reported. “Whoa! Our guns must have hit something! She’s coming apart!”

“Put her on screen and magnify,” the captain ordered. There was something about seeing his enemy being blown apart that made the event much more satisfying. It seemed a sad commentary to Captain Christopoulos but an accurate one nonetheless. He watched in amazement along with his crew. The frigate exploded into several large pieces as they passed high above her. “Be sure to remember where our guns hit her to cause those secondaries,” the captain said. “For all we know, that could be their Achilles heel.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Combat, Captain. Retarget the quads on the cruiser and open fire.”

“*Aye, sir.*”

“Twenty seconds to missile impact,” Lieutenant Eckert announced.

“Target is firing point-defenses,” the sensor officer reported.

Once again, Captain Christopoulos began the ritual of watching the icons representing his missiles disappear from the tactical display as the enemy cruiser’s point-defense systems intercepted them one by one. It seemed such a wasteful way to wage war; firing countless missiles in the hope that at least one or two would slip past the hundreds

of thousands of fragmenting point-defense rounds that the target used to defend itself. By the captain's count, they had fired half their complement of missiles in order to kill a sum total of six ships, and hopefully a seventh. Assuming the Volkov and the Zhang-Ti were able to successfully repel the remaining cruisers bound for Earth, that left the Intrepid with nine more ships to defeat.

"Four missiles have made it past their point-defenses!" Lieutenant Eckert reported.

Captain Christopoulos sat up straighter, as four nuclear weapons were about to strike the Jung cruiser. "Put the target on the main view screen and filter for the blasts."

The view screen suddenly filled with the image of the Jung cruiser passing a few hundred kilometers below them, the Earth slowly rotating underneath her. A moment later, four intense, white flashes appeared, blocking their view of the cruiser for what seemed an eternity. When the flashes cleared, there was little left that resembled a ship. Debris spread out in all directions. The force of the blasts had propelled some of it downward toward the Earth with such speed that they were already beginning to burn up as they hit the atmosphere below. Again he felt the surge of satisfaction, having dispatched another ship belonging to those who would attack his world in hope of conquest.

"Helm, continue on to the next battle group and maintain orbital altitude."

"Aye, sir," Ensign Hunt answered.

"How long until we reach the next group?" the captain asked.

"On counter orbit, ten minutes," Lieutenant Eckert answered.

"Message from Fleet, sir," Lieutenant Chara reported from the comm station. His voice suddenly changed, as if

someone had sucked the life from him. "The Volkov has been destroyed. Two Jung cruisers still inbound for Earth. The Zhang-Ti will engage at any moment."

"Damn," Captain Christopoulos swore.

CHAPTER NINE

Rear Admiral Duncan's expression soured as he read the message handed to him by one of the Fleet command center's communications officers.

"What is it, Marty?" Admiral Galiardi asked.

"FTL comm-runner from the Zhang-Ti. She's engaging the last two Jung cruisers just inside the orbit of Mars, about five light minutes out from Earth."

"Two? That means the Volkov destroyed another cruiser," the admiral realized. "That makes it an even engagement. If they can finish them off, this whole thing may swing our way..." The admiral paused, noticing the dour look on his friend's face. "What's wrong?"

"The Zhang-Ti also reports that the Volkov was destroyed a few minutes before they arrived. She was cut in half. There were no survivors."

"What about escape pods?"

"They shot them down as well."

"Jesus," the admiral said under his breath. He looked at the tactical map on the main display screen that filled the far wall, taking note of the Celestia's estimated position based on her last known course and speed at the time she ceased her main engine burn and went cold to avoid detection by the Jung. "She's not moving fast enough," the admiral mumbled.

"Who's not moving fast enough?" Rear Admiral Duncan asked.

“The Celestia,” the admiral said, pointing at the tactical display. “At her current speed, if we lose this battle, the Jung will be able to find her with active sensors in a relatively short time. She needs to do another burn, a big one, and soon.”

The admiral looked at the tactical display again. “How long until those two Jung battle groups on the far side come around and get line of sight on the Celestia again?”

“The first one will have line of sight in ten minutes,” Rear Admiral Duncan said. “The second one will be about half an hour.”

“Where will the other group be in ten to fifteen minutes, the one that is still on the same side as the Celestia?”

“The ships that the Intrepid is currently closing on will lose line of sight on the Celestia by then,” Rear Admiral Duncan explained, realizing what his friend was really asking.

“When that group goes behind the Earth, will all three groups be behind her at the same time?”

“No, sir. Battle group four will have line of sight at the same time as battle group two for at least five minutes.”

“Then the Intrepid must take out group two as soon as possible,” the admiral said.

“I’m pretty sure that was their plan, Admiral.”

“No, I mean they *must*, as in *at all costs*.” The admiral looked over at the icons representing the two Jung cruisers just inside the orbit of Mars, still on their way toward Earth. “Dispatch an FTL comm-runner with a message for the Zhang-Ti as well. Tell them they must destroy both targets by any means possible before...” The admiral paused, looking at the time display on the wall and doing some quick calculations in his head. “Before 21:25, Earth Mean Time.

Tell both ships the Celestia's escape burn must go unwitnessed by the Jung no matter what the cost."

Rear Admiral Duncan looked suspiciously at his superior officer. "Are you saying..."

"That they should sacrifice their ships if necessary?" the admiral finished for him. "Yes, that's exactly what I'm saying."

"Sir, if we sacrifice both ships, we'll be handing our world over to the Jung."

"Then we'll fight them on the ground as an underground resistance if necessary. We've prepared for that scenario..."

"Sir," Rear Admiral Duncan protested, interrupting his superior. "I cannot believe you would be willing to sacrifice our last two warships just to save an unarmed and unfinished one."

"There's more to it than that, Marty," the admiral insisted, "and you know it."

"Yes, I know, the data cores. There's data in there that the Jung might not yet have. It might make them unstoppable. I get that, sir. But might it not be better to destroy the Celestia and those data cores rather than sacrificing one of our last two ships?"

"We cannot lose the Celestia," the admiral insisted, growing weary of his subordinate's questioning of his decision.

"We've come a long way with the help of the Data Ark," the rear admiral argued, "but we can figure the rest out on our own. Those ships are..."

"It's my call! Now carry out your orders!"

Rear Admiral Duncan took in a deep breath. "No, sir, not unless you tell me why the Celestia is so important."

Admiral Galiardi stared at his friend, his eyes full of rage.

“Don’t make me relieve you, sir,” Rear Admiral Duncan said in a low voice so that only the two of them could hear his threat.

Admiral Galiardi looked long and hard at his old friend. He knew that Martin Duncan would not have made such a threat unless he truly believed he was justified in doing so. The admiral also knew his friend well enough to know he would make good on that threat if pushed to do so.

The admiral motioned to his friend to come closer as the admiral stepped back to get out of earshot of the officers nearby. “Time is short,” the admiral began in hushed tones, “so I will make this brief. There was a top secret R and D program being run out of special projects. Two teams, both working on the same concept, both unaware of the other team’s existence. Only three people outside of the teams themselves were aware of the project’s existence: me, Admiral Yamori, and then-Senator Scott.”

“The President of the NAU?”

“It would take too long to explain,” the admiral insisted.

“What sort of project are we talking about?” Rear Admiral Duncan asked. “A weapon of some kind?”

“STS, or Superluminal Transition System. It would enable a ship to instantly jump between two distant points in space.”

“How distant?” the rear admiral asked, skepticism in his voice.

“The prototype was supposed to be able to jump up to ten light years per transition event.”

“Holy...”

“Yeah, that’s what I first said when Yamori approached me with the idea. It was based on some anomalous findings in some EM shielding research found in the Data Ark by one of our physicists.”

“That’s amazing, but I still don’t see...”

“One of the prototypes was installed on the Aurora. She was testing it when she disappeared.”

“Then it didn’t work?”

“No, it worked. She jumped to a point just outside the solar system. But somehow the Jung knew about the test and were waiting to ambush her. We believe they meant to capture her, but Captain Roberts insisted on taking at least some ordnance with him during what he thought was a simple test flight around the system. He fought back and nearly won. But the last Jung ship had an antimatter reactor failure, and it took them both out.”

“I never did buy that crap about crashing into Jupiter,” the rear admiral said. “So what does all this have to do with the Celestia?”

“The second team, using the same data as a starting point, developed a nearly identical STS prototype. When the Aurora was lost, we had it installed in the Celestia. We were hoping to have enough time to get her armed and ready for combat with a working STS unit. It would have given us an enormous tactical advantage over the Jung, maybe even enough to defeat them.”

“If the Celestia has a working STS unit...”

“The main system is installed, but the external emitter array was due to begin installation in a few days.”

“You can’t let the Jung get their hands on that ship,” Rear Admiral Duncan declared. “You have to order them to scuttle the ship.”

“We can’t,” the admiral insisted. “Don’t you see, Marty? The STS is the only hope we’ve got. There’s no way we can build enough ships to challenge the Jung using conventional technologies. The STS is our best hope of long-term survival.”

“Long term? We’ll be lucky if we make it through the day,” the rear admiral argued.

“The Celestia has enough resources on board to survive for months, maybe even years if necessary. All she has to do is get far enough away that the odds of the Jung finding her become too astronomical for them to even waste their time trying. As long as we know where she went, or should I say, where she is heading, we can retrieve her once we’re able. If we’re lucky, we’ll beat the Jung back today, send our last ship to retrieve her, and still be able to get her ready for action. A single, STS-equipped warship could potentially hold the Jung at bay long enough to build more STS-equipped warships.”

“That’s why they attacked with so few ships,” Rear Admiral Duncan suddenly realized. “They wanted to take us down before we got the STS unit working.”

“Exactly,” the admiral agreed. “They didn’t have time to wait for reinforcements.”

“You should have told me,” Rear Admiral Duncan said, looking his friend in the eyes.

“Perhaps, Marty,” the admiral admitted, “but by doing so now, I have added your name to the list of those who should not be allowed to survive once our world has been captured by the Jung.”

Rear Admiral Duncan looked at his friend, the finality of his last statement setting in. “I’ll send the message.”

Admiral Galiardi placed his hand on Marty’s shoulder. “Thank you, my friend.”

* * *

The number of patients pouring into the hospital had become so great that the designated triage area had been

moved into the parking garage adjacent to the emergency department. Cars had been pushed back against the far wall in haphazard fashion using forklifts from the supply dock, ruining many of the vehicles that they had repositioned to make more room for the constant inflow of the wounded.

The triage area had begun serving as a treatment area as well, requiring relatively inexperienced, young doctors, medical students, nurses, and medics to all perform procedures they were, in many cases, neither trained nor normally authorized to do.

The parking garage was lit with portable lights being powered from a generator parked outside the building. With the lights lined up along the inner edges of the garage, the light being cast threw strange shadows. Everywhere one looked, there was despair. Blood was everywhere—on the patients, the workers, the pavement. It was a stain that would soon be gone from neither the ground nor from the memories of those providing medical care to the injured masses.

Doctor Thornton worked frantically, moving from patient to patient and spending no more than a few seconds with each one. He tried to manage more than a hundred patients, all of them trying to survive until more definitive care could be provided. He tried not to think about the explosions in the distance, taking solace in the words of the two NAU protective agents that shadowed his every move—that there was no reason for the Jung to target hospitals. He couldn't help but wonder, however, why the Jung were targeting the city of Vancouver in the first place. There were no significant military assets to speak of in the area, no airbases or naval shipyards. The only thing they had that made them unique was a large seaport, which could also be said of many cities along the Strait of Georgia. Yet their city

was still being pounded from above, as it had been for nearly an hour.

Doctor Thornton didn't even look up as the explosions became more frequent. He was so busy tending to his multitude of patients and shouting orders to hordes of medical workers that he didn't realize that the explosions were growing closer.

The two protective agents did notice and began making their way through the rows of wounded, dodging medical workers as they darted back and forth amongst the patients.

"Doctor Thornton!" one of the agents called out. "Doctor Thornton!"

At first, Doctor Thornton didn't notice his name being shouted. Someone was always shouting his name. But the voice kept repeating, and it was more insistent, and finally, it caught his attention. He turned to look in the direction of the man's voice and saw the agents trying desperately to warn him about something. One of them signaled for him to come to them. They had been trying to get him to leave and rejoin Miri and his children in the safety of their protection in a remote location. He had told them time and again that he could not leave until the wounded were cared for, which, by current estimates, could be days. But there was something different about the behavior of the two agents this time. One of them was pointing—pointing at something behind him.

Doctor Thornton turned around and looked out the openings in the garage at the city in the distance. People around him began to whisper and mumble. "*Oh, my God,*" was the most common thing he heard repeatedly. In the distance, the explosions occurred every second, and they were coming closer at an alarming rate. They walked across

their section of the city from the water northward, destroying everything within their path. The murmurs became louder and quickly turned into screams. Workers and the injured who could walk began running toward the far side of the garage. Doctor Thornton also turned and began to run, trying his best to ignore the looks of confusion and despair in the eyes of the wounded who lay helplessly on the pavement, fully conscious of both their fate and their inability to escape it.

The doctor was nearly halfway to the other side of the parking garage, heading toward the far exit at a full run with both agents flanking him on either side. A patient reached out and tried to grab his leg as he ran past, causing him to stumble and nearly fall.

“Keep moving! Keep moving!” the agent yelled.

Doctor Thornton could barely hear him over the sounds of the nearing explosions. The next one caused him to stumble yet again, and the one after that pushed at his back and threw him forward to land face down on top of an unconscious patient.

“Come on!” the agent screamed, stopping to turn back and help the doctor to his feet. The agent reached out his hand.

Another explosion struck the garage, causing the roof to collapse. Falling concrete knocked the doctor’s outstretched arm to the ground. The agent reaching back for him disappeared in a downpour of concrete and steel rods. The doctor rolled over onto his back and saw a large section of concrete ceiling directly above him crashing down. In that moment, everything flashed through his mind—his wife, Miri, their children, her voice pleading with him to leave the hospital and come be with them, and finally, his insistence

that he had to stay. *I'm sorry, Miri*, he thought as the ceiling came down upon him.

* * *

Luis sat at the helm of the *Celestia*, studying the various displays and scrolling through the seemingly infinite number of options. Most of the options were disabled and inaccessible, undoubtedly due to the fact that the ship was unfinished. The more he investigated what was working, the more Luis realized that the *Celestia* was not much more than a big, empty hull with maneuvering, propulsion, and life-support systems.

What troubled him most was the question as to why Fleet was going to such lengths to protect a ship that had virtually no strategic or tactical value. There were twenty-six people on board who were cold-coasting to nowhere in particular, which made even less sense.

Luis tried to tell himself that his job was to shut up and follow orders, but such attitudes had never been his strength. He always needed to understand why he was being asked to do something—an attitude that had brought him trouble on more than one occasion.

Somewhere in the aft end of the ship, his three friends were probably thinking much the same. He wished he could speak to them and discuss the chaotic turn of events that had seemingly changed everything. He knew their mere presence would make him feel better. Devyn would show concern and sympathy, Kyle would ask stupid questions just to see their reactions, and Tilly would make jokes at everything. On the bridge, Luis felt alone, isolated. There were eight of them on the bridge, nine including Lieutenant Commander Kovacic, but he didn't know them and didn't

feel at ease talking about their situation with them—especially not with the lieutenant commander, who was now, for all practical purposes, the Celestia’s captain.

“How are you doing?” the lieutenant commander asked, startling Luis. “Delaveaga, right?”

“Yes, sir. Luis Delaveaga.”

The lieutenant commander sat down in the navigator’s seat to the left of Luis. “You doing okay?”

“I’m fine, sir, just a little confused, that’s all.”

“Yeah, it’s a crazy situation, isn’t it?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Where are you from?”

“South America, sir,” Luis answered. “Old Brazil, actually.”

“Inland or coast?”

“A small village a few hundred kilometers inland from Baia de Marajo.”

“Beautiful country, Brazil.”

“Have you been there, sir?”

“No, not personally. I had a buddy who spent some time there after college. He loved it. Never stopped talking about it.”

“How about you?” Luis asked.

“Gdansk, Europe, on the southern edge of the Baltic. It used to be in Poland before the reformation.”

“Then you went to the European Academy?”

“Straight out of college.”

“What did you rate in?” Luis asked, trying to maintain polite conversation to keep his mind off their situation.

“Materials management,” the lieutenant commander said, a hint of disdain in his voice.

“If you don’t mind me asking, sir, how did you end up in command?”

“I was leading a supply team, techs mostly. We were loading supplies on board. Food, water, EVA suits, medical kits—everything needed to survive a few months in space. We were just about to leave when they ordered us to report back here. Since I had just loaded supplies onto the command deck, I came back here. I ended up being the most senior officer on board.” The lieutenant commander laughed. “Go figure.”

“What do you mean?” Luis wondered.

“I’m a supply officer in charge of a starship. Just between us, I don’t know the first thing about commanding a starship.”

“I don’t know much about flying one either, sir,” Luis said, “yet here I am.”

“Aren’t we a pair,” the lieutenant commander said with a smile.

“If it makes you feel any better, it’s pretty much an empty starship,” Luis added, smiling back. “Besides, you’ve been doing pretty well so far. If you hadn’t told me, I wouldn’t have known you weren’t a bridge officer.”

“What, you trying to give me a pep talk, Ensign?” The lieutenant commander laughed. “Truth is, I got a quick briefing from Captain Christopoulos just before he left port.”

“The captain of the Intrepid?” Luis asked.

“That would be him. He pretty much gave me step-by-step instructions.” The lieutenant commander looked at Luis. “You were supposed to be on the Intrepid, weren’t you?”

“Yeah. How did you know?”

“Your voice changed when I mentioned Christopoulos.”

Luis shook his head. “I’ve been waiting two months to start my rotation on the Intrepid. Two months listening to my sister complain about my mother, and my mother

complaining about my sister. Finally, we get the call to report, and we just miss her.”

“You should be thankful you had that extra time with them, Ensign,” the lieutenant commander said, his tone becoming somber. “Who knows when any of us are going to see our families again.”

Luis looked at the lieutenant commander. He wanted to know what they were doing, why they were sneaking away in an unfinished, unarmed ship, while their world was under attack.

“Message from Fleet Command, sir,” Ensign Souza interrupted.

“What is it?” Lieutenant Commander Kovacic asked as he stood.

“We’re supposed to go to full power and burn our main engines for ten minutes.”

“When?”

“In three minutes, sir.”

“Same course?”

“They didn’t say, sir,” the comm officer said.

“If they didn’t give us a new course, they must want us to stay on the same heading as before,” the lieutenant commander said. “Tell engineering to spin the reactors up to full power. We’re going to need those inertial dampeners this time.”

“Yes, sir,” Ensign Souza answered.

Lieutenant Commander Kovacic turned back toward Luis who was still sitting at the helm. “Be ready to put our nose back onto our heading when the time comes. And throttle up slowly, just in case. Like you said, it’s mostly a big, empty ship.”

“Yes, sir,” Luis answered, swallowing hard.

* * *

Chaos had enveloped the streets of Winnipeg. As the sun had begun to set, a third wave of aerial attacks struck the city. Without power, the streets were quickly becoming a dark and terrifying place, lit only by portable lights and the frequent flashes of distant explosions.

Synda darted from cover to cover, avoiding Jung attack squads that had already landed and were roaming the streets, slaughtering anyone who appeared even remotely threatening. She had already seen two such squads, both from a distance, and had managed to hide from them. Her only hope was to get out of the city, to find someplace to hide that would be of no interest to the invaders.

Synda ran quickly down the street, dodging debris from damaged buildings and items strewn about by fleeing citizens and crazed looters alike. She took temporary cover behind whatever she could find: a parked car, a dumpster in an alleyway, a shadowy entrance to a shop—anything to temporarily hide her from the masses.

