



0383 | \$ 5.95 | The Backwards Mask (novel, part three of three) Alternate

The Backwards Mask

Matt Carson



Copyright 2010 © Far Future Enterprises

All Rights Reserved.

A house divided against itself cannot stand.

- Abraham Lincoln

I know, and all the world knows, that revolutions never go backward.

- William Henry Seward

Prologue

The tired eyes of August Delpero surveyed what had become his new office. Once his personal sanctum would have included such amenities as an ultra-sophisticated personal computer with instant access to the planetary infonet, opulent furniture, tasteful holo-sculpture to impress visitors, and even a personal wet bar stocked with the finest spirits and wines from refined Fijan rice wine to the cultured brandy of Spencer.

All of it an elaborate show designed to project the power and influence that he wielded as chairman and CEO of Novastar Incorporated, a commercial juggernaut supplying technology to the burgeoning Reformation Coalition.

He reflected upon this as his gaze fell upon his current residence. Gone was the artwork and polished marble surfaces. Replacing them was a simple cot adorned with a threadbare coverlet. The remarkable view he once commanded of the sparkling coast of Trantown at the pinnacle of Novastar Tower had likewise gone away leaving only a small window on the opposite wall wherein streams of sunlight filtered in through rusty bars.

Beyond the bars and bullet-proof polymer glass, the scenery was not all that different as it had been – an irony that was not lost upon him. Only instead of seeing his own private beach in the bright light of Halos, his view of the land was clustered with guard towers, microwave security fences and rows upon rows of old-fashioned razor wire.

It was the maximum-security wing of the Trantown Federal Penitentiary with all the comforts of home that implied.

Such was the price of treason.

The past five months had refined the word hell in August's vocabulary. While the prison system of Aubaine was not as harsh as other worlds in the Coalition, his former position had opened him to every verbal and physical barb that prison could throw at him. He was constantly in fights with other inmates looking to settle a score with the persona they had built up in their minds upon meeting the man himself. Even his guards did not always hide their sneers of contempt for him. Almost everyday he read *how have the mighty have fallen* in their eyes.

For a time he felt that he might go actually go insane, especially during those three weeks he had spent in solitary. But regardless of what darkness the inside of the system had shown him, he had kept himself.

Now, if I can just keep it up for the rest of my natural life...

He rose from his cot and gripped the bars of his window. Outside seagulls cried and glided gracefully in the air, resplendent in their freedom. Once he'd had it all, and the bitterness of his imprisonment only underscored this, bringing it sharply into focus. He had lost more than others would ever gain.

Despite the things he had done, he didn't consider himself to be a bad person. Focused, certainly. Ambitious, absolutely, but evil – no. All he wanted to do was help Humanity shrug off the veils that had been pulled over its collective eyes by an unwholesome alien influence.

For that he was left here to rot, abandoned by all those of power and influence that should've supported, or at the very least insulated, him from this fate. Once word had leaked out of the part he played in recent events, no one would stand up for him – even those that he had helped attain their positions of power in the first place.

The universe, it seemed, was fresh out of gratitude, or loyalty, or any of the other qualities that he once admired.

Footsteps echoed up the ferrocrete hallway, but it was not until the sharp clang of a baton rattling across the bars of his cell that August turned from his contemplation.

"Hey, chairman," The guard said, using his favorite nickname for his least favorite inmate. "Up and at 'em. You got a visitor."

"What? It's not the end of the week. Who is it?" The only visitor that came see him was his lawyer, Karsten Vae, and that was only once a week.

"Dunno. Now get up."

August knew better than to argue. He moved to the center of the room and placed his hands behind his head.

"That's right, you know the drill," the guard said idly as he clamped hardened plastic tethers to the prisoner's hands and feet. Freedom of motion was, of course, greatly restricted, so August could only shuffle down the corridor to meet his unexpected appointment.

The guard stopped at the door to the visitation chamber and opened it for him.

"Ten minutes, chairman."

Nodding, August stepped through into the neutral colors that awaited him. A small uncomfortable stool sat in front of a pane of transparent material similar to his cell. On the other side was a much more comfortable chair bathed in sunlight from the window. There, almost wreathed in a halo, sat the last person he expected to see.

Seated opposite him was a compact woman in her early thirties, dressed in a modest yet tasteful black dress. Her luxurious black hair was cut almost pageboy short, but cascaded down from a central part, framing a lovely face with such delicate Asian features that they could have easily found her a place in popular holovids. Her dark eyes glittered, regarding him calmly, as he wearily sat down in front of her.

Though he tried to control his feelings, he could not help but marvel at her appearance. She was even more beautiful than he remembered.

Add that to the list of things I've lost.

It was sometimes hard to believe that she was one of the foremost xenobiologists in her field, and growing luminary in the medical profession. A genius with the better part of her career ahead of her, his actions had come dangerously close to ruining her reputation. There were many along the way that he had used for his own ends, and Dr. Orit Takagawa had been no different.

During the course of his incarceration, though, he'd had time to reflect upon his mistakes. More and more he came to realize that the day he'd marginalized this extraordinary woman was one of his worst mistakes of his life.

Once she had been his wife. No longer.

"Hello, August."

"Orit." He began, finding his voice, "Why have you come here?"

"I came to talk."

He smiled grimly, "It seems you have a captive audience."

Her features hardened almost imperceptibly, a gesture that told him he had stung her. How quickly he fell into old patterns. He did not let the comment linger.

"What should we talk about?"

"I think you know."

He straightened on his stool and gazed into the wells of her dark eyes.

"If you had said that a few months ago, I might. Now I'm not so sure. About a great many things."

She tilted her head to the side just like he remembered. Pent up emotion, he could tell, was rising to the surface.

"You lied to me on Ra, when you said you weren't involved. You looked me straight in the eyes and lied through your teeth."

"No, I didn't, I—"

She cut him off. "Yes, you did! Good Gaia, they were living beings, August. Hundreds of them died at Seabridge Nest in unspeakable agony, all because of you."

He sat unmoved, his back ramrod straight.

"They were only Hivers." He immediately regretted his knee-jerk reaction.

"Only Hivers? They're a sentient race and they feel pain just as acutely as you and me. Do you know how many I had to watch die horribly because of the Folgorex II bio agent you helped release? Their bodies withered away like burning paper while they remained conscious. *Conscious*. Deathwatches ran round the clock. Do you have an idea what a *hell* that was no to be able to help them? My God, August, how could you be capable of such an act – and use me to help you do it?"

Tears came, but were quickly blinked back, her rage competing with her sorrow.

"From what I hear, it was you that helped stop it."

"Yes, I stopped it, but by the time I had the vaccine the Hiver death toll was in the thousands, not just on Ra, but everywhere it spread. What you did was genocide. Nothing else can describe it."

"I'm sure there are many that agree with you, which is why I was moved to these deluxe accommodations," he made a swipe of his hand that encompassed the entirety of the prison, "to pay my debt to society."

"So, does it matter to you all the lives you helped destroy?"

August leaned in close to the glass and sighed. "So, that's it. You want to know if my conscious bothers me, right? Do I sleep well at night with the weight of my deeds hanging over me?"

Her lips formed a thin, bloodless line on her face and he knew that he had hit upon the heart of the matter. Her silence seemed to thunder in the room.

"If I don't sleep well it's because I have a cot that's not fit for an animal. But no, to satisfy your curiosity, the deaths of those Hivers don't haunt me in the least. I did what I thought I had to for the sake of Mankind."

"I somehow doubt your motives were that altruistic, August."

He shrugged.

"Believe what you want to. But as long as Humaniti relies on Hivers to do their thinking for them, we will be little more than slaves. That I can guarantee you."

"I just don't understand. Nothing justifies what -"

Just then the din of raised voices in the hallway outside reached their ears as all the lights in the room went dark. They each had about four seconds to wonder what the commotion was all about before loud boom shattered the air and a portion of the wall behind Delpero exploded outward.

Orit found herself on the floor a moment later as she came to her senses. The polymer glass had protected her from the flying debris, but the concussion had momentarily shaken her senses.

Wisps of smoke and bits of burning wire hung on the opposite side of the barrier. August lay on his side with a slight trickle of blood running from his scalp down the side of his face.

Then the ground thudded underneath her. Then again.

Craning her head around as she got up, she looked at the hole that had suddenly appeared in the wall. A menacing metallic shape filled the void. It took Orit a second to realize what she was looking at as it slid into the room, followed by another.

They were two men in heavy slate-black battle dress, brandishing gauss rifles. Unlike the Coalition powered armor that favored an open face bowl, these were much more along the old Imperial style that totally concealed the features of the operator. The reddish tinge to their V-shaped visors gave them an extremely sinister cast as they swept their weapons across the room.

She was in trouble, that she knew. Freezing in her half-crouch behind a metal partition, every muscle in her body cried out in their instinctive reaction to try get away.

The two figures fanned out into the room just as a third figure materialized through the dust-choked sunlight. This one was slimmer than the other two and strode with the confident self-assurance of a politician about to give a speech.

As this newcomer resolved in Orit's vision, she realized that she (for it was definitely a she) was clad in a black TL-15 tailored vac suit. The helmeted head settled on the inert form of August and motioned to the other two men.

One immediately produced a grav-belt and the other hauled August up by his collar. In less than a few seconds they had the former tycoon strapped in, and nodded their readiness to the woman.

"You can come out now, Physic. I know you're there."

That voice. No, it *couldn't* be. She was surely dead before a firing squad on Ra. It was impossible. And yet...

Physic, as she was known by her RC call sign, slowly rose to her feet with her hands up behind the glass. As she did, she looked directly into the dangerous eyes of the space pirate, Vega Zorn.

"You look pretty lively for being dead." Physic said acidly, surprising herself at her flippancy.

"Thank you. The rumors of my death have been greatly exaggerated, and all that." One of the men in armor leveled his weapon at the doctor with intent, but Zorn waved him off.

"Oh, no. Physic's an old friend, isn't that right, doctor?"

"I may be many things, Zorn, but a friend to you is not one of them."

"Temper, temper. I do wish I could stay and catch up, but I'm afraid that I've come to take August away from you. Funny how history has a way of repeating itself, eh?"

"Go to hell." Physic said, bile rising in her throat at the vivid memories that conjured up.

"Oh, don't worry, I'll take care real good care of him. Real good."

Even through her visor, Physic could see the sneer on Zorn's features.

"Bye, Bye now."

Almost as one, the three figures turned away and retreated back through the hole they had made. A few seconds later, she heard the thrum of contra-gravs followed by the noisy roar of HePlars from a larger vehicle.

Through the window, she had just enough time to make out a delta of darkened metal, silhouetted briefly by the light of Halos, before it completely disappeared from her sight.

Oh, fikk.

Chapter 1

Coeur D'Esprit, better known to the RC as Red Sun, stood alone in the plush lobby of Aubaine's most luxurious resort, The Ambassador Hotel. All around her were creature comforts that were generally far removed from her normal existence as a seasoned spacer. Everything seemed to shine and glimmer from the polished brass and rich velvet of its adornments, to the liveried uniforms of its overly-friendly staff.

In contrast to the latest fashions worn by many of the well-to-do people around her, Coeur wore her usual black Coalition-issue body sleeve with a green fan-collared vest over it. Despite her simple attire, however, she stood out from the crowd. She was tall for a woman at 1.75 meters and was possessed of a commanding presence that was unmistakable. Outwardly calm, her dark brown eyes took in every detail of her surroundings with casual alertness. After all, the circumstances that had brought her here were less than favorable.

Three hours ago she had been sitting in her office at the Technical Academy when her mail queue had softly chirped, announcing that she had a message. When she checked it, the source code and sender were unknown. It simply said:

To: Red Sun

Priority: Class III

Ambassador Hotel Lobby. 1300 Hours. Come alone.

Security Clearance: 7697-AΦΨ-54S100

Only one other time during her time in the RCES had she received a Class III priority message, and that had heralded the beginning of voyage where she had to take her beloved ship, the RCS *Hornet*, into The Wilds for a second time. Last time out, she'd crossed swords with the Solee Empire, not one but two technologically elevated and a cunning strain of Virus.

So, there was definite cause for concern. After confirming the security code given in the message, Coeur's blood pressure elevated appreciably behind the calm mask of control that she projected to the world. The thought of walking into a situation totally blind was not a prospect she cared for, but the neither could she ignore it.

She had taken a pinnace and blazed her way over to the island of Trannis wherein the golden hotel made its home next to an expansive white sandy beach. There she waited for whatever was to come.

Off to her side, the antique revolving door admitted a large, square-jawed man dressed in khaki shorts and a short tunic made for tropical weather. An obvious native of Aubaine, his tanned skin contrasted with his military short blonde hair that seemed almost white. Hard muscle filled his frame and his every move was crisp and deliberate, offsetting his otherwise boyish face.

Coeur turned to him immediately. It was Brigade Sergeant Major, Vin Escher, or Drop Kick, the commander of the Marine contingent aboard *Hornet*. Surprise lit both their faces as they recognized each other.

"Red?" the big man said with a wry smile. "What are you doing here?"

"Probably the same thing that brings you here." She glanced around to make sure no one was within earshot. "Let me guess. Anonymous message?"

"Yeah. Do you have any idea what it means?"

"Negative. The security clearance checks out, though."

"You got that right. I was right in the middle of maneuvers with Mercy, Bonzo and Whiz Bang down at Gramercy Island when I got it. I had to drop everything just to get here in time." He shook his head. "Hope it's worth it. I can't leave those three alone for very long with a fully-armed tank." He more grunted than laughed.

It was all in jest Coeur knew – the three Cavalry Marines under his command had proved themselves capable ten times over in her book during their time with *Hornet*, despite a penchant for playful antics.

"My guess is that we were intended to meet, but what happens now?"

"Well, skipper, my note said we needed to go up to the Presidential Level, Room 16. Didn't yours?"

Coeur shook her head. "No. It didn't."

"Well, let's go see what all the hub-bub is all about."

They made their way to the elegant grav-lift adjacent to an enclosed water fall that cascaded from the top floors down into a gurgling fountain. The shiny doors silently opened to allow them entrance.

"Presidential Level." Drop Kick barked out as soon as they were inside.

"Unable to comply." The female voice of the computer said.

"Nice." the big Marine sounded annoyed. "Send us all the way up here and then don't let us go up to their fancy-schmancy top floor. Real nice. Hope this isn't some wild goose chase."

A thought occurred to Coeur. "Here. Let me try."

"Be my guest."

"Presidential Level." Coeur said crisply to the control panel.

"Confirmed."

The doors closed and the elevator ascended with very little feeling of motion.

"So we were meant to meet after all," Coeur said. "That's what I thought."

"What do you mean?"

"Whoever arranged this little meeting wanted us to go together. They gave you the location, but gave me the authorization to get there. The only way we were getting up there would be if we were together."

The Marine shook his head. "That can't be good."

"It never is. By the way," Coeur said hastily changing the subject, "it's been a while since I've seen you. Have you and Snapshot set a date, yet?"

"Yeah, we're still in the planning stages right now, but we we're thinking about at little over three months from now on Reformation Day. We both think that's kind of fitting."

"I can see that. Any compromise on the ceremony specifics? Last I heard of it, the two of you were both being stubborn about it."

"Yeah, she gets like that," he said with a twinkle in his eye. Bull-headedness was a quality both the Marine and *Hornet's* missile gunner shared in spades, and they both knew it.

"We're thinking the wedding will be here on Aubaine, but the ceremony itself will be the traditional Oriflamme style. We're trying to arrange to get her folks to come here as soon as possible seeing as how I didn't get to actually meet them when we were there on our way to Mexit."

"Well, good. I trust that I'll be included on the guest list."

"You better believe it, skipper. If it were up to me I'd have you standing up there with us as one of my Seconds, but Oriflamme tradition doesn't care for that kind of thing."

"The price of compromise I suppose."

"Something like that." Drop Kick looked over at his Captain. Though many of the *Hornet's* crew had split up once they were planetside a few months ago, they were a very tight knit bunch. In many ways Drop Kick had begun to think of *Hornet's* crew, including even Newton, the Hiver, as part of his extended family, and part of that was fostered by their leader. Coeur had taken them into the fire numerous times and brought them home again. If anything spoke to her remarkable competence as a spacer, it was that.

Yep, she one cool customer, that's for sure.