It was not only the Jung that she had to avoid; it was also the opportunistic criminal element. They were the worst kind, taking advantage of an unruly situation to commit acts that would normally get them incarcerated. While it had not yet happened to her, she had already seen several assaults and had even broken up what appeared to be an attempted rape in plain view of everyone. That had nearly gotten her stabbed by the assailant, and she had vowed never to put herself into harm's way in such fashion again, at least not on this night.

Synda finished a longer than normal sprint down a relatively empty street, ending up in a recessed doorway and lurking in the shadows as she peered out into the night.

There were the sounds of heavy boots, like the ones she had seen worn by the Jung troops, coming from the far end of the street. The Jung boots had some metal running under the arch and up both sides of the boot that made a recognizable clicking sound on the pavement as they walked. She wanted to get as far away from that sound as possible.

As soon as the sound faded, Synda peered out again, checking both directions. The street appeared to be clear, and she started moving down the street once more—slowly at first, her stride quickened once she was sure that the sound of the Jung soldiers was gone. She looked back over her shoulder as she came to the end of the street, stopping and leaning up against the corner of the last building.

Synda slowly inched out and peeked around the corner of the building, finding a man's face only inches from her own face. It peered back at her. A short squeal left her lips. She immediately stifled it as she turned to run the other way, but a hand reached around the corner and grabbed her, pulling her toward him. The man's other hand went up and covered her mouth from behind to prevent her from making any more noise. Synda instinctively rammed the back of her head into the face of her assailant, eliciting a subdued cry of pain from the man. As his hand left Synda's face to cover his wounded nose, she rammed her free elbow into the man's gut, causing him to double over.

"Wait," the man cried in restrained fashion.

Synda spun around to kick him in the face, her back leg cocked and ready when she stopped herself. She looked at him again, her eyes squinting to see better in the darkness. "Tony?"

"Who the hell did you think it was?"

"I thought you were a rapist," she said, relaxing her stance.

"A rapist? What kind of a nut would be raping someone at a time like this?"

"You'd be surprised," Synda said as she reached for his bloodied face to check on his injuries. "Are you all right?"

"I'm pretty sure you broke my nose," he said.

"Well, why did you grab me?"

"I was trying to keep you quiet," he protested. "You started to scream, and there are Jung troops all over the place. Or haven't you noticed?" Tony touched the bridge of his swollen nose. "Damn! That hurts!"

"Stop whining," Synda told him.

"Whining?" Tony objected. "You break my nose, and I'm whining? Jesus, Synda."

"I'm sorry, all right?"

"Where were you going, anyway?" Tony asked.

"Out of the city."

"To where?"

"Anywhere," Synda insisted, "anywhere the Jung don't care about, at least. I figure that's the safest place to hide."

"Why? You think they're going to execute everyone?"

"I'd rather not hang around to find out, one way or another," Synda insisted.

"Why would they want to kill everyone?" Tony asked. "What sense would that make?"

"Are you coming with me or not?"

"Fine, lead the way," Tony agreed, still holding his bloody nose. "Damn, maybe we can stop at a store and pick up an ice pack or something."

Synda ignored him, making her way farther down the street and stopping for cover along the way as before. Tony

followed her from cover to cover, although in a more relaxed fashion.

“Where’s your roommate, Nikki?” Tony asked.

“Dead,” Synda answered coldly.

“Jesus, what happened?”

“Our building got hit. I barely made it out alive. She didn’t.”

“Damn, that’s rough.”

“What about your sister?”

“I have no idea,” Tony said. “I was at a bar with some friends when the bombs started coming down. We were watching the news and getting drunk, celebrating the end of the world and all that.”

“Well, that was certainly a constructive use of your time.”

“Yeah, well, it made sense at the time, I suppose...”

Synda stopped cold in her tracks, listening intently.

“What is it?” Tony whispered.

“I hear something,” Synda said. She listened more intently. There was a distant engine, like a large truck, but there was also the familiar sound of metal on pavement in the rhythmic fashion of boots walking down the street. “Come on!”

Synda ran down the street with Tony following close behind. They ducked behind a car with shattered windows. She peered up over the car, looking back down the street in the direction from which they had come. A truck full of local militia sped through the intersection. She heard the screeching of tires as the truck came to a stop. A second later, she heard the sound of Jung energy weapons fire mixed with gunfire from the militia. The intersection flashed with light, and the occasional energy weapons burst flew

through the intersection. Another truck screeched to a stop before it even reached the intersection.

Weapons fire flew back and forth across the distant intersection, energy weapons from the right, gunfire from the left.

“We need to get out of here,” Tony declared.

Synda continued to watch in fascination as the battle raged on. Within seconds, Jung troops started advancing into the intersection from the right as they drove the Winnipeg militia forces back.

“Synda, come on!”

She heard more tires screeching. Seconds later, the Jung forces were backing up into the intersection again, only to be caught in a cross fire as more militia forces attacked from behind them. The Jung soldiers, with no other exit, turned and started running down the street toward Synda and Tony, firing their energy weapons behind them at the pursuing militia.

“Synda!” Tony yelled, grabbing her arm and pulling her so hard she nearly fell. They ran down the street, turning to the left and running around the corner without so much as slowing.

“Wait! Wait!” Synda yelled, coming to a stop halfway down the street. “This is a dead end!”

Tony looked to his left down an alleyway. “This way!”

“Are you sure?”

“It comes out behind the bank on the corner!” Tony insisted, charging down the alley.

Synda spun around to look behind her as Jung troops entered the intersection. They took no notice of her as they stopped and spun around, dropping to one knee as they returned fire from their pursuers. She followed Tony down the alley, both of them at a full run. Just as Tony reached the

end of the alley and was about to turn right, two Jung soldiers came around the corner and ran headlong into him, knocking him down. One of the soldiers stumbled over him and landed face-first in the alley. As Tony scrambled to his feet and turned to attack the soldier that was still trying to get up, the other Jung soldier fired two shots of his energy weapon, one of which struck Tony in his left thigh, spinning him around and knocking him back to the ground.

Synda screamed and continued charging toward the two Jung soldiers, kicking the one that was on his hands and knees in the face, which flipped him over. As the Jung soldier flipped over onto his back, his weapon left his hands and skidded across the pavement. The soldier lay unconscious in the alley.

The other soldier, the one who had shot Tony, swung his weapon around to try to strike Synda in the face as she charged toward him, but she ducked quickly, leaning unnaturally backward to avoid being struck by the butt of his energy rifle. As she bent over backward, she extended her left arm, rotated her body, and swung her leg upward, her foot heading for the soldier's face. The soldier reacted quickly, blocking her leg with his weapon, moving it quickly in a circular sweeping motion, and catching the strap around her extended foot. He twisted the weapon around, making it impossible for her to free herself, and yanked backward, pulling Synda forward and causing her to fall onto her left side.

Now being even closer to the soldier than before, Synda shoved her right foot into his knee, bending it outward with a crack as the soldier fell to the ground screaming in pain. She noticed the other soldier's weapon lying a meter away and tried to reach for it as the soldier she was fighting went down, but his rolling motion pulled on her caught leg again,

making it impossible to reach the weapon. She heard the Jung soldier holler something in an unintelligible language, something she was sure was an insult directed at her. The Jung soldier was still upright, balancing on his good knee while he winced in pain from his other knee. He pulled his sidearm from his holster as he continued muttering likely Jung expletives at her and took aim. He smiled and moved his finger to the weapon's trigger.

Synda closed her eyes, waiting for the blast from the energy weapon to take her life. A scream burst from her lips as she heard the screeching metallic *zhwang* of the Jung weapon. She felt the heat of its energy dispersal, but it was from farther away, and to her right, as was the noise. She then heard a thud.

Synda's eyes popped open and saw the Jung soldier, the one that had nearly ended her life, lying face down in a smoldering heap before her, steam and smoke rising from the wound in the middle of his back armor. Blood had already begun to ooze out from under the dead soldier on one side. She looked over at Tony, who was propped up against the still unconscious Jung soldier lying in the alleyway next to him. He was holding the soldier's sidearm at arm's length, having just killed Synda's attacker.

Synda reached down and freed her left leg, picking up the dead Jung soldier's weapon and looking at the energy rifle in amazement.

"Is he dead?" Tony asked in disbelief.

"Pretty sure he is," Synda answered as she scrambled over to Tony's side to check his wound.

"Shit," Tony exclaimed, still not believing what he had just done. He winced in pain.

Synda looked at Tony's still smoldering thigh wound. "How bad is it?"

"It feels like my fucking leg is on fire," Tony exclaimed. "That's how bad it is."

"Can you walk?"

"No way," Tony said. "I can't even move my other leg. It's like that red blast of whatever it was short-circuited everything from my waist down."

"Shit. We've got to get out of here."

"Carry me?" Tony pleaded, half-joking.

"I'm a hundred and forty-five centimeters and forty-three kilograms, soaking wet. You're what? Eighty kilograms? We wouldn't make it a block." Synda's head turned instinctively toward the sound of the Jung's metallic boots as they grew nearer.

"Fuck. Trade me guns," Tony told her, also hearing the approaching footfalls.

"Why?"

"Yours is bigger."

"What are you gonna do?" Synda asked as she swapped her energy rifle for his energy pistol.

"I'll hold them off while you make a run for it."

Synda could tell by the sound of his voice that it wasn't his first choice. "What are you, some kind of hero?"

"If I'm gonna die, I'd rather die while saving your ass than riding it."

Synda smiled at the turn of phrase.

"You know what I fucking mean," Tony insisted. "Now go."

"Tony..."

"Just go, before I change my mind," he urged.

"I don't know how to thank you," she said in all honesty.

"Name your first kid after me."

"Yeah, right." She snickered at the thought. She looked at him again. "Thanks."

“No problem,” he answered as he propped himself up a bit more.

“Don’t forget about that guy,” Synda told him, pointing at the unconscious Jung soldier that Tony was still leaning against. “He’s not dead, you know.”

“Don’t worry. He will be shortly,” he promised as he examined the Jung energy rifle, trying to determine how to use it. “Now go already.”

Synda rose up off her knees, remaining in a low crouch as she moved the two steps to the edge of the building and peered around the corner. Although she could hear the sound of approaching troops, the street in either direction was clear for the moment.

“Hey, Synda,” Tony called out. “If I had asked you out, would you have said yes?”

“Probably,” she lied.

“Damn it.”

Synda turned back around and moved back over to Tony. She grabbed his face with both hands and gave him a long, passionate kiss.

“What was that for?” Tony asked when she finally pulled away.

“Well, you are about to die to save my ass,” Synda answered.

“Don’t suppose there’s time for a quickie?” he asked as Synda moved back to the corner of the building in preparation to depart.

“Maybe someday, if we all survive this,” she answered, after which she disappeared around the corner of the building.

“Damn,” Tony exclaimed, readying himself to fight. He was even more determined to survive now.

* * *

Three groups of missiles passed one another in orbit above the Earth. Two of them had been fired by the Jung and were headed toward the Intrepid. The third group had been fired by the Intrepid and was targeting all three ships in the Jung battle group currently in orbit above the Indian Ocean.

As the group of sixteen missiles approached the Jung battle group, the shots divided into three groups of six, five, and five, with each group heading toward their individual targets.

“Missiles have broken formation and are maneuvering toward their targets,” the Intrepid’s tactical officer, Lieutenant Eckert reported. “Impact in two minutes.”

“Targets one and three, the cruiser and the frigate, are moving,” Ensign Kono announced. “They’re trying to get between our missiles and the troop ship.”

“They must be afraid that some of our missiles will get past their point-defenses and hit that troop ship,” Captain Christopoulos said. “They’re willing to take the hits themselves.” The captain looked at his sensor operator. “Are they going to make it into position in time?”

“Doubtful, sir.”

“Where are our fighters?” the captain asked the flight operations officer.

“They’ve just started their climb back up from the atmosphere, sir,” the flight operations officer reported. “They’ll be in range of the troop ship in two minutes, twenty seconds.”

"Have them launch their intercept missiles at max range," the captain ordered.

"Aye, sir," Lieutenant Tonnes acknowledged from the flight operations console as he turned back around to send word to the flight's lead pilot.

"It was a good idea to have those missiles wait until the last moment to break off onto their separate targets," Lieutenant Eckert said. "Now they have to scramble."

"Combat, Captain," the captain called into his comm-set.

"*Captain, go for combat,*" Commander Nasser answered.

"Commander, launch another round of missiles, all nukes. Full burn the entire run this time. I want them there in half the time."

"*Aye, sir,*" the commander answered. "*Sixteen nukes, full burn.*"

"One minute until our missiles reach their targets," Lieutenant Eckert reported. "One minute, twenty seconds until theirs reach us. Their point-defenses are engaging."

Captain Christopoulos watched the tactical display on the port view screen as the icon's representing the Intrepid's missiles began to disappear from the display, disappearing one by one as the point-defense systems of both enemy ships attempted to intercept the incoming weapons. The two larger icons representing the Jung cruiser and frigate were trying to move forward and closer to one another in order to shield the unarmed troop ship from danger.

"Our missiles are launching again," Lieutenant Eckert reported. "Sixteen away. At full burn the entire flight, they should strike in one minute."

"As soon as they pass our defense perimeter, fire our point-defenses," the captain ordered.

"Aye, sir!"

The captain glanced at the main view screen at the center of the bridge as the sixteen missiles streaked away from the Intrepid's four launchers, their thrusters glowing bright orange as they accelerated toward their targets only a short distance away. His eyes quickly returned to the tactical display, eager to see the missiles close quickly on the enemy vessels ravaging his world. Normally, the missiles' propulsion systems would be shutting down at any second, having already reached their desired transit speed. By burning their thrusters the entire journey, they would accelerate the entire time. Not only would this make it more difficult for the enemy's point-defenses to successfully intercept the weapons, it would also leave the weapons with no fuel to maneuver during the last few seconds of flight to ensure that they found their targets. Captain Christopoulos was betting that the clustering of the targets would make that last second maneuvering unnecessary and that more of his missiles would get past their defenses.

"Firing point-defenses!" Lieutenant Eckert announced.

Icons representing the Intrepid's first wave of missiles continued to drop off the tactical display. Meanwhile, the Intrepid's own point-defenses began tearing apart the incoming Jung missiles, causing their icons to disappear as well.

"Targets successfully intercepted our first wave of missiles!" Lieutenant Eckert reported.

"Captain!" Ensign Kono called. "The cruiser is launching fighters!"

"They've spotted our fighters," the captain mumbled.

"Three missiles have breached our defense perimeter!" the tactical officer reported. "Ten seconds to impact!"

"All hands, prepare for impact!" the captain ordered. It was an expression he was using far more than he would

have liked today.

Two Jung missiles slammed into the aft end of the Intrepid, erupting in brilliant flashes of white light that nearly obscured the massive ship from view. A second later, the third missile struck amidships on the opposite side from her previous hull breach, resulting in another flash of light as the third nuclear weapon detonated. It tore the Intrepid's midsection wide open. As the three flashes of light cleared, multiple secondary explosions ripped out the three massive holes in the ship, two of which were aft and revealed her mangled engines inside. Fires flashed into existence and immediately suffocated, as the air left the compartments opened to space.

"Damage control reports hull breaches, starboard amidships!" Lieutenant Chara reported. "Aft section! Main propulsion! Engine compartments fifteen through twenty!"

"Main propulsion is down!" Ensign Hunt reported as his fingers danced across the helm console. "I've got no lateral thrust control either!"

"Fire in the forward propellant storage compartments!" Lieutenant Chara added as he sifted through the myriad of damage reports being passed to him from the damage control center.

"Our fighters are launching intercept missiles!" Lieutenant Eckert announced.

Fifty anti-ship missiles streaked away from their mounting points on the small fighters climbing up from the

upper atmosphere of Earth. Mini-rail guns on the back half of both the cruiser and the frigate swung around and opened fire on the incoming weapons in an attempt to intercept them before they reached the defenseless troop ship flying behind them.

Several Jung fighters broke away from the main group, charging down into the atmosphere on their way to intercept the incoming fighters from the Intrepid. They angled toward the incoming missiles and opened fire with wing-mounted energy cannons, slicing through several of the small missiles as they streaked by. It was not enough, and more than thirty missiles made it past them.

“Captain! Those fighters have energy weapons!” Ensign Kono reported from the sensor station. “They’re trying to shoot down the missiles launched by our fighters!”

“Energy weapons? We didn’t think the Jung had them! How many missiles did they intercept?”

“Fifteen or twenty, sir.”

“Targets one and three are firing point-defenses!” Lieutenant Eckert reported. “They’re only firing half the defenses at our missiles, Captain! The other half are trying to intercept the ones coming from our fighters!”

“Yes!” the captain exclaimed. The ship was suddenly rocked by a massive internal explosion that nearly knocked the captain from his seat. “What the hell was that?!”

“Captain! Damage control!” a voice called over the comm-set.

“Go for captain!”

“The forward propellant storage has overheated and exploded! A quarter of the forward section is gone!”

“Why wasn’t that section vented to space when the fire started?!” the captain demanded.

“The controls were damaged! We weren’t able to get to the manual overrides in time, sir! It’s out now, sir! The explosion opened the compartment for us! But that’s nearly half our propellant, sir! And it took the forward maneuvering pods with it!”

“Goddamn it!” the captain cursed.

“It gets worse, sir! We lost main propulsion and most of our midsection as well. We’re nearly chopped in half! We’re dead in space right now.”

“Have you got any good news?” the captain wondered.

“We’ve still got power, life support, and weapons, sir.”

“Jesus,” the captain said to himself. “Do what you can,” he added to the damage control officer before switching off his comm-set.

“Sir,” Ensign Hunt began tentatively, “when the forward propellant tank exploded, the force decelerated us just enough to drop us into a lower orbit.”

“How low?” the captain asked.

“We’re at the same orbital altitude as the targets, sir.”

Half of the Intrepid’s fighters exploded in near unison as intercept missiles from the incoming Jung fighters found their targets. Energy weapons lashing out from the Jung fighters cut several more of the Intrepid’s fighters in half as they broke formation and began to take evasive maneuvers. A few seconds later, the two flights of fighters streaked past one another. The Intrepid’s fighters continued on toward the troop ship as the Jung fighters came about to give chase.

The two Jung warships continued firing their point-defenses at the incoming anti-ship missiles, but the angle they were forced to shoot from was less than ideal. Six of the thirty missiles that made it past the flight of Jung fighters also made it past the Jung point-defenses and smashed into the aft end of the massive troop ship, splitting her drive section wide open. The troop ship remained intact but started pitching downward as the force of the explosion pushed her aft end upward.

Able to do no more to defend the troop ship, the mini-rail guns on the back half of the two Jung warships swung back around to help defend against the Intrepid's second wave of missiles. They opened fire, but it was too late. The constant acceleration of the second wave of missiles had done exactly what Captain Christopoulos had hoped it would do. It had pushed most of them past the Jung defenses.

Three missiles smashed into the center of the cruiser, reporting their impacts with brilliant, nuclear flashes. Two more missiles slammed into the cruiser's drive section, resulting in two more flashes of brilliant, white light. Two of the missiles reached the frigate, one striking her bow and the other her stern. One last missile passed directly underneath the frigate and slammed into the bow of the troop ship, as her nose had pitched down enough to reveal itself from behind the frigate.

"Multiple missile impacts!" Lieutenant Eckert reported.
"All three ships!"

"Damage?" the captain asked his sensor officer.

"One moment," Ensign Kono answered.

"Sir, we are closing fast on the targets," the helmsman reported.

“Major damage to both the cruiser and the frigate, sir,” Ensign Kono reported. “Neither has weapons or propulsion.”

“What about maneuvering?”

“I doubt it, sir.”

“Status of our fighters?” the captain asked the flight operations officer.

“The enemy fighters are breaking off and heading toward the next battle group,” Lieutenant Tonnes reported from the flight operations station.

“Tell our fighters to pursue and destroy,” the captain ordered.

“Sir!” Ensign Hunt called again in an insistent tone. “We’re headed right for them, and I’ve got no way to maneuver around them!”