The elevators opened revealing the meticulously detailed hallway of the Presidential Level.

"I didn't get a chance to tell you, but congratulations on your promotion."

He pointed to a spot on Coeur's arm where her recent Lieutenant Commander's wings would've hung.

"Thanks."

"It's well deserved, Red."

She glanced down the hallway towards their objective. "Well, see if you think that after we find out what's going on."

"Gotcha."

Moving past the ornate mirrors and potted plants, they quickly found themselves at the door with an embossed brass "16" prominently displayed upon it.

"I half expected it to be the penthouse," Drop Kick bemused.

Coeur studied the door for a moment and canted her head slightly. Something wasn't right here, she could feel it in her gut.

"Doesn't it strike as you as odd, the room number?" She began.

"What do you mean?"

"The room is sixteen. Each room of this hotel begins with the floor number first. So the third floor starts with the number three, the ninth floor starts with the number nine, and so forth."

"Yeah, so?"

"This is the 38th floor, but the room number is just 16."

"I see what you mean, but I don't know what that means."

"Nor do I." Coeur said her eyes distant.

Sixteen.

Good Gaia, why did it have to be that number out of everything?

The old pain returned with all of its old intensity. And yet grappling with her past was nothing new. She pigeonholed her feelings quickly, but not before Drop Kick raised a concerned eyebrow in her direction.

"You okay, Red?" Drop Kick's voice brought her back to the present.

"Yes, I'm fine."

"You looked like you were lightyears away."

"Not a bad way to put it."

He saw the chink in my armor. Unforgivable.

"I guess we better knock, huh?" She said drawing his attention away from her momentary lapse.

Drop Kick shrugged and reached up to the aged bronze knocker, rapping loudly on the door. Almost immediately, the door swung open revealing an imposing wall of green muscle.

Larger than Drop Kick by a wide margin, the figure that stood in the doorway was over 2 meters tall and probably weighed over 170 kilos. Obviously non-human, the figure's skin was a deep forest green and slightly scaled. A pronounced cranial ridge rose up in middle of the creature's hairless head, flanked on either side by lesser ridges. Vaguely reptilian, the door warden was an impressive sight dressed in what Coeur guessed was an armored body sleeve.

Even though both spacers had seen Ithklur before, nothing prepared them for the dangerous air of primal menace that these exuded. Their reputation as being the premier shock troopers operating in known space was well known.

It was enough that Coeur's hand strayed to the miniature sidearm she carried concealed on her belt. She felt than more than saw Drop Kick tense up next to her, his senses on full alert.

The Ithklur's deep-socketed yellow eyes flicked over the two clinically. It waited perhaps two beats to allow the two to recover before it turned sideways and motioned them into the room.

"This way, please." It said in slightly sibilant Anglic.

What do you think, Skipper? Should we go in? Drop Kick said in Anslan, the field sign language of the Reformation Coalition.

Coeur crossed her arms and inconspicuously drummed her response on the top of her arm where he could see.

Looks like we better. Just be ready.

Roger.

The two stepped from the hallway into a wonderfully appointed room that truly befitted a room on the Presidential Level. With its decorative columns and mosaics, it looked more like it had been lifted out of an ancient Roman villa and then set about with all the modern luxuries one could want. The heavy velvet curtains had been drawn as well as the metal blinds, allowing only minute streamers of sunlight to dapple the room.

Two more Ithklur were inside and they fixed the two spacers with unsettling predatory stares.

"Weapons, please." One of them said.

Drop Kick snorted. "You mind telling us what this all about first?"

"You must be unarmed before we proceed." The words sounded out of the alien's lipless mouth flat and humorless.

"Fine. Then I guess we wait."

The other two Ithklur tightened in their stances and began to move toward the Marine. It looked to Coeur's eyes as though they were slightly swaying as though ready to pounce.

"Drop Kick..." Coeur began, an edge to her voice.

"No, Red. I'm not relinquishing my weapon. Not until we know what's going on here."

"You must," the door warden's voice took on a dangerous timbre.

"Get bent."

Drop Kick wasn't one to have a short fuse, but this situation looked as though it were tailor made to push his buttons, and Coeur could sense the die-hard Marine in him coming out full-bore.

"Do what he says, son," came a voice from the next room.

From the bedroom came a casually dressed man, average of height and stocky of build. Slightly balding, and looking much older than his actual age from years of hard work on the sea was none other than Commodore Sean "Hammer" Lathrop, head of RCES Fleet Operations.

"It's okay, Drop Kick" he said soothingly, "stand down."

A withering gaze passed between the human and the Ithklur before Drop Kick relented. It looked as though the air around the both of them would've caught fire from their exchange.

"Yes, sir." Purposefully, he handed over the short-barreled automatic pistol he had stowed in the waistband of his shorts.

"Don't lose that."

The alien said nothing, and didn't actually seem to hear him.

"You too, Red Sun. Our guest is uncomfortable with weapons around, so hand it over."

Wordlessly, she slid it from its mini-holster did as Hammer instructed.

The director of the Reformation Coalition's exploratory forces took his seat in a plush chair and motioned for them to sit.

"Get comfortable. We may be here a while."

Drop Kick perched on the edge of the couch leaning forward.

"Begging the Commodore's pardon, but could you please tell us what in blazes is going on, sir?" The Marine's growing impatience was apparent on his face.

Coeur remained quiet, taking in Hammer's demeanor. Even through the character lines on his face, there were clear lines of stress and worry. He looked tired, and though he was adept at concealing his emotions, Coeur could tell a heavy burden weighed on him.

"The both of you know as well I that we don't usually bandy Class III messages around without good reason. Well, I can tell you that this qualifies as a good reason if ever there was one. All cloak and dagger business aside, I just needed to get the two of you here with as little public attention as possible."

Hammer could tell he had their complete attention. The two spacers before him were great together, better than maybe they themselves realized. It was for that reason that he had brought them here.

"There's someone I want the two of you to meet before we get started."

Hammer nodded to the Ithklur across the room and it disappeared into the bedroom.

Emerging a few moments later was a being more alien in appearance than even the Ithklur. Hexapodal with a kind of radial symmetry, the creature looked remarkably like a large, ambulatory starfish. Walking on four of its prehensile limbs, it raised its primary limb out in front of it scanning the area with its six eyes. Six elongated eyestalks of the primary limb were interspersed between six tentacles that splayed outward from the limb looking almost flowerlike to the human eye.

A Hiver, I should've known it would be a Hiver behind this, Coeur thought smugly.

Its gaze went to the Ithklur who straightened with balled fists at its side. Then the Hiver shambled into the room and settled on a mushroom-like stool one of the other reptilian humanoids sat down near the window.

"Red Sun, Drop Kick, this," Hammer introduced, "is M. Genghis."

With its sixth limb, the Hiver tapped on the keyboard that was strapped to its underside, which vocalized words into human speech.

"Greetings. It is an honor to finally meet the two of you in person."

"Likewise," Coeur said as Drop Kick merely nodded.

"M. Genghis is a highly-respected member of the Hiver Federation," Hammer interjected. "Listen closely to what it has to say."

"We're all ears, sir." Drop Kick put in.

"The two of you have had contact with Hivers in the past, am I correct?" The voder fashioned the emotionless words.

"Yes," Coeur put in, "I taught at the Hiver Technical Academy and we've had two Hiver advisors aboard *Hornet* since she launched."

"And you visited the Seabridge Nest on Ra, correct?"

Surely, it already knows this to be true.

"Yes, our first voyage on *Hornet* was to take the Sergeant Major here," she motioned to Drop Kick, "and Detachment A of the Third Armored Marine Battalion to the planet Ra to test the ship's worthiness for extended space travel."

"What happened once you reached Ra?"

"It was there that we found that a strain of the bio-agent Fologorex II had been unleashed on Seabridge Nest. The ship's doctor, Physic, did what she could, but we determined that we needed to leave the planet if we were going to find a cure. During that time, we found that Guild agents had been operating on the planet, possibly spreading the Fologorex poisoning, so we set off to try and find their base and possibly a vaccine."

"And did you?"

Coeur eyed the Hiver before answering. She would go ahead and play its little game.

"Yes. The trail led to Sauler where we ultimately found the Guild Base responsible. We pulled the information for Physic to create a vaccine and then ran a decap operation on the Guild HQ itself."