“What?” The captain stood from his command chair, moving forward and leaning down as if to take over the helm himself. “Have you got docking thrusters?”

“Yes, sir, I’ve been trying them,” the helmsman answered. “They’re just not powerful enough.” The helmsman turned his head to look at his captain. “We’re going to run right into them.”

The captain stood upright again. “How long?”

The helmsman glanced at his flight data display. “Eighty-eight seconds, sir.”

“Combat, captain!” Captain Christopoulos called over his comm-set.

“*Captain, go for combat,*” Commander Nasser answered.

“Commander, we’re a dead stick and headed right for the targets. I need you to blast us a way through. Fire everything you have at them.”

“*Aye, sir,*” the commander answered over the comm-set.

“Comms,” the captain said as he returned to his command chair. “Warn all decks to prepare for collision and

send word to Fleet. If they don't hear back from us in two minutes, they're not going to."

* * *

Rear Admiral Duncan stepped up to Admiral Galiardi as the admiral studied the tactical display map on the far wall of the underground Fleet command center. "Sir, the Intrepid reports that she has disabled the second battle group. She is continuing her attack to break them up."

The admiral looked surprised by the rear admiral's last statement. "Break them up? Why waste the ordnance?"

"The Intrepid is on a collision course, and all ships are dead sticks. They're counter orbit, sir. At that speed, they'd never survive a collision with an entire ship."

"At that speed, they probably won't survive a collision with a small piece of it," the admiral said. He sighed as he looked at his watch. "Send a message to the Celestia. Tell them to start their burn. It's now or never."

"Yes, sir," Rear Admiral Duncan acknowledged. He turned to his subordinate and passed along the instructions before turning back to the admiral. "Sir," he began, keeping his voice low, "perhaps you should consider preparing your evacuation."

Admiral Galiardi looked at his friend again. "I know things look bad, Marty, but we still have two warships. We haven't lost yet."

"Yes, I know, Admiral. If either of them survives, we've still got a good chance of defeating the remaining ships in orbit. But if we don't... Sir, one of those battle groups is directly over the African continent. Their forces are already on their way down. If you wait too long, you may not get

away. If we're going to continue to fight as an organized underground resistance, we're going to need a leader."

"I appreciate your concern, Marty, but I'll stay for now. If it makes you feel any better, you can have my shuttle and escorts made ready."

"Yes, sir."

* * *

Sergeant Surbeck ran down the long entry road to the United Earth Republic capital in Geneva, leading his men from their previous position at the main gate toward the center of the compound. The need to guard the main gate against entry by protesters had been negated when the bombardment sent the demonstrators scattering in all directions. It had also kept him and his men trapped for nearly half an hour, as they had hunkered down in shelters waiting for the bombardment to end.

Once the bombardment had ended, the landers began their approach and were now beginning to set down at various points within the main compound. The sergeant could see the landers—large, boxy-looking crafts with snub noses and pivoting engines on each corner—as they approached from out over the water. They weren't pretty to look at, but they didn't need to be. They just needed to get the enemy troops on the ground.

Hastily assembled gun emplacements had already opened up on the descending landers and had successfully brought down at least two of them. There were, however, a lot more of them on their way. They arrived in groups of six. Each group was escorted by a pair of gunships—long, cylindrical crafts with ducted rotors overhead that were dropped from large platforms that hovered over the lake

and out of reach of their guns. The gunships were fast and agile, with gun turrets in the noses and on either side of their fuselages. They darted about as they strafed UER ground forces, never standing still long enough to get a clear shot at them.

As they ran down the roadway, Sergeant Surbeck took notice that, while most buildings were either damaged or destroyed, the main building—the one they jokingly referred to as ‘the palace’—was untouched. The gunships danced around it but took great care not to shoot in its general direction. It was almost as if they were protecting it from harm, which made little sense, because there was nothing of strategic importance within the building itself: no data center, no command facility, no comm-center. It was nothing more than a meeting place for representatives from every nation on Earth to assemble. It was more of a symbol than it was a place of importance. It represented unity, unity of the people of Earth and a shared belief that they had to work together in order to prosper.

Sergeant Surbeck signaled for his men to fan out to either side of the street as they approached the main circle that surrounded the capitol building. Six landers were touching down on the massive, grass lawns that lined the circular roadway. As their skids settled onto the grass, their rear boarding hatches opened and their ramps slid out and touched the ground. Jung soldiers decked out in black body armor trimmed in red and gold came pouring out of the landers, running down the ramps and spreading out to both sides.

“Open fire!” the sergeant ordered as his men dropped behind cars, benches, and garbage cans—anything they could find to use as cover. Machine gun fire erupted from his men and from other squads of men all around the circle.

They had come from all over the compound, some from piles of rubble that had once been barracks, or offices, or operational rooms. The roar of so many automatic weapons was deafening, but it was nothing compared to the Jung's return fire.

As Jung soldiers came charging out of the landers, they opened fire on the UER forces with their energy rifles. Bolts of red shot out across the compound, each announced by the odd, metallic *zhwang* of the energy weapon's discharge chamber. The red energy bolts damaged everything they hit, transferring intense amounts of heat into that which they contacted. Dirt blasted into the air with every bolt that struck the ground, burning the grass around the point of impact. Concrete was blown apart, as the intense heat of the weapon caused the particles within the concrete to move and expand in rapid fashion. Holes were literally melted through parked cars in the blink of an eye. When the blast was taken by a soldier directly, the result was barely recognizable, with a large portion of the soldier's body having been burnt away in an instant.

The battle flashed red with every discharge of the enemy weapons. Yellow-orange flashes leapt from the barrels of UER guns, the sound of their gunfire adding to the cacophony of battle. Troops streamed in from all over the complex in response to the Jung's apparent concentration on capturing the main capitol building in one piece. There were no other reports of enemy troops landing elsewhere within the compound. This circle around the United Earth Republic's main building was where they were to make their stand.

Jung landers continued to cycle in and out of the area. No sooner had one landed, unloaded, and taken off, than another had come to take its place. The result was a never

ending presence of at least four landers on the ground at any one moment. The Jung troops charged down the ramps of the landers while turrets on top of the landers sprayed the nearest threats with blasts of energy. Jung troops ran forward into the middle of the crossfire, taking several shots from the UER troops as they jammed metallic shields into the ground to protect themselves from incoming fire.

“They’re trying to create a protective barrier with those shields!” Sergeant Surbeck yelled over his comm-set. “Target those carrying shields!” The sergeant raised his rifle and immediately dropped one of the shield carriers, placing three quick shots into his face and neck as he ran. The soldier stumbled forward, blood gushing from his neck, the shield flying from his hands and landing a few meters ahead of him. As quickly as he had gone down, another Jung soldier had picked up the shield and jammed it into the ground, taking up a position behind it and firing around its edge.

“Bring up a rocket launcher!” the sergeant ordered. He raised his weapon again and continued to fire, concentrating on the shield carriers. He paused for a moment as he noticed a new pattern. Once the Jung had planted six shields in a row and created a five-meter-long wall, they began adding shields above the first row, leaving gaps between the second row of shields through which to fire. It was a simple, low-tech solution to the lack of cover their chosen insertion point offered, but it was an effective one. Within a matter of minutes, they had created a successful barrier behind which they could land, unload troops, and disperse them, all without being in the direct line of fire from the nearest UER soldiers. It also gave the Jung troops a very secure position from which to return fire.

As soon as one barrier strip was completed, the amount of energy weapons fire coming from the firing gaps within the barrier became overwhelming, cutting down UER troops with ease.

“Where the hell is that launcher?!” the sergeant demanded.

“I don’t know, sir!” the corporal answered. “I sent Traeger a few minutes ago!”

“Then send someone else!” the sergeant ordered as he continued firing. He heard shouts and noises coming from behind him, and he turned to look. In came more landers, only they were not headed for the main circle. They were landing at least one hundred meters behind them where there was no resistance.

“Fuck!” the sergeant cursed, realizing they had been tricked. “They sucked us all into the circle, and now they’re inserting behind us!” he yelled to the corporal.

“Why aren’t our guys in back taking them out?” the corporal asked.

The sergeant pointed at the gunships circling the outer perimeter of their forces as they fired their turret guns at the backside of their lines.

It was the searing heat that first caught the sergeant’s attention. While his attention had been drawn toward the battle developing behind him, the sergeant had failed to notice the energy bolts striking the far side of the vehicle that he was using as cover. He had wisely taken a position that placed the vehicle’s engine block between him and the enemy, knowing it offered the greatest amount of protection against their energy weapons. Unfortunately, the concentrated fire coming from the forces clustered behind the nearest Jung barricade had eventually melted its way through the vehicle’s engine block and was rapidly heating

up the side of the vehicle against which the sergeant was leaning.

He looked down at the side of the vehicle as it began to glow an intense red-orange. "Oh, shit!" he exclaimed as he dove to one side. The glowing portion of the vehicle erupted as the metal gave way and an energy blast struck the soldier that was duck-walking behind Sergeant Surbeck, killing him instantly.

"Corporal!" the sergeant yelled as they both scooted to a new position. "Send word! Divide our forces! Half stay! Half take up rear defense! Everyone holds the line, or we're fucked!"

* * *

The Intrepid continued along her orbit over the Earth, coasting along dead stick with no propulsion or maneuvering. They had entered orbit along the same path as the Jung battle groups but in the opposite direction in order to reach and engage them in battle more quickly. For every minute they were left to harass the Earth below, thousands of people died.

Unfortunately, this also meant their dead-stick closure rate was more than fifteen kilometers per second, and neither the Intrepid nor the Jung ships had the ability to change their course or decelerate. Now the Intrepid was forced to fire on otherwise defenseless ships in the hope of breaking them apart enough to survive the impending collision.

The Intrepid's rail guns, both her quads and minis, pounded away at the three Jung ships. Two full spreads of missiles with both nuclear and conventional warheads had

been launched in rapid succession. A total of thirty-two missiles in all had been sent their way.

The first wave of sixteen missiles reached their targets almost simultaneously. A wave of explosions engulfed the three ships, accompanied by multiple nuclear flashes. The Intrepid's rail guns continued to fire during the detonations, despite the fact that the projectiles would either be destroyed or deflected by the blasts.

Firing on a defenseless enemy did not bother Captain Christopoulos. Although it was contrary to the rules of engagement, the Jung had mercilessly attacked his world without warning or provocation. In his mind, they did not deserve the considerations the customary rules of engagement afforded. Under different circumstances, he would have followed those rules, regardless of how inappropriate he might find them. However, if he did nothing, they would all die—both on the Intrepid and on the Jung ships. He would have sent a warning message in the hopes that they might be able to maneuver or might at least attempt to escape using some sort of escape pods, but eighty-eight seconds was not enough time for either.

“Second wave will detonate in thirty-seven seconds!” Lieutenant Calloway reported. “All nukes are set to detonate based on range.”

The captain watched the main view screen, the magnified image of the three ships filling his vision. The nuclear flashes cleared to reveal large sections of the various hulls still floating in their path, with debris and flash fires all around them. “My God,” the captain exclaimed. “You can't even tell which piece is from which ship.” He suddenly felt a little guilty for what he had done and had to remind himself that he had been left with no alternatives.

Ensign Kono studied her displays as she scanned the area just ahead of them, checking on the size of the debris still in their path. "It's not going to be enough," she warned, turning toward her captain. "If the second wave doesn't do it..."

Captain Christopoulos looked at his sensor officer, sending a searing glare her way that cut her off mid-sentence. Everyone on the bridge knew the stakes, and they all knew they were doing everything that could be done. None of them needed to be reminded of how poor their chances were of surviving the next minute.

"Ten seconds to missile detonations," Lieutenant Eckert reported, his voice beginning to sound desperate. "Twenty-two seconds to collision."

The captain and his bridge staff watched as the second wave of missiles closed on the debris field. Each missile locked onto the largest section of ship they could find. Each missile carried conventional warheads, sharing their targeting information with the other missiles in the group so that no two missiles would target the same object. The conventional missiles reached their targets a few seconds before the nuclear armed missiles, detonating in bright flashes of reddish-orange and amber. A few seconds later, when they were in the heart of the debris field, the nuclear armed missiles detonated. Eight brilliant flashes of light filled the main view screen.

"All hands, brace for impact," the captain announced calmly. "Gentlemen, you all fought bravely today. I am honored to have led you."

The Intrepid plowed forward as the nuclear flashes subsided. The debris field had been reduced, and most of

the biggest sections of hull had been broken apart. But the Intrepid's flight path was by no means clear. Her rail guns continued to fire, her main guns taking aim at the few remaining larger sections of hull, but it was too late.

A large piece of hull struck the Intrepid in her starboard side just forward of the exposed portion where her forward propellant tank had blown the hull open. The unfortunate location of the strike caused the chunk of debris to slide across the few meters of the Intrepid's hull and then jam with incredible force into the open section. The force ripped the entire side of the ship's hull away, pulling her bow to starboard to the point that her damaged midsection gave way and the ship broke in half. As her forward half spun to starboard, the Intrepid's back half continued forward and slammed into the spinning forward section, knocking her downward as well. Internal explosions rocked the ship, and other considerably smaller pieces of debris slammed into her, causing rips, tears, and additional explosions just under her outer hull.

The Intrepid's crew was tossed about the bridge with incredible force. The captain's command chair broke free and toppled forward as the entire ship spun to starboard. The flight crew was tossed over their control consoles, killing the navigator, Ensign Villa, instantly. Cries of pain mixed with the sounds of bodies and metal crashing about. Circuits exploded in showers of sparks and acrid smoke as electrical fires ignited. Alarms came and went, activated by the collision and then silenced by a sudden loss of electrical power. Then everything went dark, leaving nothing but the acrid smell of burnt circuits, the flashes of light from intermittent electric shorts, and the moans of the wounded.

Two seconds later, emergency lighting flickered to life, providing the most basic of illumination. Captain Christopoulos pulled himself along the deck toward the flight console. Ensign Hunt crawled to his captain and helped him to his feet, getting him to the navigator's chair before going to check on his friend and flight team partner.

The captain looked around, still dazed from the event and the traumatic blows his body had received. Every breath he took caused pain to shoot through the right side of his chest. His head felt wet, and his right leg was throbbing in pain. His vision was blurry in his right eye, and his hearing was reduced on the same side.

He observed the bridge as those who could tended to those who could not. At least half of his bridge crew was dead, some of them twisted and mangled by falling bulkhead panels and overhead consoles. Fires burned in several of the collapsed consoles as crewman attacked them with handheld fire extinguishers. A few systems began to flicker back to life, many of them intermittent at best.

One of them was the flight console, which the captain noticed immediately. So did his helmsman.

"How is he?" Captain Christopoulos asked as the young ensign returned to his captain in the navigator's chair.

"Villa's dead, sir," Ensign Hunt answered. He looked at the flight console. "We're losing altitude. The collision slowed us way down. We're dropping like a rock."

"How long?"

"We'll hit the atmosphere in two minutes, sir," the young helmsman said. "Whatever doesn't burn up on reentry will hit the surface in eight."

"Abandon ship." the captain ordered. "Give the order, son."

The helmsman looked behind him at the lifeless body of Lieutenant Chara, the communications officer, who lay dead on the deck, his head smashed by a fallen console.

"I've got it," Lieutenant Eckert said as he got back on his feet. He moved over to the comm console, avoiding the sparks shooting up around him, and activated the alert, beginning a prerecorded message that would repeat continuously.

"Where?" the captain asked as he grimaced and grit his teeth through the pain.

The helmsman looked at him curiously. "Sir?"

"Where will we hit?"

The helmsman looked at his displays, quickly calculating their trajectory. "Best guess, off the eastern coast of Australia, sir."

"Anything you can do?"

The helmsman shook his head sadly. "No, sir. I'm sorry."

The captain reached out and patted the young man on the shoulder. "You have nothing to be sorry about, Ensign. You did well today. You all did well. Now, help the wounded get to the escape pods, before it's too late."

"Let me help you, sir," Ensign Hunt insisted, reaching out to help his injured captain.

"No, I'll just slow you all down."

"Captain, please," Lieutenant Eckert protested as he moved closer.

"Don't worry, Lieutenant. I'm an old man; I've had a good life, and I killed many of my enemy today." He smiled at the young lieutenant, remembering himself at that age. It seemed like only yesterday...

The captain's smile suddenly changed to a grimace as pain shot through his side. He grabbed the young Ensign by

the arm and looked him in the eyes. "Never stop fighting, Mister Hunt. Do you hear me? Never stop fighting."

"No, sir, I won't," Ensign Hunt answered, exasperation on his face.

"Go!" The captain turned to face forward as if he were going to fly his broken ship all the way in.

Ensign Hunt backed away slowly, not wanting to take his eyes off the captain.

"Come on," Lieutenant Eckert urged, grabbing the ensign by the shoulder and pulling him toward the exit.

The Intrepid's two halves continued to fall toward the Earth, her forward section spinning laterally to starboard, her aft section tumbling backward end over end. A long field of debris stretched out behind them, following them down into the atmosphere of their homeworld.

"Eagle One, Eagle One Five!" the pilot called over the pilot's helmet comm.

"Go for one," the pilot answered.

"Sir, the Intrepid's going down! She's split in two and headed in! She'll hit the atmosphere in one minute!"

"Damn!" the lead pilot swore. "Eagle leader to Eagle flight. Maintain pursuit and engage targets at max range. Mark bingo fuel at one five seven five. When you reach bingo, start reentry and get down low enough to ditch. Try not to leave anything useful behind for the Jung. Bail out, hide, and blend in. Keep your ears open for instructions later." The lead pilot took a deep breath and sighed. Their part in the battle was almost over. "Good luck, boys."

“Hold up! Hold up! Hold up!” Lieutenant Eckert yelled as he and the four survivors from the bridge charged down the corridor. The group stumbled as the ship bounced and rocked in the steadily thickening atmosphere. They reached the hatch to the last available escape pod on the command deck. One by one, they each grabbed the overhead rail, lifted their feet up, and swung themselves through the hatch to slide through the two-meter-long tunnel that led to the inside of the escape pod.

“Anyone else coming?” the man in the pilot’s seat at the top of the pod asked.

“We’re the last ones!” Lieutenant Eckert reported.

“That’s good, ‘cause we’ve got to go!” he said as he activated the hatch, closing it and starting the automatic launch cycle. “You’ve got five seconds to strap in!” he warned the last of the Intrepid’s bridge staff as they stumbled into their seats amongst the other members of the crew already aboard the escape pod.

The outer hull of the Intrepid’s two sections began to heat up as they tumbled separately into the Earth’s atmosphere. Small pieces sticking out from the main hull were the first to tear away or melt, sending glowing fragments trailing behind them. Although the ship was too big to burn up completely, a lot of her outer hull would be torn away by the stresses as she spun on her way down.

Escape pods began shooting out the sides of the spinning hull sections, most of them from the forward section. A few of them had the unfortunate timing that sent them flying into the aft section, breaking them apart on impact and killing everyone inside. Most of them, however,

were thrown clear of the spinning sections of hull. They fired their automatic maneuvering systems and oriented themselves with their heat shields facing the Earth. The escape pods quickly became balls of fire plunging down through the atmosphere. They accompanied the larger hull sections that gave off intermittent streaks of burning plasma as they plunged downward. Slowly but surely, the escape pods spread themselves farther apart, moving laterally to put a safe distance between themselves and the tumbling sections of their ship.

“We’re clear of the ship!” the man at the controls of the escape pod announced with relief. “Descent attitude is good. All systems are green. We’re going to make it!”

A wave of relief swept across the passengers. Soon their reentry would be complete, and their main parachutes would open to carry them safely down to Earth. They had no idea what to expect once they were back on the ground. The Earth was still under attack, and now there was only one ship left to defend their home. The Zhang-Ti.

Captain Christopoulos leaned forward carefully, trying not to cause himself too much pain, as the ship continued to bounce and spin her way down. The deeper into the Earth’s atmosphere she went, the more her rate of spin decreased. He managed to locate the controls for the main view screen and reactivated it, selecting the forward camera as his view. The Intrepid’s bow was still somewhat pointed, and that slight bit of aerodynamic property was enough to make her straighten out into a proper nose-first dive. As the ship plunged through the cloud cover, he could barely make out

the Australian continent below him. He checked his tactical display. He was receiving tracking signals from twenty-seven escape pods, which was more than half of the Intrepid's inventory. It saddened him to know that nearly half his crew had either died or was about to die. He thought of his wife and of their dreams of retiring on a Greek isle in the Mediterranean. He felt guilty for not being there with her during this moment of crisis. He felt guilty for spending so much time away from her over the last thirty years. She had always assured him that she did not mind, that she knew what she was getting into when she married him, but he had always known she was just being strong. She had always been strong.

He looked at the screen again. The continent now filled his view and was rushing up at him. He could make out the major population centers. Australia had seen one of the biggest rebirths of all the continents on Earth, with many of her main cities being restored to their former glory after the discovery of the Data Ark.

As the continent continued to rush up toward him, Captain Christopoulos wondered what his life—or everyone's life for that matter—might have been like had the Data Ark not been discovered. Would they have never raised the interest of the Jung? Or would they simply have been less prepared to defend themselves when the Jung eventually came? How much longer would it have taken them? Ten years? Twenty? One hundred?

Another glance at the screen revealed more than he cared to know. He could make out the coastline ahead. His ship was coming in at a steep angle. The coastline quickly revealed the outline of a bay. Within seconds, he could see it was a big bay with complex coastlines that formed many different peninsulas. He could see why this area had been

so quickly rebuilt. It was incredible. It was morning on the continent below him, and the sunlight on the water glistened even from his altitude. As he continued to descend, he began to make out fires in the city below. There were ships flying low overhead, attacking the city. It was the Jung. There was a flight of a few dozen flying over the bay toward the main bulk of the city. He recognized the city. He recognized the opera house the people of Australia had rebuilt to closely resemble the original structure that had crumbled and fallen hundreds of years ago. Now the iconic structure was charging toward him.

The Intrepid's massive forward section plowed into the new opera house and erupted in a massive fireball. No more than a second afterward, the aft section plowed into the bay just inland, barely missing the new harbor bridge.

* * *

"Coming up on 23:20 Earth Mean Time in ten seconds, sir," Ensign Souza reported from the Celestia's comm station.

"Ensign Tilly," Lieutenant Commander Kovacic called over his comm-set. "How are we doing on those reactors?"

"Reactors one and two are at full power, sir," Tilly answered, sounding a bit more confident than he had when preparing for their first burn. *"Reactor three is at twenty-eight percent and climbing. Four is at twenty-two percent and climbing."*

"That'll do. Good work."

"Five seconds to burn," Ensign Souza reported.

Lieutenant Commander Kovacic looked at Luis. "You ready?"

"Four....."

"To drive a starship at full power?" Luis asked.

"Three....."

"Hell no," Luis continued, "but I'll do it anyway."

"Two....."

"I hope the Jung aren't looking our way," he mumbled.

"One....." Ensign Souza finished. "Mark."

"Mains are hot," Luis reported as he pressed the button to power up the Celestia's main drive. "Throttling up."

The partially empty hull of the Celestia made a strange rumble as her main engines lit up and drove the ship forward.

"Passing ten percent," Luis reported. He could feel the ship moving despite the efforts of their inertial dampening systems. "Should we be feeling it this much, sir?"

"I don't think the inertial dampeners have been fully calibrated yet," the lieutenant commander admitted. "I guess it's better than nothing, though."

"Passing twenty percent." Luis watched the ship's forward speed as it quickly rose. With each percent increase of thrust, he could feel himself being pushed back in his seat just a bit more. "Passing thirty percent."

"We're accelerating faster than we were the first time. I don't feel it anywhere near as much," the lieutenant said, "so I guess the inertial dampeners are doing something."

"Passing forty."

"Keep an eye on that clock," the lieutenant commander reminded Ensign Souza. "If we aren't cold-coasting again by 23:30, that fourth Jung battle group will come out from behind the Earth and spot our main thrust ports without even trying."

“Almost two minutes into the burn now, sir,” the ensign reported.

“Good. Don’t take your eyes off it.”

* * *

Sergeant Surbeck fired wildly in the direction of the Jung energy weapons fire in the distant darkness, as the enemy forces closed in on him and his men from all sides. They fought on the run, firing as they ran from cover to cover and trying to find a hole in the Jung’s rear line through which they could escape. Finally, they had nowhere left to run.

“Concentrate all fire there!” the sergeant ordered, pointing at the Jung line.

All eight of his remaining men immediately complied, taking aim at the same general point and firing away. One by one, Jung troops began to fall, and a hole was created.

“Through there!” the sergeant yelled. “Fire to the sides as you go, and don’t stop running for anything!”

All nine of them came out from behind their modest cover, charging toward the hole in the Jung line, running as fast as they could, and firing to either side of the hole. The first man out barely made it two steps before his torso disappeared, leaving only a head, arms, and legs to topple to the ground. The second man made it a bit farther before his entire left shoulder and arm were melted away, and he fell to the ground screaming in agony. The third man ran past his fallen comrades, paying them no attention as he, too, made the mad dash for his life. Two more followed closely behind, firing to either side as more of their comrades fell to enemy energy weapons fire.

Sergeant Surbeck and the last three UER soldiers burst out from behind cover at the same time, charging behind

the others. With seven of them firing on either side of the hole, they managed to keep the Jung nearest them ducking behind their cover.

The first three men broke through the Jung's loose line of attackers and continued running. Unfortunately, they did not continue firing, instead, just running for their lives.

"Keep firing!" the sergeant yelled as he finally made it through the gap. He and two others shuffled sideways for several meters as they fired at the Jung, dropping several of them as they scurried to find new cover. The result was an even bigger gap in the lines. Now there were four of them, the sergeant and three of his men, walking quickly backward as they fired at the exposed Jung line.

Jung soldiers immediately began popping up from behind cover and moving toward the gap in their defense line, taking care to remain protected by whatever obstacles they could find to use as cover against the UER projectile weapons.

Sergeant Surbeck turned around and started running as he dropped his empty magazine and slammed in a new one. "Run! Run! Run!" he urged as he shot wildly behind him in the hopes of discouraging any pursuers. He glanced over his shoulder as he fired but realized that the Jung were no longer pursuing them. "Head for the fence line!" he yelled to his men ahead of him. If they could make it there, they could breach the fence and disappear into the city itself. Once free of their uniforms and weapons, they would be safe. It was too late for the United Earth Republic's capitol building; it was lost to the overwhelming forces of the Jung.

The brightly lit fence line grew closer, and Sergeant Surbeck's hopes of escape became stronger. Then he heard the sound of one of the Jung gunships approaching from behind. He dove to the ground, rolled, and came up on one

knee facing behind him, his weapon raised and firing at the gunship. The gunship fired back, tearing up the ground before him as bolts from the gunship's forward turret walked along the ground and right up to the sergeant. The bolts kicked dirt in his face just before they walked up his body, striking him in the thigh, abdomen, and chest. His body suddenly burned with intense pain as his flesh and bone instantly melted away, and he collapsed on the ground, a smoldering pile of bone and charred tissue.

The gunship streaked overhead, the sergeant's eyes following it as he lay on the ground in agony. He could hear the sound of the gunship's turret as it continued firing. He could hear the sound of his men as they, too, were seared by the Jung energy weapons. Moments later, the sounds stopped, and his vision blurred just before it went black.

* * *

Admiral Galiardi sat in his chair, staring at the tactical display map on the far wall. The room had taken a somber tone over the last few minutes, as everyone in the room witnessed the fall of not only the Earth Defense Forces, but all of the national surface forces as well. Icons representing Jung forces on the ground covered the map, especially in areas of dense populations. While the Jung invasion fleet might have been small in number, their ground troops were not.

"Sir," Rear Admiral Duncan began, "we just lost all contact with the Zhang-Ti."

"What about the Jung cruisers she was chasing?" the admiral asked, almost afraid of the answer.

"We have lost all contact with them as well. There were numerous nuclear detonations in the area of the contacts.

Long-range sensors are picking up scattered contacts, most of them smaller than an escape pod. At that distance, it's hard to tell, but we're confident it is debris, probably from all three ships."

"Then we have no more warships in space," the admiral said, stating fact.

"That is correct. We are also down to fewer than one hundred fighters, none of which have bases to which they may return and rearm. All our surface-to-orbit defenses were wiped out long ago. The Jung now have superiority in all areas: in space, in the air, and on the surface."

The admiral sighed. He looked at his friend. "I really thought we had them."

"We almost did," Rear Admiral Duncan said. "But I believe it's time."

Admiral Galiardi looked at his old friend. They had spent the last twenty years shaping the Earth Defense Forces together, battling politicians and public opinion in their efforts to ensure the safety of their world. They had made compromises that went against their beliefs in order to obtain the concessions they felt gave them the greatest benefit in battle. In the end, it had almost paid off. There was still one more chance.

"You know the order I have to give you," the admiral said.

"I know, sir."

"You know how hard it is for me to give that order."

"I'll make it easy on you," Rear Admiral Duncan said. "I'll volunteer."

Admiral Galiardi smiled at his old friend as he placed his hand on the console screen in front of him. After the screen scanned his hand to identify him, it displayed a list of options. The admiral selected the option named 'Buckeye',

typed in a pass phrase, and pressed the initiate button. After logging out, he stood and extended his hand to his friend. "Thank you, Marty."

"Good luck, Mike," Rear Admiral Duncan said as they shook hands. He looked his friend in the eye one last time. "Run the bastards off our world."

"I will, Marty. I will." Admiral Galiardi turned and headed to his office, just as he had a thousand times before. He picked up a few things from his desk and placed them in his briefcase: a few data chips, a picture of his deceased wife with his children and grandchildren, and one of him and Marty on a fishing trip out on Cape Lopez Bay. He stood at his desk a moment, looking through the window into the command center and hoping that something on the tactical map had suddenly changed for the better, but a thousand blinking red icons still marked his failure.

The admiral took a deep breath, closed his briefcase, and headed out the side exit and into the back corridor. In a few minutes, he would be on a high-speed, underground transport that would take him to the southern edge of the city where he would be covertly evacuated by EDF Special Forces operatives to a safe house hundreds of kilometers away. He had a new mission ahead of him, one that would be even more challenging, but first, he had to disappear. He had to blend in with the population.

Rear Admiral Duncan signaled for his communications officer.

"Yes, sir," the officer responded as he came to stand near his commander.

"I have two messages for you to send. First, to all stations and all units, transmit the code word 'Buckeye'

followed by orders to lay down all arms and stand down,” the rear admiral instructed. “The second message is to be broadcast to the Jung on all channels and all frequencies, no encryption. Message reads, ‘We surrender.’”

“Yes, sir,” the comm officer answered, trying to hide his disbelief.

Rear Admiral Duncan went to the admiral’s chair, sat down, and rolled up to the console before him. He placed his hand on the scanner to verify his identity. The screen changed and displayed a list of options. Rear Admiral Duncan chose ‘Buckeye’, typed in a pass phrase, and pressed the execute button. A timer appeared on the screen showing five minutes. It flashed three times, then began counting down. Rear Admiral Martin Duncan had carried out his final orders.

* * *

Admiral Yamori, head of the Fleet’s special projects division, stood in the crisis room at the Special Projects headquarters in North America. As the commander of the department that managed all research and development for the Earth Defense Force, the admiral was one of only three people on Earth that knew about the STS projects.

“Admiral, sir,” the soldier said as he stepped up and saluted, interrupting the admiral’s conversation with a subordinate.

Admiral Yamori looked at the soldier, not recognizing him. He noticed that the man was in full combat gear, heavily armed, and wore the EDF special operations patch on his shoulder.

“Yes, Lieutenant?” the general asked, noticing that there were three more similarly dressed and armed men behind

the lieutenant.

“I need you to come with us, sir.”

“What’s this about?”

“Admiral!” a junior officer cried out, turning to move quickly toward him. “We just got word from Fleet Command! We’ve surrendered, sir!”

The admiral’s face turned pale. He looked at the lieutenant, realization in his eyes. For a moment, he thought his knees would give out, and he’d collapse to the floor, but he did not. He managed to summon all his strength.

“Buckeye?” he asked, his voice quivering and barely audible.

“Yes, sir,” the steely eyed lieutenant responded.

“Major,” the admiral said, “order all personnel to remain at their posts until further orders. No one is to leave the building, other than these four men. Is that understood?”

“Yes, sir,” the major answered, somewhat confused.

The admiral turned back to the lieutenant, his voice having returned. “We can talk in my office, Lieutenant.”

“As you wish, sir,” the lieutenant responded, gesturing for the admiral to lead the way.

Admiral Yamori walked calmly across the room and down the corridor, the four men following close behind. He reached a side entrance to his office and entered, the lieutenant and one of his subordinates following the admiral inside.

The admiral walked behind his desk and took his seat. “I accept my own fate, Lieutenant,” the admiral said as he opened his desk drawer.

“Slowly, sir,” the lieutenant warned, his left hand up and his right hand on his sidearm hanging from his belt.

Admiral Yamori’s eyes darted quickly from one man to the next, noting that both of them were poised and ready to

draw their weapons. He also knew that special operations soldiers never missed and always shot to kill.

“Relax, Lieutenant,” the admiral said, pulling a small metallic container from his desk. He popped the lid open and tipped the container to empty its contents onto the desk. A small, red capsule fell out of the container. The admiral picked it up between his thumb and forefinger, showing it to the lieutenant. “As I was saying, I accept my own fate. However, I do question that of my staff. Most of them know nothing of the projects that we manage here. Are their deaths really necessary?”

“That’s none of my concern, Admiral,” the lieutenant replied coldly. “I’m just here to carry out my orders, and that is exactly what I intend to do.”

“No shades of gray, huh?”

“No, sir. No loose ends.”

The admiral held the pill up to his mouth. “Good luck, Lieutenant. You and your ilk are going to need it.” The admiral placed the pill between his back teeth and bit down hard, breaking the capsule open. He could taste the bitter liquid as it oozed out of the capsule and spread through his mouth. He tried not to swallow, as if refusing to ingest the vile poison would save him.

The lieutenant watched with professional detachment as the admiral’s face began to grow pale once more. He looked at his watch, checking the amount of elapsed time. The seconds went by sluggishly, as the admiral slowly began to fade away. The old man’s eyelids drooped. His eyes rolled upward and back, and his head fell backward against the tall back of his office chair. His body went limp, his arms dangling at his sides. His mouth hung open, and he began to drool as his respirations slowed.

The lieutenant watched for several minutes before moving behind the desk and checking the admiral's carotid pulse. As he pulled his fingers away from the admiral's neck, he nodded at his subordinate. The ensign came around the desk as well and also checked the admiral's pulse, nodding his confirmation of the admiral's passing to the lieutenant.

As they moved toward the exit, the lieutenant tapped his comm-set in his ear and spoke. "S-P actual secured."

A small, black, unmarked airship sat on the street outside the Special Projects headquarters building, its engines idling. The spec-ops lieutenant and his three men exited the front door of the building and moved briskly and confidently to the airship. As soon as the four men were aboard, the airship lifted, swiftly climbing ten meters into the air and speeding off at top speed into the night. As soon as the airship disappeared, the Special Operations building exploded, sending debris flying high up into the air, scattering out in all directions, and leaving a massive, flaming crater where the building had once stood.

* * *

President Scott sat at the back of the underground command bunker deep below the now devastated North American Union capitol building in Winnipeg. For more than an hour, he had watched two tactical maps on the wall. One monitored the defense activity of the NAU forces on the North American continent. The other monitored the EDF forces around the world. Over the last ten minutes, more blue icons had winked out of existence than during the entire hour preceding it. Both maps were covered with

thousands of red triangles of various shapes and numerical designations.

The president bolted upright when all of the blue icons on the world map representing EDF forces began blinking white. "What's going on?" he asked as he stood.

"EDF has just issued a surrender order to all forces," General Bergeron said as he approached the president. "They've also transmitted the code word 'Buckeye'."

"What's 'Buckeye'?" the president wondered. "What does that mean?"

"It's a code word," the general said.

"Sir," the president's lead protective agent said, "we need to get you to a more secure location."

"What?" the president asked, confused. "We're in a bunker a hundred meters underground. How much more secure can we get?"

"A bunker hundreds of people know about, sir," the agent insisted.

"Sir!" one of the communications technicians called out. "We've lost all contact with Fleet Command! No comms, no telemetry, nothing!"

"He's right, Mister President," the general agreed.

President Scott looked at General Bergeron, wondering why the general wasn't more concerned about the communications technician's report. "What's going on here? What's 'Buckeye'?"

"I'll brief you on the way, sir," the general said as he moved behind the president and his lead agent to grab his briefcase. "We need to get moving while our forces are still active and the Jung are..."

The general never finished his sentence. Shots rang out, ricocheting off walls and consoles and slamming into the bodies of officers, technicians, and protective agents. At

least twenty gunshots were fired from one automatic weapon.

One of the bullets entered the general's back, passed through his torso, and came out the left side of his chest. It continued flying until it struck the president's lead protective agent in the left triceps. The force of the impact spun the agent to the right, and the next bullet fired hit the president in his back, passing through his lung and exiting just below his right shoulder, sending him falling forward.

The gunfire stopped.

The president's lead protective agent was already on the floor, his left triceps bleeding. The general's lifeless body was lying nearly on top of him, covering his legs and left hip.

The shooter, one of the president's protective agents, pressed the release button on his weapon, dropping the empty magazine to the floor and replacing it with another.

The president's lead protective agent pushed the general's body off him and got to his knees, positioning himself between the shooter and the president, who lay on the floor just past him, moaning in pain but still alive. The agent pulled his weapon to return fire as the shooter opened up again, spraying the kneeling agent in the chest and knocking him backward on top of the president. The shooter stepped forward as he fired in order to get a clear shot at his primary target, the President of the North American Union.

The shooter stopped firing, bent over, and pulled the dead agent's body from atop the president.

President Scott, barely conscious, turned his head toward the weapon now pointed at his face. More shots rang out, and the shooter's body jerked several times as it fell to the side, just missing the president as he tumbled to the floor.

The room filled with more protective agents and soldiers as they swarmed in, weapons drawn. Agents shouted, "Clear," as they checked the room for more threats but found none. Someone hollered, "Medics!"

Within seconds, combat medics were at President Scott's side, cutting away the clothing from his upper body.

"We need to treat on the move!" one of the nearby protective agents ordered.

"Just let me get a line first!" one of the medics demanded as he applied a tourniquet to the president's arm and started slapping at the inside of his elbow. As his partner placed an oxygen mask over the president's face, the medic slid an IV needle into the president's arm.

"We've got more wounded over here!" another agent called out.

"Get the gurney ready!" one of the medics ordered.

"Is transport standing by?" an agent asked.

"In the tunnel and ready to roll!" someone answered.

"Which hospital?" one of the medics asked.

"No hospitals!" the agent in charge insisted.

"He needs surgery!" the medic argued.

"Don't worry; he'll get it," the agent insisted.

"Where are we going?" the medic asked as they lifted the president onto the gurney.

"You don't need to know," the agent in charge told him. "Just keep him alive until we get there. That's all you have to worry about."

* * *

Jung forces marched confidently across the airfield tarmac. Buildings burned in the distance, sending plumes of smoke high into the night sky. The main capitol building

stood in the midst of the ruins, relatively unscathed by the battle that had been fought around it only minutes before. Jung gunships patrolled the perimeter, maintaining a constant guard as they searched for any lingering combatants still foolish enough to offer resistance. Jung combat squads captured Earth soldiers across the compound, herding them toward a hastily assembled detention area. The United Earth Republic's main compound, the symbol of the Earth's unified effort to protect themselves against Jung invasion, was now under their control.