The words were bitter in Coeur's mouth. In less than thirty seconds she had described in cold detail what had taken months of effort interspersed with periods of deadly peril. Her original Hiver envoy, Scissor, had not made it back from that mission, succumbing to the same toxin that had claimed thousands of its race.

"I see."

Drop Kick turned to Hammer. "Surely this has been declassified, sir."

"Indeed," said the Hiver answered for him, "it has."

Hammer straightened in his chair. "All right, people, this is where things start getting serious. Everything from here until you leave this room is strictly classified. No one, and I mean *no one*, is to know what is discussed here until *Hornet* is underway."

"Underway, sir?" Coeur arched an eyebrow.

"We'll get to that in a minute. M. Genghis, if you would continue."

Drop Kick was impossibly even more on the edge of his seat, full of anticipation as revelations were surely near to being unveiled.

"You are familiar with the Hiver phenomenon of manipulation, correct?" M. Genghis said.

"Enough to know that the 'M' at the front of your name stands for 'manipulator', and that you must've done something pretty important to earn it." Red Sun said back. "I've spent months on end with a Hiver aboard my ship, so yes I'm familiar with it. The Hiver predicts an outcome of a situation similar to a scientist proposing a hypothesis, then it engineers the circumstances to arrive at the pre-determined outcome. At that point they let those involved know about it to take proper credit."

"Correct. That is the usual manner in which manipulations take place. I ask because a grasp of the principals of manipulation is central to an understanding of our current situation."

Drop Kick snorted. "I don't suppose you'd care to explain that."

"Gladly," M. Genghis said with typical indifference to human sarcasm. "You see, Sergeant, there are many humans that believe that the Reformation Coalition is itself the result of a manipulation. I can assure you that is not the case."

From your lips to God's ear, pal Drop Kick thought to himself.

"However, the Hiver Federation and its representatives have, on occasion, used our influence to help educate and stabilize the Reformation Coalition. Over the course of the last 10 years, we have noticed a continuing disintegration of social order across the expanses of space you call the Area of Operations. In the Reformation Coalition itself, the member worlds have noticeably fallen out of unity. Based on available data, I have been able to deduce that a total collapse of the Coalition is imminent within the next three years.

"Through careful study of the situation utilizing and supported by several lesser manipulations, I set in motion a manipulation with a greater, more far-reaching effect. The goal of the manipulation was simply this: the internal stabilization of the Reformation Coalition."

"I mean no disrespect," Drop Kick said, "but it doesn't look like you've succeeded. The Assembly of Worlds seems more like a nursery of spoiled children every day."

M. Genghis regarded him silently, the fingers of its prime limb fluttering slightly as if in a soft breeze. The reference to children was lost on the Hiver, whose race did not share an affinity with their young. Rather they released their offspring into the wild so that only the most intelligent and resourceful progeny would survive to eventually take their place in Hiver society.

"As progress was being made toward this end, however," M. Genghis lowered his head slightly, backlit by the closed Venetian blinds, "I became aware of a counter-manipulation being carried out through the Reformation Coalition, one whose goal is precisely the opposite of the one I set forth. Where I wish to bring peaceful coexistence, they seek destruction."

"Who's behind it?" Drop Kick asked.

"We don't know," Hammer interjected, his brow furrowed. "The intelligence division has been cracking down on it, but so far we have no real legs to stand on as of yet. There are several front runners that come to mind."

"I'll say," the Aubani Marine said, "The Guild, The Solee, some renegade megacorporation or TED, or even a Empire-Building strain of Virus."

The RC certainly had no lack of enemies seeking their downfall.

Good Gaia, what will I have to contend with this time, Coeur thought.

"To effectively combat this counter-threat," the Hiver said, "it became necessary to assemble a ship and crew with sufficient training and technical skill to go where was needed, possibly traversing even The Wilds, without raising undue suspicion."

"Lemme guess," Drop Kick could see the writing on the wall, "*Hornet*."

"Correct. The ship would then be available to investigate those activities that were detrimental to the manipulation. I sent instructions to the one you know as Cicero, or Scissor, to accomplish this task. Through a manipulation of its own, it directed the Technical Nest to effect repairs and refit *Hornet* for space travel."

"So, I take it that we, "Coeur made a motion encompassing Drop Kick and herself, "were also part of that manipulation." Having the Hiver she had only just met referring to her and her ship like pawns on a chessboard was unsettling to say the least.

"Affirmative. You, Red Sun, were chosen because of the knowledge you possess as a Pre-Collapse remnant, and because of your ability to lead and inspire others."

"I'll take that as a compliment." Coeur said flatly. The Hiver did not respond.

"Another key position would be the ship's engineer. The subject in question would need to be both resourceful and possess a certain quality that I believe you refer to as "wilyness." I also believed it necessary that the subject should be at least passingly familiar with The Wilds."

"Crowbar," Coeur thought out loud. The Hiver made a very human looking gesture as he nodded his prime limb, what humans often saw as the Hiver's head.

That one I remember – Scissor set up the situation so I would pick him. Strange, he never revealed that manipulation to take the credit.

Something about that fact stuck in her mind and began to germinate as the conversation continued.

"The team would also need a scientist and medical technician, not only to treat the crewmembers in case of illness or injury, but also to properly analyze scientific data in the field and assist the Hiver envoy."

"Physic," Coeur said.

"Indeed. It was easily arranged so that the two of you would become roommates, so that you would in turn pick Dr. Takagawa for the mission when it was finally presented to you."

And I bet that's why she never received clearance for all the other assignments she asked for outside the Medlab, too.

"And what about me?" Drop Kick asked sourly.

"Ah, you see the operations that *Hornet* would no doubt face ran a marginal probability of facing limited combat both in space and on the ground. Because of your service record and dossier, it seemed that you were the likeliest candidate available to serve in that capacity without endangering the established group dynamic."

"So, I wouldn't step on the Captain's toes, right?"

Six eyes blinked momentarily at the human colloquialism, perhaps unsure how to respond, or at least pretending to.

"And the others like my Marines, Deep Six, Gyro and Snapshot?"

"Each was a necessary position for the ship to properly function. Once the three of you were in place, Scissor relied on your expertise to choose appropriate subjects for these roles."

"Sounds like Scissor had us going pretty good from the start, huh?" The Marine said to no one in particular.

"I must admit the efficiency with which Cicero accomplished the goal in question. I believe that it was going to reveal the details of this manipulation once the first mission of this type was accomplished. Had Cicero survived, I believe that it would have attained the status of Manipulator."

"Wait a minute," Coeur said her thought from earlier finally manifesting itself. "By revealing all this to us haven't you invalidated your own manipulation? The larger one, I mean."

"Yeah, good point." Drop Kick chimed in

"An accurate perception," M. Genghis returned. "And yet what has been set in motion already must carry forward if this region of space is to maintain its unity. Therefore I require your assistance to set the manipulation back on its original course."

Red Sun and Drop Kick looked over at Hammer where he sat with legs crossed, a million questions in their eyes.

"Look, this isn't unlike when I asked you to go to Mexit and make sure that old Solomani arms depot didn't fall into the wrong hands. The successful completion of this mission is paramount to the RC, and its survival may very well depend on it. That's why I'm tapping you and *Hornet*. You two have managed to work miracles in the field before, and that's exactly what the RC needs right now. A miracle."

Their eyes glittered. What ever happened from here on out, Hammer knew the two of them were ready. Mentally, they were already preparing themselves, making ready for what was to come. All he had to do now was point them in the right direction and turn them loose.

"What do we need to do, sir?" Coeur said. She had already weighed the risk versus the reward in her mind. She was resolute. Next to her Drop Kick nodded in assent.

"First," the Hiver said, "you must retrieve a key element of the manipulation. A device called the Alpha Bank."

"Come again?" Drop Kick said.

"It is a vast memory storage device that is of great importance to the sector of space." The Hiver said simply.

"What does it contain?" Coeur asked cautiously.

"The future."

Of the many things the two veteran spacers expected to hear, the almost ominous response resonated deep within them. Sidelong looks at each other told spoke volumes in the knowledge that the worlds could very well hang in the balance.

The future, the thought echoed in her mind.

Sixteen.

Her path to the future, paid at so high a price.