The Jung squad walked up to the North American Union's backup presidential shuttle. The officer in charge of the squad opened a small panel on the side of the shuttle and activated the boarding ramp, which deployed slowly out of the side of the shuttle directly below its port boarding hatch.

The officer proceeded up the ramp, followed by his men. He opened the hatch and stepped inside, turning to head forward to the main passenger compartment of the multi-level shuttle. He and his men walked confidently up the aisle of the main cabin, coming to stop in front of the shuttle's only passenger.

"Mister Scott, I presume?" the Jung officer asked in heavily accented English.

Eli Scott turned his head and looked at the officer. The officer was young with pale skin and light brown hair. His eyes were steely blue and confident. He was dressed in the same combat armor as the rest of his men, only he did not carry a supply pack on his back, nor did he carry the same energy rifle as the others.

"Yes, I'm Eli Scott," Eli answered.

"If you will accompany me, sir?" the officer said, extending his hand to point back toward the exit.

"It's about time," Eli mumbled as he rose.

* * *

"Coming up on 23:30 Earth Mean Time in thirty seconds," Ensign Souza announced.

The Celestia had been burning her main engines for nearly ten minutes.

"What's our speed, Mister Delaveaga?" Lieutenant Commander Kovacic asked.

"Just passing one hundred fifteen kilometers per second, sir," Luis answered.

"That doesn't sound good."

"Coming up on end of burn," Ensign Souza interrupted. "In three.....two.....one.....mark."

Luis pressed the main engine cutoff button on his console. The low rumble of the Celestia's main propulsion system that had been reverberating through their mostly empty hull went quiet. "Mains are off."

"Put our underside toward Earth again," the lieutenant commander instructed Luis. "Comms, tell engineering to take the reactors back down to idle until further notice. It's time to go dark and cold again."

"Aye, sir."

"At our current speed, how long will it take us to clear the system?" Lieutenant Commander Kovacic asked Luis.

"Uh, not in our lifetime, sir," Luis answered.

"You're kidding."

"Sir, at our current speed, it will take us more than two months just to reach the orbit of Jupiter. So the edge of the system? Maybe a few hundred years."

The lieutenant commander looked disappointed. "What the hell? I thought these Explorer-class ships were supposed

to be fast.”

“They are,” one of the civilian technicians said, “when they’re finished.”

“We’ve got all four engines, don’t we? How much more finished does she need to be to get up to a significant fraction of light speed?”

“All four engines are installed,” the technician explained, “but only two of them are operational, and they still need to be fully tested and calibrated. Until they are, their output is significantly less than their design maximum. If they had been burning at their true full power, the little bit of fuel we had on board only would have lasted a minute or two.”

“So we’re just supposed to cold-coast and hope the Jung don’t find us?” the lieutenant commander said.

“Sir,” Ensign Schenker at the sensor station began, “the odds of us being detected by the Jung while cold-coasting is pretty low. Even at our current range from Earth, the amount of visible light and solar radiation that our underside is reflecting is so minimal it would take a concentrated effort on a fixed point in space to detect us. In other words, they’d have to know where to look to even see us.”

“You’re sure about that?”

“Yes, pretty sure, sir,” the ensign said, “and the further out we are, the more difficult we are to find.”

“What about patrols? Search parties?”

“Once we get far enough out, it would take a thousand ships to find us,” the ensign insisted.

“If the Jung had *that* many ships, there would be no *use* in fighting them,” Luis said.

The lieutenant commander sat back in the command chair for a moment, thinking. “That’s why they put us on a specific course instead of just telling us to run for it,” he

realized, “so they could find us later?” The lieutenant commander scratched the side of his face. “That just doesn’t add up.”

Luis turned to face the lieutenant commander. “Sir, what *is* our mission, anyway?”

“All I know is that we were to wait for the data cores to arrive, then use whatever Fleet personnel we could find to take the ship out of port and head on the course I gave you. Once we got up to the assigned speed, we were to cold-coast and hide from the Jung until Fleet contacted us with further instructions.”

“Data cores?” Luis asked.

“From the Data Ark.”

“Who did the orders come from?” Luis asked.

“Admiral Galiardi himself,” the lieutenant commander said. “I almost pissed myself when he appeared on the comm screen.”

“Why the cores?” Luis wondered.

“He said there was far more technology in them. They don’t know if the Jung are more or less advanced than the technology still on those cores, and they don’t want to take the chance that they aren’t.”

“And if the Jung find us?” Ensign Schenker asked.

“We’re supposed to destroy the ship and the cores. They told me to rig the containment bottles on the antimatter reactors to fail. They said that would do it.”

“How long are we supposed to wait out here?” Ensign Souza wondered.

“As long as it takes,” the lieutenant commander said. “Hopefully not too long. Once they repel the invasion, they’ll probably send someone after us.”

“I’m assuming they gave us food and water,” Luis said.

“Yeah, enough to last months, maybe years. Loaded them myself, remember?”

An alert tone on the communications console announced an incoming message. Ensign Souza turned back around. “Incoming message, sir. It’s from Fleet.” The ensign suddenly froze as if in a state of shock. “Oh, my God.” He turned back around. “Fleet just surrendered.”

“What?” Luis said.

“What exactly did they say?” Ensign Schenker asked.

Lieutenant Commander Kovacic nodded at the ensign on the communications console.

“All units, Buckeye. Lay down all arms and stand down. This is a surrender. Repeat, Buckeye. Lay down all arms and stand down. This is a surrender.”

“What the hell is ‘Buckeye’?” Luis asked.

“I’m pretty sure it’s a code word,” Ensign Souza said, “maybe to authenticate the surrender order.”

“Have you ever heard of it, sir?” Luis asked the lieutenant commander.

“No, never.”

“I wonder what it means,” Luis said.

The lieutenant commander slumped back in his command chair and sighed. “It means we’re going to be out here a lot longer than we thought.”

CHAPTER TEN

Jessica pressed the button on the presentation remote, bringing the lights in the Aurora's command briefing room back to full intensity as the projections on the far wall faded away.

Nathan sat at his usual position at the head of the conference table, leaning back in his chair after watching Lieutenant Commander Nash's presentation. "And the entire invasion all occurred in the course of only a few hours?" His tone implied disbelief on his part.

"Yes, sir," Jessica said confidently.

"How can you tell?" Abby wondered.

"Fleet Command constantly broadcasts a time signal so that all ships in space can keep their clocks synchronized to Earth Mean Time," Cameron explained. "Even at speeds below one percent the speed of light, some amount of time dilation does occur for ships on patrol."

"Most of the comm signals we gathered were time stamped as well," Jessica added. "It took a little calculation, but we were able to piece together the timeline to a reasonable degree of accuracy. There are still some pieces missing, but as far as how the Jung were able to successfully defeat the Earth's defenses, we've pretty much figured it out."

"I'm confused," Nathan said. "Didn't we see the OAP on long-range optical sensors when we first returned?"

“After closer analysis we determined it was not the Orbital Assembly Platform,” Lieutenant Yosef explained. “It was something that was similar in structure and size. We have yet to determine what it was.”

“The most important thing we learned is why someone sent us those coordinates,” Jessica added. “Why they wanted us to look from that particular angle.”

“Maybe they wanted to ensure that we would see that the *Celestia* escaped before the OAP was destroyed,” Vladimir suggested.

“Exactly,” Jessica said, pointing a finger at Vladimir. “From most of the obvious approach angles, her original escape burn would have been obscured by either the destruction of the OAP or the nuclear detonations that the *Intrepid* used to hide the *Celestia*’s escape from the nearby Jung ships in Earth’s orbit.” Jessica looked at Nathan and Cameron. “The question is: why did they want us to see it?”

“Obviously, the sender of the second message wanted us to go after her, to rescue her crew,” Cameron said as if stating the obvious.

“That’s no doubt part of it,” Nathan agreed, “but there’s more to it. The sender of the second message wanted us to rescue the ship itself, to use it to fight the Jung, to liberate the Earth.”

“A bit of a reach, isn’t it?” Cameron countered. “They didn’t even know we were still alive until we suddenly appeared in the system and hailed them.”

“Perhaps,” Nathan said. “But whoever sent that second message decided quickly enough to send us after her. Think about it; if Fleet just wanted to keep the *Celestia* out of the hands of the Jung, why put it on a course out into deep space? And why go to such great pains to hide her escape *from* the Jung? She can’t be complete yet. She was six

months behind us in her build schedule when we left, and we were still two months from completion. If she had been completed, she would have been used to help defend the Earth. If they just wanted to keep it from being captured, they could've just blown it up, or blasted it toward the sun. There's something else going on here. There's something either on that ship, or in that ship, that they want to protect... that they want *us* to protect."

There was a long, tense silence as everyone in the briefing room contemplated their captain's assertions.

"There's still one other possibility," Jessica said, interrupting the uncomfortable silence. She waited for both Nathan and Cameron to look her way before continuing. "It could be a trap."

Again, there was silence in the room.

"How would that even be possible?" Cameron wondered, breaking the silence. "We appear, and they suddenly hatch a plan to trap us?"

"The warning message and the message telling us where to look were two different transmissions," Jessica explained. "The first message warned us that it was a trap, and maybe it was. But maybe the trap wasn't for us. Maybe it was for the Celestia."

"But the sender called us by name," Cameron said.

"Probably because we had just announced ourselves," Nathan reminded her, "something that, in retrospect, I probably shouldn't have done."

"If the trap wasn't meant for us, then that means they knew that the Celestia had escaped."

"It also means they don't know where she went," Nathan added.

"At least they didn't at the time," Jessica said. "It's been more than two weeks since we reappeared over Earth. For

all we know, the Jung have already found the Celestia and are setting up another trap... this time for us.”

“But you said Fleet went to great lengths to hide the Celestia’s escape from the Jung,” Nathan argued.

“We were able to see that she escaped,” Jessica said. “Why couldn’t the Jung?”

“We knew when and where to look,” Cameron said, “and from what angle.”

“What if they intercepted the same message, the second one that came just before we jumped away? Or what if they already had their suspicions about the Celestia’s demise, or someone on Earth talked? They’re smart enough to look from other angles. If so, they could have seen her escape just as easily as we did.”

“She’s right,” Cameron admitted, “and it has been nearly three weeks since we received that second message. That’s plenty of time for them to set up a trap, assuming they also knew about the Celestia’s escape.”

“At the very least,” Jessica said, “it’s safer to assume that it *is* a trap than it is to assume it’s not.”

The room again became silent.

“So, the Jung want us to go after the Celestia so they can try to ambush us again?” Nathan finally asked.

“To capture or destroy us,” Jessica explained. “Either outcome would be acceptable to them.”

“How would that even work?” Nathan asked. “How would they spring such a trap? Surely they must realize that we would scuttle the ship rather than let them have the jump drive.”

“Agreed,” Jessica answered. “If I were running the trap, it would be from inside the Celestia. You’d have to have a mole on the Celestia. Otherwise they wouldn’t be able to get anywhere near it. I’m sure the Celestia has orders to scuttle

as well. And we'd spot any ships in the area long before we got close to her. So a direct ambush on *us* is out. They'd have to try something from inside, like a mole or a hidden boarding party... something we wouldn't expect."

Nathan leaned forward, putting his elbows on the table and his face in his hands. "Damn," he mumbled as he rubbed his face. "I don't suppose you can offer me any kind of probability factor on this."

"Too many variables, sir. I'd be making a wild guess at best," Jessica insisted.

Nathan sighed. "I don't see as we have much choice, really."

"Sir, I may not be able to offer you odds on whether or not it's a trap, but I *can* tell you that the odds are in our favor when it comes to avoiding a trap. If there *is* a boarding party hidden on board the *Celestia*, we'll be ready for them."

"She's right," Cameron interrupted. "The *Jung* would be under the impression that we only have a crew of one hundred. They have no idea we're fully staffed."

"And that we have a platoon of heavily armed *Corinari* on board," Jessica added with a smile.

"Even if they were dumb enough to try a direct ambush, and a bunch of *Jung* ships came out of *FTL* at once, we'd still be able to jump away in an instant," Cameron said.

"We can detain the *Celestia*'s crew and interrogate them one by one," Jessica added. "If there's a mole on that crew, we'll find him, sir."

"Okay, so we take the chance," Nathan said. "I get that. Can we find her?"

"We have her course," Jessica explained. "It's reasonable to assume that *Fleet* either wanted the *Celestia* to stay on a particular course, or that the chosen course would

eventually take her someplace they wanted her to be. The fact that they wanted us to see her departure implies that they wanted us to see her course as well.”

“Makes sense,” Cameron agreed. “There’s still one problem, though.”

“We don’t have the propellant to go chasing after them,” Nathan said, finishing her thought for her. “We’re going to have to solve that problem first.”

“I still recommend we make contact with the resistance on Tanna,” Jessica said, “through the guy Josh and Loki met, Garrett. I think there’s a good chance he would know where the Jung might store propellant. At least it’s better than a blind search. Besides, we already have good intelligence on the Jung assets in that system, so we wouldn’t be going in completely blind.”

“Agreed,” Nathan said. “Do you still want to take Loki with you?”

“Yes, Loki should go, but not with me. I think Major Waddell should go with him.”

Nathan looked confused. “I thought you wanted to go.”

“I do, but someone needs to go to Earth to make contact with the resistance there. They need to know we’re out here. We need a way to communicate, coordinate our efforts, and share intelligence. I am the most qualified person on board for this mission.”

“Who are you going to take with you?” Nathan asked.

“No one, sir. I was trained to work alone.”

“That sounds risky,” Nathan protested.

“I have to agree,” Cameron added.

“Waddell has training in covert ops, and Loki already knows the contact on Tanna. It makes sense that they go as a team. If I took someone with me, it would have to be

someone from Earth, and no one on board has the right training. I'd be at greater risk if I had to babysit someone."

Nathan sighed again. There was a lot to think about and very little time to mull things over. "All right, assume for the moment that we're going to put you on Earth and Waddell and Loki on Tanna. How do we do it?"

Cameron pulled out the control panel on the side of the conference table and activated the holographic display system built into the table. A holographic image of the Sol sector appeared, glowing brightly as it floated above the table. "This is the Sol sector and the fifty light years around it," she explained as she slid the control rings over the thumb and forefinger on each of her hands and stood. She reached out and began manipulating the holographic image in front of them, using her hands to rotate the image and zoom in. "This is Sol," she explained as she zoomed in and rotated the image so they were looking down at the star and its ecliptic plane. "We're about here," she explained, touching the thumb and forefinger of her right hand together as she pointed at the location. An icon representing the Aurora appeared in the hologram.

"How did...?" Nathan began in amazement.

"Takaran upgrades," Cameron answered, cutting him off with the slightest of smiles. She used her finger to draw a line from the icon representing the Aurora to Earth. "We're already on a course to just miss Earth. We'll have to do a small deceleration burn first, as our current speed is a bit fast for Earth orbit. Then a slight course correction will put us on a trajectory that would allow us to jump in and immediately achieve orbit. Overall propellant expenditure should be minimal."

"How do we get her on the ground?" Nathan wondered. "*Covertly*, I mean."

“I could space jump,” Jessica suggested.

Nathan didn't like the idea but said nothing. The idea of jumping from orbit and falling to a planet below just didn't seem right, despite the fact that she and others had done so successfully in the past.

“That's what I was thinking,” Cameron agreed. “After Lieutenant Commander Nash jumps, we loop around the planet just enough to put us on a trajectory for the Barnard system.” Cameron continued her first line around the Earth and outward, pausing to zoom out and reveal more stars before continuing the line to Barnard's star. “Once there, we do another sling shot to put us on course for 72 Herculis. We can jump in close enough that it's only a few short jumps to Tanna by jump shuttle. This should all take us another week, by which time the jump shuttle should be back up and operational. Right, Lieutenant Commander?” Cameron paused, looking at Vladimir, her last question directed at him.

“Uh, yes, of course,” he answered, caught off guard.

“We coast and wait for them to return, then decide what to do about our propellant problem based on whatever intel Loki and Waddell bring us.”

“What about Jessica?” Nathan asked. “Are we just going to leave her on Earth?”

“Of course not,” Cameron said. “With recharge times and whatnot, it will take us several days, if not weeks, to make this work. I'd have to plot all this out before I could give you an exact timeline. But I'm sure Lieutenant Commander Nash will have plenty of time to complete her mission before we return.”

“And if for some reason it takes us considerably longer than expected?” Nathan asked.

“I’ll just find a nice beach somewhere and wait patiently,” Jessica said, smiling.

Nathan couldn’t help but smile back, especially when he considered the image of Jessica sunbathing on a tropical beach clad in a skimpy bathing suit, if anything at all.

“We can always send the jump shuttle to retrieve her,” Cameron said.

“Or the Falcon, for that matter,” Vladimir added. “She will probably be ready by then as well.”

Nathan sighed yet again. “I have to tell you, I’m not crazy about the idea of leaving someone behind on Earth while we go jumping out forty-some-odd light years away for weeks at a time. The Earth is occupied by enemy forces, remember? It’s not going to be a vacation. However, it does seem to be the best plan. Furthermore, if all goes well, it will accomplish our three most immediate goals: getting propellant, making contact with the resistance on Earth, and rescuing the Celestia.”

“Not to mention that the Earth resistance might have intel that would help us determine whether or not there is a trap waiting for us on board the Celestia,” Jessica pointed out.

“Another good point,” Nathan agreed. He turned to Cameron. “Plot this all out, Commander, then coordinate with the lieutenant commander, Major Waddell, and Loki.”

* * *

Nathan made his way down the ramp from the command deck to the operations deck on his way to personally check on Lieutenant Montgomery’s progress with the upgraded jump drive that he was installing on another of their shuttles. Normally, he would receive updates from his

executive officer, Commander Taylor, but Cameron needed time to plan their upcoming missions with his security chief, Lieutenant Commander Nash.

It was also an opportunity for Nathan to stretch his legs and walk the ship, something he hadn't done much over the last few weeks as they had cold-coasted through space gathering signals about the Jung invasion two months earlier. He had spent most of his time cooped up on the command deck, thinking of ways to fight the Jung, both in the Sol system and throughout the entire core, if it came to that. He had begun to feel like a hermit, bouncing from ready room to quarters to captain's mess.

The upgraded jump shuttle concept held particular interest to Nathan, as every scenario he ran lacked the same thing: resources. People, equipment, materials, and fabricators, just to mention a few. They were a single ship packed full of supplies and ordnance to be sure, but still a ship. They needed a support base, somewhere people could live and work in support of the operations of the Aurora. In the Pentaurus cluster, they had Corinair. Battered as it was, there had still been people and an industrial base. They had even possessed a spaceport in the Karuzara asteroid that was nearly perfect for making repairs to his ship. He had not realized how important those factors were until he tried to plan a campaign without them. It made him realize why terrorists acted as desperately as they did at times, as they, too, had no support base to speak of.

He wondered if that was how the Jung would see his ship and his crew, as terrorists. Did they believe they had a rightful claim to the Earth simply because they were powerful enough to assert it? It certainly would not be the first time that such a claim was made. Nathan's studies of

Earth history had taught him countless examples of exactly such claims, both pre- and post-plague.

As Nathan continued down the corridor toward the main hangar deck, he made a mental note to himself to see to it that whoever made the trip back to the Pentaurus cluster to seek assistance should make it known that, above all else, they needed support infrastructure—specifically the kind with which they could set up a base of operations.

Nathan's train of thought was interrupted by his comm-set.

"Captain, medical," Doctor Chen's voice called over this comm-set.

"Go ahead, Doctor," Nathan answered.

"You should probably come to medical, sir."

"What is it?"

"It's Josh, sir... He's awake."

"On my way," Nathan answered, smiling.