The Hiver waited a beat letting its words sink in before continuing. "Since the Federation was not as affected by the Imperial collapse as the human worlds, we have retained our technical knowledge and manufacturing techniques. These we share with the Reformation Coalition, but at pace that allows for true understanding and application of the information before proceeding to the next advanced level."

"In other words," Drop Kick frowned deeply, "you get to control the flow of information, telling us what we can learn and when we can learn it."

"Precisely," the Hiver said. "The Alpha Bank contains a sizeable portion of Hiver technical data from all of the scientific disciplines - information which was supposed to be slowly time-released over the next standard fifty years."

In an age where knowledge was power, the single concentration of such information could indeed be a powerful asset, particularly if one could skip the half-century delay that the Hivers had in mind. If what it said was true, there wasn't a planetary government in known space that wouldn't go to any length to get their hands on it.

A cold chill passed through Coeur's body at the thought of someone like The Guild in possession of such wealth of knowledge. A quick look at Drop Kick and she found her concerns mirrored in detail.

A sudden weight appeared at her shoulders and the base of her neck. Throughout the past few minutes Hammer had sat quietly in his armchair taking it all in, a pensive look upon his weathered Nimban features. Now Coeur was beginning to understand why he looked so tired.

"So the obvious question at this point, is where is it?" she said.

"Ah. Therein lies the difficulty that we face," M. Genghis said. "The ship transporting the Alpha Bank from Guaran to Aubaine, the free trader *Hokona*, has gone missing."

"Fikken," Drop Kick muttered out loud. "Are you serious?"

"Quite serious. The ship checked in with M. Dina and the survivors of Sea Bridge on Ra six weeks ago. Its presence in the system was confirmed by the System Defense Boats, *Asp Alpha* and *Asp Beta*. The ship was on a narrow time schedule for its arrival here at Aubaine with only a week's margin of error, due to the sensitive nature of its cargo."

A week's margin? Even with Hiver efficiency a week's a razor thin amount of time, Coeur thought.

"With respect M.Geghis," she said, "a lot can happen in space travel that can eat up a week's worth of grace period on a schedule. Perhaps it just been delayed somewhere between here and Ra."

"Unlikely. The *Hokona* was equipped with Jump-3 engines and its priority was to come to Aubaine as quickly as possible. Had a delay occurred as you say, a coded message, disguised as an ordinary cargo manifest, would have been forwarded to us. No such message has arrived as of today."

"That's why," Hammer spoke up, "*Hornet* is going to go find her. Best case scenario, she's just broken down somewhere or couldn't get another ship to carry the message to us."

"And worst case scenario, sir?" Drop Kick said grimly.

Hammer regarded him for a moment before answering as though carefully weighing his words and their possible implications.

"Worst case, *Hokona* has been destroyed and the Alpha Bank has been captured by an outside power."

"Oh, I see." The Marine said as though he were sorry he asked.

"One of my mottos has always been: Hope for the best, but plan for the worst. I'm equipping you for the worst, as you'll see when you get back to your ship. So as your mission stands, you'll head coreward towards Ra and see if you can find any sign of *Hokona* along the way, following up on leads as you go. We'll give you the alternate courses she was going to take if the others proved untenable. If you get to Ra and nothing has come up, then back track along those secondary paths and try pick up her scent that way. We'll upload her full specs into *Hornet's* computer before you leave tomorrow."

"That soon, sir?" Coeur asked.

"Time is of the essence." The director of the RCES said. "You'll leave as soon as your refit is complete."

M. Genghis caught Red Sun and Drop Kick's attention with a slight wave of the fingers radiating from his prime limb.

"Your cooperation in this matter is greatly appreciated by the Hiver Federation," it said in its same dead level tone emanating from its voder. "Extreme discretion is, of course, advised both during and after this mission. If the manipulation is to be properly restored, then..."

Drop Kick cut the Hiver off.

"Begging the Commodore's pardon, but I think that's the *last* I want hear of Hiver manipulations." His tan skin flushed as his temper rose.

Coeur laid a calming hand on her friend's arm. "Drop Kick."

"No Red, I want to say this. We've been sitting here wasting time chatting and having to hear how cavalierly this alien we've never met has been monkeying around with our lives! I won't stand for it."

Drop Kick stood up and glared down upon the Hiver with thunder behind his eyes. M. Genghis did not recoil from his menacing stance as most Hivers Coeur had known would have. It merely looked up at him with its unshakable calm.

I sure as hell wouldn't want to be on his stool right about now, Coeur thought. From the corner of her eye she noticed the three Ithklur ready to pounce the moment the Marine escalated the situation.

"Stow it, Marine." Hammer said, his voice carrying the unmistakable weight of authority. "You've got a job to do."

It had been Hammer that contributed the most to the casual demeanor of the RCES. Many thought that perhaps he didn't possess the necessary gravity to demand attention from others rather than request it.

They were wrong.

Drop Kick suddenly found himself at attention and the growing indignation he felt at the Hiver's action cooled noticeably.

"Commodore, if I may address the Sergeant Major's concerns?" M. Genghis swung its prime limb around with the near boneless grace of a swan.

Hammer nodded with a warning gaze at Drop Kick.

"Be my guest."

The alien turned back to face the still-standing Marine.

"Tell me, you view manipulation as an inappropriate act, do you not?"

"Darn skippy, I do."

"May I ask, why?"

"Because whether you realize or not, humans like to be in control of their lives, not dangling on the line like someone's puppet. And that goes double for me." Drop Kick crossed his arms across his broad chest, but carefully modulated his voice to avoid evoking another verbal riposte from Hammer.

"So you ascribe a negative perception to the one that engages in such an activity." It echoed from the voder as more of a statement than a question.

"Well, yeah."

"I comprehend. Would you then object to someone directly asking you to take on such a responsibility if the end result was desirable, such as saving the Reformation Coalition?"

"No, I wouldn't mind."

"And would you do so if you were ordered?"

"Sure. I'm a Marine. Safeguarding the RC is what we do." Drop Kick glanced at Coeur obviously wondering where all this was going.

"Would it then upset you if you accomplished such a deed when foreknowledge of such events could have been detrimental or even completely obstructive to a desirable end result?"

Drop Kick at last understood and cast his gaze down.

"I guess not."

"Then I submit to you that what is truly important to your sensibilities is not who directs your actions, but rather the result of those actions. Understand Sergeant that, though you may have been part of a manipulation, your actions and your conduct are reflective upon you, not the manipulator."

Drop Kick swallowed and met the six-eyed gaze.

"Well, I suppose you had me doing things I would've done anyway. It still doesn't seem right, though, you poking your nose into other people's business like that."

"Actually, like the Majority of my race, I possess neither a sense of smell, nor an olfactory housing upon my person."

Drop Kick rolled his eyes, but at least conceded the point. Coeur could tell that matching wits with a Hiver, particularly this Hiver, was like trying to win an argument with Socrates.

"You doubt the utility of manipulation, Sergeant?"

"You could say that."

As Drop Kick was speaking, something caught Red Sun's eye. On one of the manipulator's limbs, the one nearest to the prime, it wore a silver ring. It was a curious affectation for Hivers as they needed neither clothing nor adornments. What's more the ring had a deep cerulean blue gem fixed upon the band. It was small enough that it might have escaped her notice except that the gem had begun to emit a flash of light at half-second intervals.

One of its six eyestalks left Drop Kick and flicked in the direction of the light for a brief instant. The flashing then abruptly stopped.

"Perhaps, I can demonstrate it for you. Observe."

M. Genghis slid from the mushroom-shaped chair and padded across the room to one of the elegant tables. Reaching out with the fingers of its prime limb, it picked up a piece of the hotel's letterhead and a writing stylus. The rest of its fingers surrounded the area around the paper as it appeared to write something down.

As it finished, it neatly folded the paper four times and stuffed it into one of the utility pouches on its external voice box apparatus. Before it could explain what it was doing, if indeed an explanation was to come, Coeur's communicator crackled to life.

As she stood to fish it out of her belt, than Hammer straightened in his chair and put his hand to the earbud in his left ear. Red Sun eyed him as the static subsided in her hand-held unit.

"This is Red Sun, go ahead."

A frantic voice filled the channel.

"Coeur? Coeur? Are you there?"