* * *

Nathan found himself looking into Josh's open eyes. "It's about time," Nathan said as he approached Josh's bed. He couldn't stop the grin that was forming on his face, even if he had wanted to.

"Sorry, sir," Josh said in a gravelly voice. "I guess I just needed some time off."

"Take all the time you need, Josh. We're still fixing your ship, so you've got some time still. How are you feeling?"

"Tired, a headache, I think. Leastways, I feel like there's something going on in there that isn't usual."

Marcus came in and stepped up next to the captain, looking at Josh with a wide grin. He looked at the captain

and jabbed him in the side with his elbow. "You see? I told you he was hard to kill..."

Nathan favored his right side slightly as the senior chief's elbow jabbed him. "Yes, you did, Senior Chief."

"Oh, uh... Sorry, sir," Marcus said, realizing he was overstepping his bounds, especially under the new, stricter disciplinary guidelines being enforced by Commander Taylor. He tried for a moment to stand stoically, but he failed miserably, bursting out in a loud guffaw.

Nathan patted the senior chief on the back. "It's quite all right, Marcus. I feel the same way."

"Damn you, kid!" Marcus suddenly bellowed. "You scared the shit outta me!" The senior chief's laughter returned, sweeping away his sudden anger just as quickly as it had come.

Loki was next to enter, smiling at the sight of his best friend with his eyes open and being yelled at by Marcus. For the first time in weeks, things were getting back to normal.

"I'll talk to you later, Josh," Nathan told him as he turned toward Doctor Chen. "Doc?" he called, gesturing for her to follow him into the next room.

Nathan and the doctor quietly exited the treatment area, going into the entry foyer as Loki and Josh began talking. "So he's going to be okay then?" Nathan asked as soon as they were out of earshot of the others.

"Well, the fact that he is conscious is a good sign," the doctor began, "but we won't know if he'll have a full recovery for some time yet."

"When will you know for sure? I mean, he looks pretty good, considering what he went through."

"Mentally, he'll probably be fine," the doctor agreed. "I'm more concerned about his motor skills. Josh is an instinctive pilot. Such people have differences in their neural pathways

that contribute to their abilities. It will take time for us to know if those pathways healed without losing any of those capabilities that give him his unique piloting abilities.”

“If you had to guess...”

“Like I said, the fact that he is awake and talking normally is a good sign. Give it a few days, Captain,” the doctor urged. “By then, he’ll be stronger, and we can conduct a few tests.”

“Of course,” Nathan said. “Nice work, Doc.”

“Congratulate the Corinairans,” Doctor Chen insisted. “It was their nanites that saved him.”

* * *

Nathan entered the port repair bay at the aft end of the port-side fighter alley. There were at least a dozen men hard at work on both the Falcon and the jump shuttle that had been disassembled by Lieutenant Montgomery and his team of Takaran scientists for the purpose of testing the mini-ZPEDs with the shuttle’s jump drive.

The bay was originally designed to allow the complete tear-down of two EDF fighters simultaneously. Both the Falcon and the jump shuttle were considerably larger than a standard EDF fighter, which made for a very cramped repair bay.

Nathan ducked under the Falcon’s wing-body in order to get between the two ships as he moved toward the back of the repair bay in search of Vladimir. Once he reached the back wall and looked to the sides, he found the big Russian hunched over a workbench, a welding hood over his head and a plasma welder in his hand. Nathan shielded his eyes from the intense light as he approached, taking care to stay

clear of the sparks and to not disrupt his chief engineer's work.

"Vlad!" he called out once the plasma torch in the man's hands died out.

The Russian looked from side to side, forgetting that he was wearing a hood with a darkened visor. He lifted the visor and saw his friend and captain. "Nathan! What are you doing here?"

Nathan held up a food box in his hand. "Lunch!"

"Excellent!" Vladimir set down his welder and took off his helmet. "Finish this weld," he told the nearest technician, "then give it to Jalvers." Vladimir took off his heavy gloves and placed them on the bench. "Let's eat!" he told Nathan, gesturing for him to follow.

Vladimir led Nathan into the small office at the inboard aft corner of the bay, shutting the door after they entered to reduce the noise coming from the repair bay. "What did you bring me?" Vladimir asked.

Nathan was always amused by the amount of joy his friend took at eating. "Your favorite, dollag and keiber root."

"Ah," Vladimir exclaimed as he opened the box and took a seat at the desk. "Meat and potatoes!"

"I thought the shuttle was being worked on in the starboard repair bay," Nathan said.

"We had to move it over here," Vladimir explained as he shoveled his first bite of dollag into his mouth. "Montgomery said there was too much risk of mixing up parts or something." Vladimir shoveled the potato-like keiber root in his mouth as well, not stopping to chew before he continued talking. "I think he just wanted more room to work."

"Yeah, it's kind of tight in there."

Vladimir looked at Nathan, noticing that he had not brought a box of food for himself. "You're not eating?"

"I already ate."

"How did you know I was hungry?"

"When are you not hungry, Vlad?"

Vladimir nodded his agreement as he took another bite of dollag meat.

"So, how go the repairs?" Nathan asked, making small talk.

"You mean since I gave you a report four hours ago?"

"Humor me."

"Everything is installed. We just have to put all the access panels back in place, reconnect the control conduits, and put the seats and benches back in. Then, of course, we must test everything."

"Then it will be ready soon?"

"Two days," Vladimir promised, taking a swig of water. "Three at the most."

"I was kind of hoping it would be ready sooner."

"I am good, Nathan, but I am also careful—especially with ships that can jump a light year at a time. Don't forget; Abby has to sign off on the jump drive systems as well. That's where the fun begins." Vladimir rolled his eyes as he scooped up the last of his food.

Nathan looked at the empty box. After all of the meals he had shared with his friend, he was still amazed at how fast the man could eat. "Yeah, I was hoping I wouldn't have to take the ship back into harm's way without propellant."

"What are you worried about?" Vladimir wondered. "You jump in, Jessica jumps off, you jump out, da?"

"Not exactly. Jessica thinks we should attack a few Jung installations on the surface, make it look like a probing raid. She thinks that if we just jump in and jump out, it will make them suspicious and make it more difficult for her to get down to the surface and disappear into the population."

“Then we jump in, she jumps off, we fire and blow up a few things, then we jump out.”

“We have to wait until we travel far enough around the planet so that we line up with our next gravity assist target.”

“How long will that take?” Vladimir wondered.

“About fifteen minutes.”

Vladimir’s expression changed for the worse. “That is a long time, especially in orbit over an enemy-held planet.”

Nathan sighed. “It still feels weird to think of it that way. The Earth, our world, controlled by the Jung.” Nathan thought for a moment. “Do you ever wonder about your family? How they’re doing? If they’re even alive?”

“My father died more than a decade ago,” Vladimir said. “My mother moved in with her sister. They live in a small dacha in a village about three hours east of Moscow. There is nothing there that would interest the Jung. I’m sure they are fine.” Vladimir chuckled. “Besides, I pity the Jung soldier that runs into my mother.” He looked at Nathan, who still looked pensive. “You think about your family, yes? Your parents, your brothers and sisters?”

“Parents and sisters, yeah. My brother, not so much. He’s the oldest, and I’m the youngest. We never hung out much, never really got along. I mean, it’s not like I wish him dead or anything. You know what I mean.”

“I have a cousin like that. If he disappeared tomorrow, no tears of mine would be shed.”

Nathan wondered if he would cry over his brother’s death. It seemed unlikely, and that somehow made him feel guilty.

“So, you are worried that we might get into more trouble than we can handle if we stay in orbit so long,” Vladimir said. “Why? If things get too bad, you jump early and we

deal with the problem after we are safe again. There are thousands of planets out there, Nathan. I'm sure we can find something we can line up with to make a turn. So we have to jump a few more times than we thought? No problem! Not every mission must go exactly as it is planned. Hey, it's better than putting more holes in our ship!"

"You have a knack for making every problem seem simple."

"It is a gift," Vladimir said, shrugging his shoulders as he rose from his seat. "Now go; I have work to do. My captain wants his jump ships back."

* * *

Commander Taylor entered the captain's ready room, her data pad in hand as usual. "Captain?" she called from just inside the hatch. She waited for Nathan to look up from his display. "I've finished the mission planning and course calculations."

"Come in. Let's take a look," Nathan said.

"I'm not interrupting, am I?" she asked, noticing that he had been deeply engrossed in whatever was on his view screen.

"No, please, I need the break," he insisted, rubbing his eyes. "Battle tactics and scenarios analysis can be really tedious and boring at times—especially if that's all you ever look at." He took the data pad she offered and began scanning the display, leafing through the pages.

"We'll need to do a minor course correction before we make our first jump, but the propellant use will be minimal. Once we jump into Earth orbit, it will take twelve minutes to reach our next jump point, the one that will take us to the Barnard system."

“Twelve minutes,” Nathan mumbled. “That’s a long time in orbit. How much resistance do you think we’ll encounter?”

“There are two ships in the system that we know of,” Cameron explained, “both cruisers. However, their positions as we see them are nearly two months old. One of them appeared to be parked at the moon’s L2 point. If she is still there, she wouldn’t be able to get into firing position on us before we jumped out. The other ship was near Mars. At sub-light speeds, she wouldn’t make it back in time either. Of course, keep in mind that we now know that their FTL systems are accurate enough to perform interplanetary FTL runs, so regardless of where a ship is, they could be back to Earth in minutes. The only advantage we have is that we will be on the backside of the planet in relation to those two ships—that is, if they are still in the same locations as they were two months ago, which is doubtful.”

“So what you’re saying is, you have no idea,” Nathan said.

“What I’m saying is, we have little to go on.”

“Well,” Nathan said, handing the data pad back to Cameron and leaning back in his chair, “I’d feel better if we did know, but as Vlad said, if we run into trouble, we can always jump away and figure it out afterward.”

“Not exactly what I would call a plan,” Cameron said. “There are other points along the orbit from which we could jump, but they all added more than a week to our transit time, because the systems were so far away.”

“Assuming we manage to make it to our prime jump point, what’s our transit time to 72 Herculis?” Nathan asked.

“Just over two days. Once in the Barnard system, we’ll have two options. We can make several orbits around the sole gas giant in the system in order to adjust our angle

relative to the galactic plane so we are on course directly to 72 Herculis, or we can jump out to any of three other systems and then make the adjustment there. It just depends on what we find in the Barnard system.”

“Anything in the Data Ark about it?”

“Nothing that we could find. Just the usual system and planetary survey stuff. There was never anything interesting enough in the system to warrant even a remote research outpost, let alone a colony. It’s doubtful the Jung have established anything there.”

“I don’t know. It’s only about six light years from Sol, so it’s not bad as a staging point for an attack on Earth.”

“For us, maybe, but for the Jung, it would take seven months to make the journey. Alpha Centauri is closer, has more resources, and already has an industrialized colony. I’m sure that’s why they took it first, to use as a staging point to attack us.”

“You’re probably right,” Nathan agreed. “So when do you want to get started?”

“Jessica is already down on the hangar deck suiting up.”

“That quickly, huh?” Nathan said, a bit surprised.

“To be honest, sir, I’d love to wait a week and use the shuttle, but cold-coasting through our own system while the Jung are about, and doing so with almost no propellant, makes me nervous.”

“You and me both, Commander.” Nathan looked at his watch. “I guess we’ll go as soon as Jess is ready,” he said, rising from his chair.

* * *

“Anyone care to tell me why you’re getting dressed in the hallway?” Nathan asked as he walked up to his security chief.

Jessica was standing near the port cargo hatch along with Lieutenant Montgomery and several Corinairan technicians. She was wearing something akin to the space-jump rigs they had used over Takara. This one, however, was considerably different. The torso was bigger and more complex. The entire rig seemed more like a miniature space ship, but with arms, legs, and a helmet.

“We decided to use the cargo hatch this time instead of the flight apron,” Jessica explained as two technicians slipped the jump rig’s main chute pack over her shoulders and secured it to the hard points on her suit.

“Why?”

Jessica shrugged, then looked at Lieutenant Montgomery. “Lieutenant?”

“When your people jumped over Takara, your orbit was considerably lower. That allowed the jumpers to use their maneuvering jets to move into position. The lieutenant commander will not have that luxury this time around. She will barely have adequate propellant to decelerate enough for her orbit to decay at the proper rate, let alone to adjust her entry angle. The cargo hatch is the most outboard exit that would work as a jump-off point. It is large enough for her to exit easily, and a very small blast of her thrusters will get her clear of the ship so she can begin deceleration.”

“I have a bet with these guys that I can get up enough speed to get clear by just running and jumping out the airlock,” Jessica said, a grin on her face.

“I see. So you think you can run with all that stuff on?” Nathan wondered.

“I’m gonna cheat,” she whispered with a wink.

“Gravity plating?” Nathan whispered back.

“Yup. I got Vlad to take it down to thirty percent in the airlock.” Jessica looked at the technicians, who were picking up her chest piece to bring over and attach next. She held her forefinger up to her lips as a signal to Nathan to keep her secret.

Nathan stepped aside to give the technicians more room as they positioned the chest piece and attached it. “This is a different rig than before,” he stated.

“Yes. The Corinairan rigs that your crew used to invade my world were based on an old Takaran design. At best, it had a sixty percent survival rate. This version, specifically designed for use by the Ghatazhak, has a ninety-two percent survival rate. We brought several of these with us from Takara.”

“It looks a little roomy,” Nathan said, noticing that the suit dwarfed Jessica somewhat.

“I guess the Ghatazhak are some big boys,” Jessica said.

“Yeah, so I heard. You’re not going to rattle around inside that thing, are you?” Nathan asked. “Could lead to a lot of bruising by the time you reach the ground.”

“I got it covered, skipper,” Jessica said. “I padded most of the empty space with all the stuff I need to take with me. I’ve got a knapsack, my old civilian NAU ID, and all my civilian clothes. I’ve even got that little number that I wore on Founders’ Day.” Jessica winked at him.

“Planning on seducing your way into the resistance?”

“Hey, a good operative plays to their strengths and uses *all* their resources.”

“Nice.” Nathan looked back at Lieutenant Montgomery, who looked perplexed by their conversation. “Are you sure this suit will work? Has it been tested?”

“While this particular unit may not have been tested, the design has been used in over one thousand combat jumps.”

“How many of those combat jumps were successful?” Nathan wondered.

“Ninety-two percent,” the lieutenant answered, puzzled as to why the captain would ask a question to which he already knew the answer. “Stop being such a mother hen, Skipper,” Jessica said. “Hey, they even reprogrammed the interface, so it’s in English this time.”

“Oh, then what am I so worried about?” Nathan said, jokingly. The technician stepped forth with Jessica’s helmet. Nathan looked at him. “Give us a minute.” Nathan waited for the technicians to step out of earshot before continuing. “You sure you want to do this?”

“Hey, I wasn’t kidding about that beach, you know. I brought my swimsuit as well.” Jessica saw the concern in Nathan’s eyes. “Jeez, you really do worry too much, you know that? It’s Earth, remember? I was trained to fit in and disappear into alien populations. Now I’m jumping into my own backyard. This is going to be easy; trust me.”

“You know I do,” Nathan said.

His voice was more serious than she could ever remember, and he was staring into her eyes. Jessica’s eyes darted back and forth, then her left eyebrow shot up. “You’re not gonna kiss me in front of all the foreigners, are you?”

“Just be careful,” Nathan said. “The Earth is probably crawling with Jung by now.”

“Hey, my plan is to avoid them like the plague,” Jessica said, smiling.

“Funny.”

“Just be sure to come back for me,” Jessica told him. “There’s still a whole lot of war to fight, and I don’t want to

miss out on all the action.”

“Don’t worry; I’ll be back as quickly as possible,” Nathan promised, stepping back.

“Not too quickly, Skipper,” she warned. “I need to work on my tan.”

Nathan stepped back farther to allow the technicians to place the helmet over Jessica’s head. He stood next to Lieutenant Montgomery.

“I’ve noticed a peculiar trait among Terrans,” the lieutenant began.

“Oh really? And what might that be?” Nathan asked.

“A tendency toward bravado and misplaced humor when facing grave danger.”

Nathan looked at the lieutenant. This time it was Nathan’s eyebrow that went up. “I thought you said that suit design had a ninety-two percent survival rate.”

“Oh, it does. I was referring to the beach she expects to lie on,” Lieutenant Montgomery stated in deadpan fashion.

Nathan looked at the lieutenant and smiled. “You’re learning, Lieutenant,” he said, patting him on the back. “Make sure she gets off the ship without any problems,” he added as he turned to depart.

“Of course, sir.”

Nathan stepped up to Jessica one last time. “Good luck. Send me a postcard when you get there.”

Jessica gave him a thumbs up gesture as he left, and the technicians locked her helmet into place.

* * *

“Captain on the bridge!” the guard at the hatch announced as Nathan entered the compartment.

“How are we looking?” Nathan asked Cameron as he made his way down to the command chair.

“We’ve adjusted our attitude so the cargo boarding hatch will be on a direct line with the lieutenant commander’s preferred reentry trajectory,” Cameron reported as she vacated the command chair and stepped to the left to make room for Nathan. “We’ve also made our course correction and completed our deceleration burn. We’re now down to eight kilometers per second, which should put us at an altitude of just under four hundred kilometers above Earth when we jump into orbit.”

“Twelve minutes, right?” Nathan asked as he took his place in the command chair.

“Twelve minutes and eighteen seconds, to be precise.”

“Twelve minutes and eighteen seconds,” Nathan repeated. “All right then.” Nathan tapped his comm-set. “Nash, Captain. How are you doing down there?”

“I’m entering the cargo airlock now,” Jessica answered. *“Give me a minute to depressurize, and I’ll be set.”*

“Understood. Bring me some sea shells,” he added jokingly.

“You bet.”

“Comms, set general quarters,” Nathan ordered.

“General quarters, aye.”

“I’ll be in combat,” Cameron announced. She headed for the exit as the general quarters alarm sounded.

“I trust that our next jump is plotted and locked, Mister Riley?”

“Yes, sir,” the navigator answered.

Nathan looked at the main view screen that wrapped around the forward section of the bridge. In a moment, it would be filled with the image of the Earth, the idea of

which made him nervous. Their last jump home had not gone as expected.

"All compartments report general quarters stations manned and ready, Captain," Naralena announced from the comm-center at the back of the bridge.

"Very well. Mister Riley, jump us in," Nathan ordered.

"Activating auto-nav," the navigator reported.

Indicator lights on the helmsman's console lit up momentarily. "Auto-nav is making final adjustments."

"Jumping in five....." the navigator reported.

"Nash, Captain. Stand by to jump," Nathan called over his comm-set.

"Four....."

"*Standing by,*" Jessica answered.

"Three....."

Nathan adjusted himself in his command chair, taking a deep breath and getting a firm grip, preparing himself for whatever happened when they came out of the jump.

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

The bridge filled with the blue-white light of the jump flash, which disappeared a split second later.

"Jump complete."

"Verifying attitude," Lieutenant Yosef announced. "Jumper has a clear shot," she reported a moment later.

"Jump complete," the navigator's voice announced through Jessica's helmet comms. She pressed the button on the hatch control console with her left hand. The outer hatch to the cargo airlock parted down the center and quickly slid open, disappearing into the bulkheads on either side. Her eyes grew wide, her breath quickened, and her pulse rate increased at the sight of the Earth slowly spinning below

them filling the entire hatchway. The planet was dark and mysterious, her night side lit with millions of lights on her surface clustered into groups that signified major population centers. She could see the Earth's terminator line to her far left, as the Aurora headed along its orbit toward the night side of the planet. Jessica realized that jumping off the flight apron of the Aurora had been much easier. That time, she had followed nine others, and they had jogged out across the apron and leapt into the air, floating out and away from the ship. This time, she was facing the planet below. The edge of the airlock seemed much like the edge of an incredibly high cliff, and that wasn't helping matters much.

"Nash, Captain... Jump, jump, jump!" Nathan's voice ordered over the comm-set.