"Physic?" she said, surprised. "What's wrong?" A cold lump began to form in her stomach.

"They've taken him, Coeur! They took him in broad daylight!"

"Physic, calm down." Red Sun said firmly. "What has happened?"

"It was Zorn. She's alive, I don't how, but she is. She just forcibly broke into the Trantown jail and nabbed August right in front of me."

The cold feeling went from being merely chilly to sub-arctic.

"Are you okay?"

"Yes, but Zorn was heavily armed. She took him away in some kind of transport."

"How long?" Coeur demanded.

"Not more than a minute."

"Sit tight," she said, calm despite a world that seemed radically different than just a minute previous. "We'll see what we can do."

"Roger. Physic out."

She clicked it off and turned back to Hammer and Drop Kick.

In odd contrast, Hammer looked more tired than before, but an intense light burned in his eyes.

"There's just been an explosion over at the Penitentiary. Apparently some kind of prison break." He said carefully enunciating every syllable.

"I know, sir," Coeur said. "They just broke August Delpero out. Apparently they're heavily armed."

Shock lit his face. "Delpero?"

"That can't be good." Drop Kick said, his gift for understatement holding true.

"Physic was there when they took him, sir. It was Zorn."

Hammer shook his head decisively. "Well, she isn't going to get away. Come on!" The highest-ranking officer in the RCES fleet broke into a run towards the door just like fighter pilot in the middle of a hot scramble.

Hot on Hammer's heels, Drop Kick and Red Sun followed accompanied by the larger Ithklur door warden.

Hammer broke into the hallway at a dead run, wasting no time traversing the beautifully carpeted corridor.

"This way," he said over his shoulder, "to the roof."

A few twists and turns and they found themselves in a grey stairwell, with Hammer taking the steps two at a time.

Geez, for an old man, he can really hoof it, Drop Kick thought.

They nearly unhinged the door marked, "Roof Access" as they four of them burst through it. Unlike most hotels that sported a lavish swimming pool on the roof to make the most of Halos' light, the room of the Ambassador Hotel looked more like a landing pad. Celebrities and other notables in the corporate and political arenas were known to frequent the establishment and this was put into place to ensure their discreet exit and entrance.

Today, however, the only vehicle on the pad was a large, fully enclosed air raft that looked like it was configured for use as a tour bus as well as a familiar beat up speeder painted primer red. It was the same speeder that Half-Track had used to convey them fleet headquarters on their last mission. On that day, they had spoken to Hammer and he had given them a dangerous mission to undertake that affected the future of the RC as well.

History repeats itself, Coeur mused to herself. *Here we go again.*

The enclosed canopy, a difference since the last time Coeur had seen it, opened as they approached.

"You drive," Hammer said to Red Sun as he piled into the co-pilot's seat just as Drop Kick and the Ithklur warrior took the back.

Coeur, knowing the special capabilities of the seemingly innocuous speeder, smiled slightly as she slid into the pilot's seat. "Yes, sir!"

Her hands expertly adjusted the controls and the speeder began to lift off on its contra-gravs before the canopy had even finished closing. The top of the hotel began to shrink as they lifted into the air and came about.

Drop Kick, with little to occupy his immediate attention, studied the tour bus that had been parked next to them. From its markings, it seemed to be a transport for the electro-band, Psychotic Polyester.

"Nice ride," Drop Kick said to the Ithklur almost chidingly. "I take it you and the good Manipulator came in that?"

"Affirmative. It was believed that it would conceal our presence here."

"Yeah, I bet." Drop Kick smiled. "That kind of music is enough to keep most people at least a hundred meters away."

Despite the danger they might be in any minute from now, they were taking action and Drop Kick couldn't be happier. From the alert way that the Ithklur sat in its seat and the burning look in its eyes, Drop Kick could see they were both in their element – the hunt.

"The name's Vin, by the way." He said over the loud hum of the engines. He extended his hand to the alien. "It's Drop Kick if you prefer."

The Ithklur's scaly face didn't seem to move, but it returned the gesture, taking Drop Kick's hand firmly in his four-fingered one.

"I am Lirien Kree'vesh, Firstson of Veerkashan ... or Raptor to those of your kind."

"Raptor, huh? Well, that fits. Say, mind if I have my weapon back? I might have a need for it." He had gained more information than he had hoped in that exchange – a name *and* a gender. From what Drop Kick had heard, there were few differences between the genders among the reptilian race.

Without hesitation, Raptor reached into his webbing and produced the Marine's pistol. Drop Kick took and primed it all in one motion.

"Strap in back there," Red Sun said over her shoulder, "I'm about to burn the air." The speeder rose to sufficient height to put its speed to greatest use, orienting itself toward the distant Jandor Peninsula on which the correctional facility sat.

"The prison's eighteen clicks away," Hammer said looking at the data pad in his lap. "Cut across the bay." Coeur nodded her understanding.

There was the peculiar "false" feeling of movement that accompanies initially dampened take off as Coeur punched it well past the regular speed limit, avoiding established airlines. The sturdy little craft was capable of up to 300KPH and in under fifteen seconds she was pushing the craft to its limits.

The cityscape of Trantown became a blur beneath them as they cut across the skies and shot out over the sparkling blue perfection of Yamman Bay.

They were less than four minutes out from the target, cutting a least-time course to the rocky promontory of land that outlined the bay's western edge, terminating with the prison grounds.

The Commodore activated his comlink. "HQ, this is Hammer. Priority alert. Patch me through to SatCom."

A female voice answered after a few seconds, slightly distorted through the comm channel. "We're reading you, Hammer. Go ahead."

"Are you tracking the situation over Trantown?"

"Affirmative, sir."

"What've you got?"

"It looks as though an unregistered *Redwing*-class sub-orbital cutter is speeding away from the scene at close to 1250 KPH and accelerating."

"Are there any pursuers?"

"Negative. The local police sent in two air rafts, but they were quickly left behind. Standby, sir."

SatCom came back on the line after a moment.

"Sir, Brierly is scrambling three *Cobra*-class supersonic interceptors. They should be there inside five, sir."

"Tell them to step on it," The RCES C-in-C said, then switched lines of thinking. "Control, is the bogie gaining altitude?"

A brief pause and then, "Roger."

Drop Kick leaned against his flight restraints put his hand on the back of Hammer's seat. "They're sub-orbital? Surely they can be trying to break gravity in a tin can like that."

"They probably have a ship waiting to pick them up in orbit," Coeur said over her shoulder.

"SatCom," Hammer said coolly, "Give us their projected course. "We're inbound. And get me the *Kukulcan* on a secure channel."

The gigantic monitor was one of Aubaine's most deadly SDB's. Weighing in at 75,000 tons displacement, it was a mighty defender of the RC nerve-center.

Hammer looked down at his datapad as the information began streaming in from the satellite telemetry.

"They're heading almost due north at a 30 degree pitch. Change course to intercept."

Coeur looked over at her commander, "I don't think we can catch them if they are at that speed, sir. I'm squeezing as much juice out of this rig and we're barely topping 300."

Hammer nodded, but didn't seem concerned.

As Coeur began to bank, she spared a glance at the plume of black smoke rising into the sky almost directly in front of her.

While her little craft was agile for its size, executing a bank at full speed still demanded a more sloping arch than she would've liked. Consequently by the time the nose of the speeder was pointed north, she could actually make out the cliffs upon which the Penitentiary was built. She could even see individual windows and guard towers that were bustling with activity. Emergency vehicles were already arriving on the scene flashing their lights.

The prison. Physic's down there somewhere.

Hammer switched over channels as a sequenced red light flashed, indicating the ship was standing by.

"This is Black Star." A deep baritone voice sounded over the speakers. "We're reading you loud and clear, sir."

"Manny," Hammer said using the Captain's first name, "we've got an inbound bogie that's headed topside. Are you in range to intercept?"

Coeur heard the Captain say something off mike without breaking the link, as the lines of information came his way.

"That's a roger, Hammer. At their rate of ascent, it looks like we've got about four minutes before they're in the dark. They'll be well inside our firing envelope by then, sir."

"Excellent. Are there any ships in range that could pick up the cutter?"

"Negative, sir. *Kukulcan's* the only one in this part of the sky."

"Listen carefully," Hammer said. "We've got an escaped prisoner on board that bogie – one that needs to go right back to his cell. So shoot to disable, not to kill. Are we clear?"

"Yes, sir. We'll only wing them."

"Good Hunting. Hammer out." He broke the link.

The horizon promptly disappeared, replaced with endless sky as Coeur raised their pitch from a lateral grade to one matching their escaping contact.

"Sir," Coeur began, bringing up her earlier point, "I don't think that we can catch them in this speeder. Scrappy as she is, she can't do five hundred in the air, much less twelve."

Hammer's eyes met hers and she detected a slight twinkle in them. Without looking away, he once again brought the communicator to his lips.

"Are you reading, *Sparrow*?"

The communicator answered back immediately with a new voice, "Yes, sir. We've got you on our scope. Link up in thirty seconds."

"Roger that."

Coeur arched an eyebrow, but said nothing. It didn't surprise her that an old hand like Hammer would have a trick up his sleeve for a situation like this.

I guess that's why he runs the show.

Drop Kick looked back and forth between the two of them.

"What's going on, sir?"

"My personal pinnacle has been in a wide holding pattern since we arrived at the hotel, just in case I needed to evict M. Genghis at a moment's notice. When I woke up today, I didn't think I'd use it to run down escaped criminals and their cohorts, but that's life in the service for you." He said with a slight chuckle.

A few seconds later a giant silver eagle zoomed over their heads and then braked, so that the small speeder was directly in line behind it. Coeur felt the speeder jerk under her control as some of the sleek pinnace's engine wash fell on them.

The aft section of the craft folded out in front of them and ghostly blue lights sprang up on either side the interior, forming what was to Coeur's mind landing lights.

"Okay," Hammer said. "Take us in nice and easy."

The veteran pilot took a deep breath. "Yes, sir."

As fast as she dared, Red Sun flew the speeder directly at the back of the pinnace and nosed it directly into the exposed cargo hold. There was a thudding sound at various points on the speeder's fuselage as magnetic grapple latched onto them and settled them into place. The window of sky behind them closed as the compartment sealed up behind them. Without delay, Coeur popped the canopy and the four of them bailed out.

"We're secure, Firebrand," Hammer said into his comlink as his feet reached the deck plating. "Hit it."

"I don't suppose this bird has a pea-shooter?" Drop Kick said to Hammer.

He pointed to either side of the compartment ahead of them. "Turrets on either side. Go."

Drop Kick looked at Raptor and they understood each other immediately. As Red Sun and Hammer made their way forward toward the cockpit, the two grunts peeled off to man the side-mounted laser turrets.

Even with inertial compensators, Coeur could feel the deck plates vibrate beneath her feet, telling her that *Sparrow* was making up for lost time. As they reached the pilot's compartment, she read the air speed indicator. It read over 1400KPH.

"Welcome to the party, sir," the young pilot Firebrand said as Hammer and Red Sun secured the flight harnesses. "We saved you a front row seat."

"Time to target?" Hammer said, resonating calm.

"We're on them inside two minutes, sir."

"Make it sooner," Hammer replied.

"Thought you'd never ask, sir." Firebrand said pouring the fuel to it. There were a few bumps as they went supersonic and kept going right past it, until the pinnace cleared Mach 5. Hammer pressed a button on the console beside him. "Guns, are you prepped back there?"

Drop Kick's voice answered. "Locked and loaded, sir."

"Affirmative," Raptor stated simply.

Sparrow raced through the air, shredding the cloud cover around it. The golden sunlight flamed upon the silver exterior of the pinnace giving the distinct impression of a predatory bird in flight.

A proximity alert sounded in the cockpit a few seconds later. "There're our *Cobras*, sir." Firebrand reported.

"Signal them to fall into escort formation around us and formulate a firing solution on that cutter. Cripple only."

Coeur reached over and touched Hammer on the shoulder. "What kind of armament are the interceptors carrying, sir?"

Hammer punched it up on his panel, and frowned. "Looks like they came in ready to defend an invasion, not down a single cutter." He pointed to his screen and Coeur understood.

All three interceptors were bristling with an array of Thunderhead anti-aircraft missiles. Even a near miss burst from one of them was enough to destroy the cutter three times over.

"Remind me to speak to Brierly Flight Ops when we get back." Hammer said to Coeur. "That kind of firepower is reserved for planetary emergencies."

"Signal from Eight Ball, sir," Firebrand said. "His squad is falling in."

Outside the viewport, two of the angry looking interceptors took up positions on either side of the pinnace. Though the third remained unseen, it would no doubt take up a rear position just above *Sparrow's* rear section so that it could have launch missiles without fear of hitting the commander's pinnace.

"We have a visual on the target," Firebrand said as he held the craft in tight formation with the interceptors.

"Let's see it.

The forward viewscreen, located between the pilot and co-pilot's seat flashed to life. Occupying the screen was the delta configuration of the fleeing *Redwing* cutter. It sported no markings or colorations save the uniform shade of gunmetal that adorned its hull. A few seconds later, the three of them could make out the ship itself outside the viewport. Firebrand slowed *Sparrow* to match speeds with the target.

It was bigger than the pinnace by several tons, but was not built for hyper-speeds like *Sparrow*. That it would be used as a getaway vehicle was didn't add up. Coeur knew that Vega Zorn was not the kind to make a move like this unless there was reason. Whatever the space pirate might be, she was not a fool, and that started silent warning bells going off in Red Sun's head.

"Raise the cutter," Hammer said to Firebrand, "Tell them heave to and set down, now."

Firebrand did so, but as his hand was about punch in the final command, he stopped short and tilted his head quizzically.

"Sir," Firebrand said wonder in his voice, "the cutter is hailing *us*."

Hammer's face went grim. "Put them on."

The viewscreen switched from a readout of the ship in front of them to a peculiar sight. In the foreground sat the armored head and shoulders of a figure in battle dress on what looked like the bridge of the ship. In the background was Vega Zorn in her tailored vac suit. She stood casually, with both her hands gripping the back of the chair she stood behind. She seemed either amused or bored as she idly tapped her fingers.

"Greetings, Commodore," the armored figure said, its voice filtered to sound ominous. "we've been expecting you."

"Can it, mister." Hammer said with flinty eyes. "Land that tub right now or I will land it for you."

"On the contrary," the figure replied, "I would advise you and your fighters to break off at once. I will only give you this single warning."

"Nuts to that."

Zorn cut in, "Red? Is that you?" A smile was plainly evident on her face, visible even through her facebowl.

"Small world," Coeur replied.

"It is at that."

"I don't suppose you're going to do this the easy way?" Coeur's voice was carefully stripped of all emotion.

"Do I ever?" the space pirate said playfully as though nothing were amiss.

"Point taken."

Hammer allowed the banter to play out as Zorn was at least a potential source of reason, in stark contrast to her metallic friend.

He started to make a firmer demand when Firebrand caught his attention.

"Incoming message, sir. It's from M. Genghis."

Before he could accept, a portion of the viewscreen split off and resolved itself into the form of the Hiver, still cozy in the luxury suite at The Ambassador.

Hammer cut the sound to the other channel.

"Commodore, I have an urgent request for you," It said.

"We're a little busy right now, Manipulator. "

The Hiver continued anyway.

"I've been monitoring your situation. I would advise you to cease your current action and break off pursuit."

"What?"

"Your danger grows exponentially every second you remain."

Hammer gritted his teeth, but remained composed.

"Don't do it, sir." Drop Kick said over the line, "We've got them in our crosshairs. Say the word and we'll light them up."

Sparrow was already seeing the sunlit sky fade into the brilliant starscape of space. The pinnace could not follow them much longer and neither could the *Cobras*, which were built for atmospheric operations. If they were going to take their shot it was now or never.

With heavy resignation, Hammer made the call. "All fighters, break off, I repeat break off immediately."

The squadron leader answered back, "Sir? You want us to bug out?"

"Roger, do it now."

"But, sir, you couldn't ask for a cleaner lock than this."

"Do you know who this is, son? This is Commodore Lathrop. I said break off, now do it." Coeur could only imagine the shock to system that reproof had been to the pilot, and it had been delivered crisply without any hint of anger.

"Roger, sir." Eight Ball said indignantly, "We're clearing..."