As if by instinct, and without any hesitation, Jessica rocked backward and forward three times, then went galloping toward the exit. The lower gravity made it easy to move, even while carrying over ninety kilograms of space-jump gear. It was ten steps to the open hatchway, but they went by quickly. As she reached the edge of the airlock, she leapt out the open hatch, sailing off toward the dark planet below.

"Jumper away," Naralena reported. "Outer cargo airlock hatch is closed."

"Threat board?" Nathan asked.

"Threat board is clear," Mister Randeem reported from the tactical station directly behind the captain. "They haven't spotted us yet, sir."

"Lieutenant, how long until she's far enough away that we can change attitude?"

“She’s far enough away, now, sir,” Lieutenant Yosef answered from the sensor station. “Another minute and she’ll be astern of us.”

“Helm, adjust attitude relative to orbit. Nose first, topside toward the planet. I want all guns in play.”

“Aye, sir,” the helmsman answered. “Pitching and rolling.”

“Twelve minutes to primary jump point,” Mister Riley reported. “Six minutes to first alternate.”

Nathan watched the view screen as the darkened Earth below them shifted position, moving around the edge of the view screen until it came to rest above them, a dark arc across the top, its distant day-side terminator approaching.

“Maneuver complete,” Mister Chiles reported. “Attitude is nose first, topside toward the planet.”

“I assume you’re keeping a running escape jump plotted,” Nathan said to the navigator.

“Yes, sir,” Mister Riley answered. “Currently keeping a running plot on the first alternate jump point.”

“Tactical, is Lieutenant Commander Nash out of our firing lines?”

“As long as we’re firing forward, yes, sir.”

“Start looking for targets, Mister Randeem. Anything forward of us that looks like a threat. We should be over the North American Fleet Academy spaceport, so check there. The Jung may be using it for themselves.”

“Aye, sir.”

“Contacts!” Lieutenant Yosef reported from the sensor station. “Coming up from the surface. Probable missile launch. Transferring tracks to tactical.”

“Confirmed,” the tactical officer reported. “Eight surface-to-orbit missiles coming from launchers on the surface. Time to impact: five minutes.”

“The missile warheads are nuclear, Captain,” Lieutenant Yosef added.

“That launch site is your first target, Mister Randeem,” Nathan said.

“More contacts! Coming up from the surface again, this time from behind us,” the lieutenant said. “Sixteen contacts. Transferring to tactical.”

“Contacts are interceptors,” Mister Randeem reported from tactical. “They should be within reasonable engagement range in six minutes.”

“Can we defend against those interceptors with rail guns?” Nathan wondered.

“Doubtful, sir. Based on the performance data we got from the Falcon’s encounter with the Jung in the 72 Herculis system, those interceptors are fast and highly maneuverable. We might strike a few on approach, but if they start maneuvering, our rail guns won’t be able to track them and stay on target.”

“Those interceptors are also carrying nukes,” Lieutenant Yosef reported. “Small, low yield, tactical-type warheads.”

“Those missiles are probably designed to penetrate our hull,” Mister Randeem advised. “The Corinari anti-ship missiles were designed the same way, with delayed detonators so they would go off inside the hull. They weren’t nuclear, but they could do a lot of damage.”

“Then it’s a good bet that Jung anti-ship missiles are designed to work just as well,” Nathan agreed.

“Would you like to launch fighters, sir?” Mister Randeem asked.

“Not yet, not until they get closer,” Nathan told him. “I don’t want our fighters to get too far away from us. Too much risk that they’ll get left behind.”

“But those missiles...”

“Wait two minutes, then launch the first group,” Nathan ordered.

“Aye, sir,” Mister Randeem answered, taking note of the time.

“Combat reports quads are locked on the missile launch site. Firing now.”

“There are three more missile sites ahead, sir,” Lieutenant Yosef reported. “The next one will be in range in one minute.”

Jessica drifted silently away from the Aurora as the ship began showering the first surface target with its rail guns. The only sounds she could hear were those of her own breathing and the occasional *beeps* and *twirps* of her space-jump rig’s control computer. The suit was so big on her that it felt more like a tiny spacecraft than a suit. It reminded her of the tiny booths that the technicians used to build spacecraft at the OAP. They had still been out there, working away twenty-four hours per day, right up until the day the Aurora departed.

Several blips had appeared on her helmet visor display, indicating both missiles and fighters coming up from the surface. Her first instinct was to warn the Aurora, but she had to maintain radio silence. The Aurora could see the contacts; of that she was sure. She checked the countdown timer to her deceleration burn. Soon, her space-jump rig would automatically reorient itself so that her pack was facing in the direction she was traveling and fire its deceleration engine. Unlike the Corinari unit that she had used for her first space jump over Takara, this one did everything for her. All she had to do was hang on and enjoy the ride.

“Point-defenses are firing,” Mister Randeem announced. “Two minutes to missile impacts.”

Nathan watched the main view screen. The new tactical display system installed by the Takarans used icons directly on top of the visual image. Red triangles representing the incoming missiles appeared directly over the exterior view being fed to the screen from one of the Aurora’s many exterior cameras embedded in her hull. Numbers representing track designators, range, speed, and time to impact were listed alongside each icon. As each missile became close enough to see, the triangle changed from solid to an outline, with the white dot of the missile’s nose in the center.

Nathan continued to watch as each missile was struck by the fragmenting point-defense rounds and broke apart, their propellant tanks exploding, after which the red triangle and tracking information would vanish from the screen. It all seemed so effortless, and he couldn’t help but wonder if the improvements made to their rail guns, by first the Karuzari and then the Takarans, had made the difference. He also wondered if the Earth would still be free of the Jung if they had possessed such improvements when the Jung invaded.

“All incoming missiles have been destroyed,” Mister Randeem announced proudly as the last red triangle disappeared from the main view screen. “Quads have destroyed the first missile site.”

“Target the second site,” Nathan ordered. “Let’s see if we can eliminate it before it gets a chance to launch on us.”

“Aye, sir. Passing targeting instructions to combat.”

Nathan glanced at the time display on the lower right corner of the main view screen. “Green deck, Mister

Randeen. Launch fighters.”

“Green deck, aye,” Mister Randeen answered.

“Two minutes to first alternate jump point,” Mister Riley reported from the navigator’s station. “Eight minutes to primary.”

“Captain,” Naralena called out from the comm-center at the back of the bridge. “Flight is requesting you reverse our attitude before they launch.”

“Helm, flip us end over!”

“Pitching over, aye!” Mister Chiles answered.

Nathan noticed Lieutenant Montgomery stepping down to the auxiliary console on his left.

“I thought I might track Lieutenant Commander Nash’s descent,” the lieutenant announced.

Nathan nodded his agreement, and the lieutenant took his seat.

Major Prechitt scanned his displays as his fighter was lifted a few centimeters off the deck by the launch rail sleds clamped onto his wingtips. “Gear up. Gear doors closed. Mains and maneuvering hot. Talon One ready for launch.”

“*Copy, Talon One,*” the launch controller replied over the major’s helmet comms. “*Bay is depressed. Rails are hot. Launching in three.....*”

The outer door for the outboard starboard launch bay split in half where it met the launch rails on either side of the tube and began to part, the top half rising into the ceiling and the bottom half lowering into the deck.

“*Two.....*”

The door reached its fully open position, revealing a long, dimly lit tunnel that opened into space along the starboard side of the Aurora’s bow section.

"One....."

Major Prechitt grabbed the handrails on either side of his cockpit just below the canopy and held on tight.

"Launch."

The launch rails on either side of the tube became charged, and the shuttles clamped onto the wingtips of the major's fighter began to run down the rails toward the distant exit, pulling the fighter along with them. Blue energy glowed and sparked before and after the shuttles as they charged down the rails.

Major Prechitt was pushed back hard into his flight seat as his fighter sped down the tunnel. Four seconds later, he shot out the end of the tunnel and beyond the Aurora's bow. The speed indicator on his flight data display jumped dramatically as the Aurora's speed was added to the fighters speed at the moment it exited the launch tube. With the force of the launch catapult gone, the major let go of the handrails. He took his flight control stick in his right hand and his throttle in his left and began to bank to starboard slightly. "Talon One airborne," he announced, smiling at the use of the old expression left over from their days operating from surface bases on Corinair. *One of these days, I'm going to have to change that,* he thought.

The inner launch bay door on the inboard starboard launch tube slid quickly up into the overhead a split second after the outer doors had closed. Deckhands preparing to walk the next fighter into the launch bay braced themselves against the rush of air, as the large starboard fighter bay shared its air with the depressurized launch bay.

As soon as the inner door had risen high enough, the automated spacecraft movement systems began rolling the

next fighter from its position just outside of the launch bay inner door into the launch bay itself. Deckhands walked at either wingtip, eyeballing the tips as they approached the shuttles on the launch rails on either wall of the bay. Once the fighter was in position, each deckhand raised his arm to indicate the alignment was good on their side, and the fighter's crew chief, walking behind the fighter with a controller in his hand, pressed a button that allowed the fighter to roll another meter forward, so the shuttles would lock onto the fighter's wingtips. The deckhands at the wingtips tucked the fingers of their raised hands into a fist to indicate good locks, and the crew chief hit another button on his controller and began walking backward, away from the fighter. Rotating red lights along the walls of the bay came to life, and the two deckhands at the fighter's wingtips moved quickly out of the launch bay. The inner launch bay door came sliding back down, locking into the groove in the deck as it came to a stop. There was a sudden hiss of air as the door sealed itself. The fighter was now out of the crew chief's hands and under the command of launch control.

With the door sealed, powerful vacuum pumps rapidly removed most of the air from the launch bay as the pilot prepared his ship for takeoff. As the last of the air was pumped out of the bay, the artificial gravity in the bay disengaged. The launch rails charged, and the shuttles securing the wingtips to the rails lifted the now weightless fighter a few centimeters off the deck. As soon as the gear was off the deck, it quickly retracted up into the belly of the fighter, and its gear bay doors slid closed. A moment later, the outer launch bay door in front of the fighter split at the launch rails, the top half rising while the bottom half dropped, the last remnants of air pressure escaping into the unpressurized launch tunnel. Two seconds later, the fighter

surged forward, leaving the launch bay on its race through the launch tunnel. The outer doors closed, and a few seconds later the inner doors rose again, sucking air in from the fighter bay as it allowed the next fighter to begin the launch cycle.

Major Prechitt listened to the next four fighters announce their departures as he checked the status of the sixteen Jung fighters coming up fast from the surface of the Earth. As the last fighter to launch reported in, he keyed his comm-set. "Talon Flight, Talon One. Form on me, two lines abreast. One through Four high, Five through Eight low and behind five zero clicks. Remember, nobody over accelerate. We don't want to climb above them. We just want to get to them and take them out before they launch their missiles on the Aurora." Major Prechitt increased his throttle, powering up his main propulsion system and accelerating for several seconds until he reached the proper closure rate on the incoming targets. He then throttled back and prepared to lock his missiles on the bandits. Soon, they would be within targeting range.

"Eight fighters away," Mister Randeem reported from the tactical station. "The first four will reach firing range in one minute."

"Time until the bandits can fire on us?" Nathan asked.

"Two minutes, sir."

"Six minutes to primary jump point," Mister Riley reported. "Second alternate in four."

"Contact!" Lieutenant Yosef announced.

The fact that she was reporting a single contact and not multiples made Nathan nervous.

“Jung cruiser! Just came out of FTL!” the lieutenant exclaimed. “Based on trajectory, it’s the one we spotted near Mars before we jumped in. Transferring to tactical.”

“ID confirmed. She’ll be able to engage us in five minutes, sir,” Mister Randeem reported.

“Alert flight ops,” Nathan said. “Make sure those pilots remember that we’re out of here in five and a half minutes.”

The maneuvering jets on Jessica’s space-jump suit fired, pitching her end over so that she was traveling backward on her orbit. The display on her visor flashed a warning. Her deceleration thrusters were going to fire. The warning counted down from five seconds. Jessica braced herself as best she could. The large thruster on her back just below her parachute pack fired and quickly throttled up to full power. She could feel herself being pushed into the back of her hard-shelled, over-sized suit as the thrust decreased her speed. The thruster fired for nearly half a minute, sending heavy vibrations throughout her suit and into her body. The noise of the thruster reverberated through the shell of her suit and into her helmet. It was almost deafening.

The thruster finally ceased its burn, and her maneuvering jets fired again, rotating her back over so she was traveling head first once again. One last maneuver brought her face down toward the dark planet below her.

It was again peaceful and quiet within her little cocoon as she continued to fall toward her homeworld. She had never imagined herself returning home in such a manner, just as she had never imagined that her first covert assignment would be on the Earth itself. Of course, none of

what had happened to her over the last four months could have been imagined, not by anyone.

The next warning she received was for the same part of her first space jump over Takara that she remembered to be least enjoyable. She had five seconds until atmospheric interface. She watched the countdown, her eyes darting back and forth as she waited for her thermal shields to pop on just as they had during her previous jump. The countdown passed three and still no shields. Then two, and then one. The countdown reached zero, and the display showed that she was now entering the Earth's upper atmosphere... And there was still no indication of any thermal shields.

Jessica suddenly remembered Lieutenant Montgomery talking to her about her atmospheric interface... something about her shields. Was she supposed to turn them on herself? If so, how was she supposed to do that? Her eyes continued scanning her visor display, but still nothing presented itself that would indicate either the presence of active thermal shielding or the malfunction of it.

It did indicate one other thing... The skin of her little cocoon was beginning to heat up.

“Lock intercept missiles on assigned targets,” Major Prechitt ordered as he finished assigning targets to the other three fighters in his half of the first group. “Coming up on max range. Go weapons hot.” The major flipped a small, red rocker switch on his right console, activating his weapons' firing systems. “Firing two in three.....two.....one.....fire!”

Major Prechitt pushed the small button on the side of his flight control stick. Two missiles flew off the rails hanging

under his fighter's short, stubby wings. They streaked forward, their red-orange thrust ports burning brightly in their tails. A split second later, six more missiles, two from each of the other three fighters in his group, followed his missiles out.

"Two away!" the major announced. Each of the pilots in his first group of four fighters also reported their missile launches. The major looked at his tracking display as the blips representing their eight missiles moved quickly across the screen toward the group of sixteen red dots representing the incoming Jung interceptors. "Impact in twenty seconds."

A warning alarm began to sound in the major's helmet. He looked at his console. "Targeting locks! They're locking onto us!" A cluster of red dots, maybe thirty of them, emerged from the group of Jung interceptors moving toward them. "Missile launches! Evasive action! Launch forward decoys!"

Major Prechitt quickly pressed another button on his console. A dozen small projectiles shot forward in rapid succession from the nose of his ship, just under the cockpit. He could feel the vibrations of the decoy launches in his seat. The decoys streaked forward away from him and immediately began to spread out, putting at least a few meters between each of them. Their propellant quickly spent, the tails of the decoys suddenly went dark. A moment later, the decoys began glowing brightly, creating an intense thermal signature. He looked down at his tracking display as well, noting that there were several fuzzy distortions caused by the radio emissions coming from the decoys. He immediately fired his maneuvering thrusters, causing his fighter to translate rapidly upward. He killed the thrusters two seconds later and quickly shut everything

down except his reactors, which he took down to their lowest output. He wanted to be sure the decoys were more attractive as targets to the incoming weapons than his fighter might be.

It worked. Ten seconds later, four missiles exploded in the area of his decoys. Unfortunately, one of his group had not reacted quickly enough. Somehow, the Jung missiles were not fooled by his efforts, and two of the barrage of miniature missiles slammed into Talon Four, blowing it apart.

"Four is down! Repeat, Four is down!" one of the pilots reported.

Major Prechitt fired his maneuvering thrusters again to stop his translation, then rotated to put his tail in the direction of travel. "Talons Two and Three! Flip over and go to full burn! We need to accelerate to stay with these guys! But stay to the outside! Talons Five through Eight! Lock on and fire as soon as they hit max range and be prepared to launch decoys and translate out of the flight paths! Don't forget to go cold or the missiles will find you!"

Major Prechitt fired his main engine, immediately bringing it up to full power. The Jung interceptors had come up to an orbital altitude just below the Aurora's and were accelerating to climb and catch up to her. Their missiles would undoubtedly have little trouble catching the Aurora. In order to give chase, the major and his pilots, all of whom had been traveling at a slower orbital speed in order to close on the Jung interceptors, would have to accelerate again in order to catch up to them. It was an odd sort of combat, but orbital engagements were what his pilots had originally been trained for.

The second group of four fighters reached max range and fired their missiles on the Jung interceptors, taking out two more. They, too, had to launch decoys and translate out

of the path of the incoming weapons, but the major's warning had kept them all alive, and soon, they, too, were flipping over and going to full burn.

"Flight, Talon One, launch the ready fighters! Repeat, launch the ready fighters!"

Four more fighters, two from each side of the Aurora's forward section, shot out of her launch tubes. The fighters fired their main engines just enough to alter their course slightly and decelerate, as they were flying backwards in relation to their orbital path and needed to decrease their orbital speed in order to not only close the distance between them and the incoming Jung fighters more rapidly, but also to drop into the same lower orbit from which they were approaching.

"Ready fighters have launched," Mister Randeem announced. "Eight more are away and will reach max range in one minute."

"How many bandits are still inbound?" Nathan asked.

"Twelve, sir."

"Four minutes to primary jump point," Mister Riley reported. "Two minutes to second alternate."

"How far out is the cruiser?"

"Jung cruiser will be in targeting range in three minutes, sir," Mister Randeem reported.

Intermittent red-orange streaks of burning plasma spilled over Jessica's over-sized helmet as she plunged into the steadily thickening atmosphere of Earth. Her reentry visor had automatically closed just before she had begun to heat up. Had it not, her eyes would have been blinded by the

plasma trails streaming across the outside of her helmet. Her arms and legs had become locked in place, a measure also taken by the suit's automated control systems to prevent injury. It seemed such a logical thing to do. She remembered having to hold her limbs tight against her body during her first jump using the Corinair space-jump rigs, afraid that one of them might suddenly be ripped from her body.

Unable to see out of her space-jump rig—which now felt more like a coffin than a cocoon—the visor display system provided a detailed set of lines and grids to indicate her actual descent path relative to her preferred descent path. So far, the auto-flight system had managed to keep her exactly on course using frequent bursts from maneuvering thrusters built into her suit.

All of this did not matter to Jessica. The one thing that did matter was the fact that she had no thermal shielding that she knew of, and the temperature on the outside of her suit was climbing rapidly. She could feel the cooling system in her suit struggling to keep the interior cool, but it was failing. She was beginning to sweat quite a lot.

As both her exterior and interior suit temperature indicators on her visor display continued to rise, a sense of panic swept over her body. The feeling was accentuated by her inability to move her arms and legs against the force of the thickening air, as well as a general lack of visual cues from the outside environment. She tried to think of pleasant things to calm herself and reduce her anxiety, but nothing worked. One thing kept running through her mind. "I'm gonna be one of the eight fucking percent!" she screamed.

Four more Jung fighters exploded as the ready flight's missiles found their targets. Fragments from one of the Jung interceptors struck a neighboring ship in their formation, causing it to go into a spin. The pilot struggled to control the interceptor with thrusters but failed and struck the ship on the other side. Both ships broke apart, their spilled propellant going up in a brief flash fire.

"Yes!" Major Prechitt cried out as he watched the devastation from his cockpit. "Ready flight, flip and burn," he ordered as the eight fighters blew past the remaining six Jung interceptors. "Once you catch up, fall in above and below the bandits. We need to get guns on these bastards and take the rest of them out before they get into firing position. Once they launch their nukes, they'll be free to maneuver, and things will get really difficult."

"Ready flight just took out six more interceptors!" Mister Randeem reported. "They're moving into position to go to guns."

"How long until those interceptors can launch on us?" Nathan asked, staring at the tactical overlays on the main view screen.

"One minute."

"Mister Riley?"

"Primary in three minutes, Captain," the navigator answered. "One minute to second alternate."

"Screw the alternate," Nathan said. "There's no way we'd get our fighters back in time."

"Yes, sir," Mister Riley answered. "Locking jump drive onto primary jump point."

“How far out is the Jung cruiser?” Nathan asked.

“Cruiser will be in targeting range in two minutes,” Mister Randeem answered.

“Flight, Captain,” Nathan called over his comm-set. “Recall all fighters! Repeat, recall all fighters! I need them on our deck in two and a half minutes!”

“*Recalling all fighters, aye,*” the flight operations officer answered.

“Pitch us back over, Mister Chiles,” Nathan ordered. “I want our fighters to have a straight-in approach.”

“Talon Flight, Talon One. Pivot and go to guns!” Major Prechitt ordered as he manipulated his flight control stick, yawing his fighter to port and pitching his nose down toward the six Jung interceptors below him. He watched his targeting display as his ship’s attitude changed in relation to its orbital path, waiting until his targeting reticle was in the center of the group of six targets. After stopping his ship’s yaw and pitch, he selected a firing pattern for his rail guns and squeezed the trigger on his flight control stick.

A constant stream of brilliant, blue-white bolts of energy shot out of either side of the fighter’s nose. The selected firing pattern caused the fighter’s maneuvering system to begin a series of tiny bursts from selected maneuvering thrusters that caused the fighter’s nose to dance around to an almost imperceptible degree.

A kilometer away, where the major’s energy bolts met the flight of six Jung interceptors, the pattern was obvious. The blue-white bolts of energy drew a zigzag pattern across the flight of interceptors in an attempt to score as many hits as possible.

Only a second later, several more Talon fighters joined in the attack, their own energy cannons dancing across the flight of Jung interceptors in their own patterns. Within seconds, the blue-white bolts of energy were coming from both sides and from behind the interceptors.

The Jung pilots panicked, having never encountered Earth fighters armed with energy weapons. The Jung interceptors began to maneuver wildly in a desperate attempt to evade the bolts of energy lashing out at them from seemingly every angle.

Energy bolts walked across the lead interceptor as it rolled and jinked. They cut into its wing and fuselage. The interceptor broke open and exploded, sending fragments in all directions. An interceptor nearby also exploded, a combination of both the bolts of energy and the fragments from the lead interceptor.

Major Prechitt watched as his flight quickly annihilated the group of six Jung interceptors. It had been almost too easy, and he almost felt bad for the pilots of the Jung ships. The entire attack had taken only twelve seconds, after which, his threat display was clear of the tiny pests. The only one that remained was still a minute away, but there was nothing he could do about that one.

"Cease fire! Cease fire!" the major ordered his flight of fighters.

"Man!" one of his pilots yelled over comms. *"What a slaughter!"*

"Man, I can't tell who shot what!" another pilot said.

"Who cares?" a third pilot declared.

"Corinari!" one of the older pilots yelled proudly.

"No, Alliance!" another one corrected.

"Talon leader, Flight," the flight controller's voice called across the comms. *"All Talons are to return to the Aurora*

immediately! Repeat, all Talons are to return to the Aurora immediately! We jump out in two minutes!"

"Flight, Talon leader copies," the major answered. "Talon Flight, recall! Return to the Aurora as fast as you can! We've got two minutes before she jumps. If you're not wheels on deck by then, you'll be joining Nash on the surface!"

"I wouldn't mind!" one of the younger pilots commented.

"Just get your ass on the deck," Major Prechitt scolded, although he did not disagree with the young man's sentiments. He also knew that an incredible amount of testosterone and adrenaline was currently surging through the veins of all his pilots, even the older, more experienced ones. "Nothing fancy, just get your wheels on deck. We'll cycle through the airlocks after the jump."

"Lead the way, boss!"

Major Prechitt fired his main engine once more and throttled up to full power. It would take them just over a minute to reach the Aurora, which left them even less time to land. "Flight, Talon One," the major called over his comms. "Open the outer doors on all three transfer airlocks. We're going to need all the room we can get if we're going to fit fifteen of us on deck at once."

"All incoming Jung interceptors within contact range have been destroyed," Mister Randeem reported from the Aurora's tactical station.

"Flight reports Talons are on their way back and should be on deck by the time we jump, sir," Naralena reported from comms.

"Target the cruiser with our quads and open fire," Nathan ordered.

“Sir, we’re not in effective targeting range yet, and the Earth’s gravity is going to make it even more difficult at this range.”

“Just sweep the target,” Nathan instructed. “It doesn’t have to be pretty. We just have to send as many projectiles in their direction as possible. Something’s bound to hit. We certainly won’t destroy them, but we might give them a bloody nose on the way out.”

“What about the fighters?”

“Cease fire as they pass over our tail.”

“Aye, sir,” Mister Randeem acknowledged. “Quads are firing.”

“Contacts!” Lieutenant Yosef reported from the sensor station. “Multiple contacts coming from the cruiser. Probable missile launch! Transferring tracks to tactical.”

“Eight missiles inbound,” Mister Randeem reported. “Time to impact: seventy seconds!”

“Time to primary?” Nathan asked.

“One minute!” Mister Riley answered.

“How long until our fighters are down?”

“Fifty seconds,” Mister Randeem answered.

“Keep your finger on that jump button, Mister Riley,” Nathan said. “It’s going to be close.”

“Talon leader, Flight. Forty-five seconds to jump,” the flight controller’s voice called over the comms.

Major Prechitt’s eyes shifted between his flight data display and the view out the front of his canopy. The aft end of the Aurora was coming at him fast. “Talon Flight, leader,” he called over his comms. “As soon as you pass over the Aurora’s aft end, do an end over and go to full burn to decelerate quickly.”

"You want us to land ass first?" one of his pilot's asked.

"That's the plan," the major answered. "Got a problem with that?"

"No, sir."

Major Prechitt glanced out his canopy again. The Aurora was going to pass closely under him. He noticed the blue-white flashes coming from the rails of the Aurora's quad guns as they reflected off the back of her forward section. "Flight, Talon One. We'd appreciate it if those quads weren't firing when we land."

"Quads will cease fire before the first Talon lands," the flight controller answered.

"That will certainly help," the major responded.

"Captain, Lieutenant Commander Nash's outer suit temp is getting awfully hot," Lieutenant Yosef reported, genuine concern in her voice. "I don't see any thermal shields on her."

"Why aren't her thermal shields on?" Nathan asked Lieutenant Montgomery.

"She doesn't have any," the lieutenant answered, surprised that the captain was not aware of the fact.

"What do you mean, 'She doesn't have any'?" Nathan asked, a look of disbelief on his face.

"The Ghatazhak space-jump systems were designed to be as stealthy as possible. The use of powered thermal shielding would make them much easier to detect during atmospheric interface."

"What keeps them from burning up?" Nathan asked.

"The suits are designed to withstand the heat of atmospheric interface through the use of aerodynamics,

heat resistant materials, and a robust, internal cooling system.”

“How robust?” Nathan asked. Lieutenant Montgomery appeared confused. “How hot is it likely to get inside the suit?” he added in a more demanding tone.

“Based on the density of Earth’s atmosphere, approximately sixty-five degrees by your Celsius temperature scale.”

“Sixty-five? Are you kidding me? That doesn’t concern you?”

“The Ghatazhak had never had a problem...”

“She’s not a Ghatazhak, Lieutenant!”

“Captain, even I could withstand such temperatures,” Lieutenant Montgomery argued. “I admit, it would not be pleasant, but...”

“Don’t you think you should have mentioned this before?”

“I explained it to Lieutenant Commander Nash when she was preparing for departure. Perhaps she was distracted by your exchange.”

“Medical, Captain!” Nathan called over his comm-set.

“Medical. Go ahead, sir,” Doctor Chen answered.

“Can a human survive a temperature of sixty-five degrees Celsius for several minutes?”

“Possibly, but steps would have to be taken to condition the person. Proper hydration, physical conditioning, prolonged exposure to high temperatures to precondition the subject...”

“Can Lieutenant Commander Nash survive it?”

“I don’t know, Captain. She is in excellent condition, both physically and mentally, but I just do not know.” The doctor paused for a moment. *“I would not have recommended it.”*

Jessica felt as if she were on fire as her space-jump suit shook violently during reentry. Her body was dripping wet, and her eyes stung from the perspiration running down her face. She kept her eyes closed as much as possible, opening them intermittently to check her altitude and exterior suit temperature, the latter of which kept climbing at a frightening rate.

Something hot touched her left shoulder. It didn't hurt at first, but the burning sensation intensified. An alert tone sounded in her helmet. She opened her eyes again, checking her visor display. An alert message was warning her of impending seal failures. "Oh, God!" she yelled. "I'm gonna kill you, Montgomery!"

Major Prechitt's fighter descended rapidly down the sloped, forward face of the Aurora's main drive section. The backward burn of his main engines had decelerated him fast enough to get him down to a manageable landing speed, even coming in tail first. His eyes were locked on his flight data display and the lines that indicated his approach parameters in relation to the Aurora's flight apron. With his landing gear down and locked, he would coast in with his wheels a meter above the deck.

His fighter coasted over the aft edge of the flight apron just as he had planned. He waited several seconds before thrusting downward so his fighter would touch the deck as far forward as possible in order to leave plenty of room for those coming in to land behind him. At the right moment, he applied a gentle downward thrust, just enough so the apron's artificial gravity systems would grab hold of his fighter and pull him the rest of the way down.

Collision alarms sounded as his wheels touched the deck and his ship rolled backward toward the open, port-side transfer airlock. He applied wheel brakes to slow his ship, taking great care not to over steer. His fighter finally came to a stop just inside the port-side transfer airlock. He breathed a sigh of relief. "Flight, Talon One down."

He looked out his canopy, aft toward the forward slope of the Aurora's main drive section, watching as the rest of his fighters came in to land in the same backward fashion. As promised, the quad rail guns on either side of the flight apron were no longer firing.

The major's wingman was already on the deck. He could see the nose of his wingman's fighter barely sticking out of the larger, center transfer airlock. Two more fighters touched down nearly simultaneously, one of them rolling in next to the major's wingman in the center transfer airlock while the other rolled backward into the starboard transfer airlock.

Major Prechitt checked the time display on his console as the landing procession continued outside his canopy. They had twenty seconds until the Aurora would jump away. A quick count revealed that more than half of his fighters had already made it down onto the apron. He ducked his head slightly in order to see out from under the overhang of the transfer airlock alcove as the last five Talons descended along the sloped hull of the drive section. Four of them were descending perfectly. The last one was not. "Fifteen!" the major called over his comms. "Thrust down! You're too high!"

"Something's wrong!" the young pilot replied. *"I'm losing power in the vertical thrusters!"*

"Can you roll?" the major asked urgently.

"I'm trying!"

A few small squirts of thrust shot out of the wounded fighter plane, causing him to descend, albeit too slowly. His nose drifted downward as well.

"I'm not getting enough thrust!"

"You're starting to translate down," the major told him, "but it's not enough!"

"I can make it! I can make it!"

"You're going to hit the upper hull and bounce off!" the major yelled. "Eject! Eject! Eject!"

It was too late. The fighter slammed tail first into the hull of the Aurora just above the major's head. He could feel the vibrations of the impact. "Lieutenant!"

"Two missiles have breached our point-defenses!" Mister Randeem reported.

"Jump point in seven seconds!" Mister Riley announced.

Nathan felt a distant thud, as if something had struck the ship from behind. "What the...?"

"Ten seconds to missile impact!" Mister Randeem added.

"Flight reports Talon Fifteen has struck the hull!" Naralena announced.

"Jumping in five..." the navigator reported.

"What about the rest of the fighters?" Nathan demanded.

"Four....."

"Flight reports all fighters are down," Naralena answered.

"Three....."

"Damn!" the young pilot yelled as his damaged fighter slid up the sloped backside of the Aurora's forward hull

section.

"Two....." the Aurora's navigator counted over the comms.

"Damn!" the pilot swore again as his ship continued to slide up the Aurora's hull. At any moment, his ship would slide past the curvature of the upper hull and tumble into space.

"One....."

He knew what would happen if he was partially caught in the Aurora's jump fields. He had seen the images of the ill-fated shuttle that had experienced a partial shield failure while jumping out of a hot landing zone during the battle of Answari.

"Jumping!"

The young pilot took his last deep breath and closed his eyes. He felt a prickly sensation sweep over him as the blue-white flash of the jump made the inside of his eyelids appear as a bright, pinkish hue. There was a ripping sound and a sudden whoosh of air as if the canopy of his fighter had been ripped away. Even inside his helmet, the sound was deafening. Then the light was gone, and silence and darkness enveloped him.

"Jump complete," Mister Riley reported from the navigation console.

"Verifying position," Lieutenant Yosef announced. "Three light years from Sol. On course for the Barnard system."

"Threat board is..." Mister Randeem stopped mid-sentence. "I've got something just above us by only a few meters, and it's drifting away from and forward of our port beam!"

"Put it on the screen!" Nathan ordered.

The main view screen changed exterior cameras. The new image from the upper, port-side camera revealed the nose of a Talon fighter. Everything from just behind the pilot's seat to her tail was gone.

"Holy shit!" Nathan exclaimed, recognizing the fighter's nose section. "Is there anyone alive in that thing?"

There was a brief pause, as Naralena listened to a report over her comm-set. "Flight reports the pilot is alive! They're launching a rescue shuttle!"

Nathan felt a wave of relief come over him, not just from the survival of the Talon pilot, but also that the Aurora had escaped two nuclear armed missiles by only a two-second margin. There was, however, still one other matter.

"Lieutenant," Nathan said, turning toward the sensor station to his left. "Did you happen to notice the exterior temperature on Jessica's suit before we jumped?"

"Yes, sir. It was over sixteen hundred degrees Celsius and climbing," she answered solemnly.

"The suit can survive such temperatures," Lieutenant Montgomery insisted, "I promise you."

"I'm not worried about the damned suit, Lieutenant," Nathan said. "I'm worried about the woman that's inside it."

"I'm sure the lieutenant commander will be fine," Lieutenant Montgomery responded.

Despite the confidence in the lieutenant's voice, Nathan could tell he wasn't entirely convinced of his answer. Nathan had a pretty good idea of what had caused the eight percent failure rate in the suit.

Nathan glared at Lieutenant Montgomery as he turned to leave the bridge. "For your sake, Lieutenant, you'd better hope she is."

Lieutenant Montgomery had no response. Lieutenant Yosef was sitting next to him. He looked at to her for support

but got nothing but silence.

“Secure from general quarters,” Nathan ordered as he headed aft toward his ready room. “We’ll recharge for a few hours before we jump to Barnard.”

* * *

Ducks floated quietly on a large pond in the middle of a dairy pasture far outside of Winnipeg, the city that was once the capital of the North American Union. It was a clear and peaceful night, with the occasional sound of distant cattle interrupting the regular sounds of the night. The pond served as a watering hole for the dairy cows, as well as being a home for various species of fowl native to the area.

All at once, the ducks took to flight in a panic, flapping their wings in urgency as they left the pond and leapt into the air in a bustle of noise. A large, human-shaped object suddenly landed twenty meters from the pond with a thud, toppling over to one side. A large parachute fell to the ground downwind of the object a few seconds later.

Arms extended from the human-shaped object as whiffs of smoke rose from its still smoldering joints. Its legs separated slightly and the object seemed to rise to its hands and knees. Its motion seemed to trigger the chute retraction system that immediately sucked the parachute back into the pack on the back of the human-shaped object. Once the chute was fully retrieved, the object bent over again, its right hand reaching for a release mechanism. The top of the object fell away, revealing the occupant’s head.

Jessica gasped and coughed as more smoke came from inside the upper torso of her space-jump rig. After a few seconds, she sat upright, still on her knees, and looked around. Her long, black hair had fallen out of its bun and

was soaked with perspiration and matted against her head, back, and shoulders. She paused for a moment to enjoy the fresh air and the cool evening breeze on her face.

Jessica moved her right hand to her chest pack and pressed another release button, dropping the chute pack from her back. With the weight suddenly released from her back, her chest pack threatened to send her tumbling forward, and she quickly released it as well. She then pressed two releases on her chest that had been covered up by the chest pack, and her torso section separated along the outer edges of her back. The back half of the torso section sprung outward, still hinged at the upper edge of her buttocks. She reached down to her waist and released the hinge, dropping the back plate to the ground along with her knapsack and several pieces of clothing that had been stuffed inside with her to help fill the additional space inside the space-jump suit.

Jessica pulled the forward section of the torso up a few centimeters and away from her, more clothing spilling to the ground. She tossed the torso piece aside and savored the cool breeze across her sweat-soaked body.

After a minute of blissful cooling, she twisted to one side and fell backward onto the ground. She reached down and released clamps on either side of her thighs, allowing the front of the upper part of the leg section to spring forward. She reached inside the leg pieces and pulled out the last of her clothing that had been used as space filler, tossing it aside as she went. Finally, she wiggled out of the leg section, freeing herself once and for all of the Takaran coffin that had nearly roasted her.

She lay motionless for at least another minute. The form-fitting undergarment that was supposed to wick moisture away and help cool her body was completely saturated with

her sweat to the point that it felt unusually heavy. She was pretty sure it had failed at its job.

As she lay there staring up at the clear, starry night's sky, she heard the sound of one of the ducks as it returned to the pond. She knew that sound, as there had been duck ponds at the Fleet Academy. Ponds had water, and she was terribly hot and thirsty. She raised her head enough to see the moon's reflection in the water only twenty meters away. She immediately rolled over and struggled to get to her feet, stumbling toward the pond. She didn't stop at its edge but continued in until she was up to her waist in the cool water. She dove in.

Jessica's head broke the surface a few meters farther out in the pond. She brushed her wet hair back, feeling amazingly refreshed by the water. She could hear the sound of a stream running in the distance and concluded that it must be feeding water to the pond. She dipped her mouth into the water and took a drink, knowingly disregarding the risk of disease. She was extremely dehydrated, and she simply did not care about sickness. The water tasted fine to her, and there was a med-kit among her belongings that the doctor had put together in unmarked wrappers to hide the fact that it was an EDF med-kit.

After quenching her thirst and looking around from her spot in the middle of the pond to see that she was alone, she removed her undergarments and walked out of the water completely naked. She felt so much better after her dip, and her energy had returned. She hurried up the shore and back to her pile of belongings, quickly pulling on pants, a shirt, shoes, and a bulky sweatshirt. She tied her wet hair back and donned a sports cap that Nathan had given her to wear in order to better fit in among the residents of the northern parts of the continent.

She pulled on her jacket, stuffed the rest of her belongings into her knapsack, and set it aside. She gathered up all of the pieces of the Takaran space-jump rig and placed them together in a pile. She then took a small container out of the rig's chest pack, opened it, and carefully sprinkled the powder evenly across the pile. After striking the top of the lid against the bottom of the container, the container began to burn, and she tossed it onto the pile. The powder instantly ignited, and the pile was engulfed in an acrid, gray smoke that glowed a subdued red at the center as the pile of high-tech components burned away.

A minute later, the smoke began to clear, revealing a pile of ashes where her space-jump rig had once lain. The smoke dissipated quickly, and the ashes began to scatter in the evening breeze.

Jessica tucked her ponytail inside her jacket collar and turned the collar up to cover her damp neck from the chilly Winnipeg night. She kicked at the ashes with her foot to help them disperse as she looked about, surveying the dark pond and the surrounding landscape once again. The lights of Winnipeg glowed in the distance. That was her destination.

Jessica took a deep breath. She was back on Earth. She was home. She also had a mission to perform. She needed to make contact with the resistance, and the former capital of the NAU was as good a place as any to start. She picked up her knapsack and slung it over her shoulder as she headed off toward the city lights.

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(A review would be greatly appreciated!)

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