He stopped in mid-sentence and static filled the line. All at once each of the three interceptors fell out of position around *Sparrow*, not in the orderly manner that had been drilled into them, but haphazardly with no rhyme or reason. One even came close to smashing into the pinnace, but a deft dodge by Firebrand avoided that fiery fate.

"Gaia," Hammer said. "What happened? Were they hit?"

"No, sir, their power signatures seem nominal, they..."

"They what?"

"Oh my God," Firebrand looked visibly sickened, "their inertial dampeners failed, sir."

Coeur's eyes went wide with the implications.

At the speed they were going...

Disgust and anger filled Coeur as she cast a baleful gaze at Zorn, who was still standing there. She continued to drum her fingers on the back of the chair, but the whimsical look on her face was gone. If anything it looked almost haunted.

"Put us back on," Hammer said to the pilot.

The figure in battle dress was inscrutable behind the flashing red visor.

"A preventable loss, Commodore," the figure said, "I trust that further demonstrations will be unnecessary."

Hammer straightened in his seat and those weighty blue eyes locked on his opponent with calm, yet deadly intent.

"Now you have blood on your hands, and by Gaia, you'll answer for it."

Hammer switched off the com and the viewscreen went dark.

"Fire all weapons!"

Drop Kick and Raptor opened up, lancing at the back quarters of the cutter with their lasers. Bits of plating and debris blew off, but the cutter continued its hard burn.

The pinnace had finally reached the upper limit of its operational area and began to fall behind even as the cutter continued forward. Effectively, they had gone as far as it could go. The two gunners pinged away it, but the farther their target moved away, the less effective they became.

"Sand casters, sir!" Firebrand said excited.

Two canisters fired from the back of the cutter and explosive bolts spun them around creating pinwheels of pure sand. Each little silicate acted as a minute, reflective mirror. For laser weapons, whose true power is in the focused concentration of energy, something as ordinary as sand could block or dramatically reduce such a weapon.

And with that, *Sparrow* was out of the game. They could go not go forward and neither could they fire at the target. Still, the two gunners eagerly challenged the barrier of sand, but to no avail.

Hammer was immediately back on the comm.

"Come in, *Kukulcan*."

"*Kukulcan*, here, sir," Black Star said.

"Black Star, I rescind my previous order. Take that cutter out."

"Yes, sir." There was a note of grim finality in Black Star's voice.

By now *Sparrow* had lost all visual contact with the target, and appeared as a faint blip even on the EMS.

"Switch to satellite feed." Hammer said quietly.

Abstract outlines representing the fleeing ship in red and *Kukulcan* in green floating above a line graphic representation of Aubaine came into view. The mammoth SDB closed in, tightening the noose. It began firing its secondary lasers at the small craft to make them expend their sandcasters, all the while it maneuvered to bring its primary battery to bear to ensure the kill.

"New contact, sir. Bearing three-two-three." Firebrand said.

A new blip appeared in amber on the screen, denoting an unknown friend or foe. The cutter made for it, leaving a trail of protective sand in its wake.

"What? Where did it come from?" Hammer demanded.

"Unknown, sir. It just appeared out of nowhere."

"That must be the cutter's ride out of here."

On their sensor panel, *Kukulcan* wheeled around to target the new ship, obviously on the same page as the Commodore. Yet in the time it took to change vectors and qualify a new firing solution, the cutter linked up with the new contact.

And then, as suddenly as it appeared, the new contact vanished off their scope as though it had never been there.

"It's gone, sir."

"Like hell it is." He said. "*Kukulcan*, saturate that area. Maximum firepower."

The monitor rained fire into the area, bombarding the space where the ghostly contact had been only a moment before.

"Anything?"

"Negative, sir. The scope's dead." Firebrand said sadly.

And so are three of our pilots, Hammer thought.

"Send out an alert to the fleet and have Command deploy patrols to search for possible Jump exits at 100AU's out."

Firebrand, who wasn't used to sending out orders of this magnitude, relayed the orders back to FleetCom.

"What about us, sir?"

"Take us back down."

Coeur could sense the frustration that welled up inside the C-In-C. They had been a razor's edge from their objective only to have their quarry escape. From what she knew of him, he was a man that truly cared for the lives of those he commanded. The deaths of those pilots would haunt him.

Once they were at an altitude where the speeder would operate, the four visitors to *Sparrow* departed with Hammer taking the helm on the way down. The relatively short time it took to retrace their steps seemed like an eternity. Not one of the four really felt like talking, each coping with defeat their own way. Hammer was implacable. Coeur was pensive. Drop Kick frowned and looked idly out the window, while Raptor sat perfectly still with his slitted eyes closed.

They touched down in the same place they left, next to the tour bus and slowly made their way back to Room 16.

They were met by the other two Ithklur, but were not asked to relinquish weapons this time around.

"I see you have returned safely," M. Genghis said from atop its stool-like perch.

Hammer eyes were level as he walked up the Hiver.

"Not all of us made it back safe."

"I see. A regrettable loss of life."

"Yes. It was." Hammer crossed his arms. "You know something you're not telling me."

The Hiver did not reply.

"Now I'm willing to allow you a free hand here because I think you're working in our best interests, but that support goes away in a heartbeat the moment my people start paying the price for your silence."

Hivers were emotionless, at least in the human way of understanding it, but M.Genghis recoiled slightly from his words as though stung by them.

“Commodore, please understand that I know only what I have deduced from careful scrutiny of the existing circumstances or what I have set in motion directly.” From its side pouch, it produced the piece of letterhead with a flourish of its tentacles.

Hammer took the paper, but did not immediately open it.

“What is it?”

“Proof that we are on the right track, Commodore.”

Hammer unfolded the paper and studied the words there for long moments before passing it over to Coeur and Drop Kick to read.

It simply said:

The agents of the enemy will reveal themselves on Aubaine at last.

Chapter 2

Outwardly, the exterior of Berth 57 seemed deserted, but inside the large hangar that contained RCS *Hornet* was practically roiling with activity.

As Red Sun and Drop Kick made their way through the side entrance of the ship's berth, they noticed a slight thrumming of machinery followed closely by pounding and drilling sounds that weren't there a few seconds before.

“Did you hear any of this from outside?” Coeur asked her companion.

“Nope,” he answered. “And I bet nobody else did either. Look at those,” he indicated a large fan-like device in the corner. “Sound baffles. Filters the sound out. Probably didn't want anyone to know what they were doing in here.”

“Ah, I can see why.”

Before her, *Hornet* was being swarmed over by a platoon of engineers behind a large plastic curtain that had been drawn around her. Each of the mechanics wore a black one-piece uniform with no name or rank visible. The only visible symbol they wore was a patch on their right shoulder emblazoned with the insignia of the Reformation Coalition, with one curious exception. While the patch that RC's wore showed a humanoid figure in much the same pose as Da Vinci's Vitruvian Man surmounted upon a galaxy-like swirl, the emblem these men and women wore was done in black and gold outlines and conspicuously missing the swirl pattern.

“See that,” the Marine pointed to their uniforms, “they're RC spooks. My guess is that they don't exist on public file like you and I.”

“I'm sure this little shop project is why they gave all the attendants the day off, to keep them out of their hair,” Coeur said.

“Yeah, and I'm sure that carnival that just happened to pop up on the other side of the grounds was no accident either.”

“Hmmm...”

When the two of them had come back to the Academy, it was practically a ghost town until they made their way to the hangar bay. Several “escorts” had come out of the woodwork, challenging them for ID. It had taken her longer to get to her ship than normal, and now that she was here, she found the *Hornet* she left this morning was not the same ship that stood before her.

Slightly indistinct behind her semi-transparent shroud, there were subtle differences that Coeur could make even from where she stood. For one, the sea-foam green paint of her hull was largely gone, being slowly replaced by a darker battleship grey. Another team at the other end of the ship seemed intent going back over the grey, restoring the original color over the base coat. The contours of her sides seemed at once slightly widened and streamlined. From everything going on all around the ship, Red Sun was sure those weren't the only changes.

"So this is what Hammer calls a refit," Coeur said with her eyes transfixed upon her transformed ship.

"Guess so. Shall we go take a look?" It was a rhetorical question, he knew Red Sun well enough to know that, despite her nonchalant demeanor, she could not wait to see the new side of *Hornet*.

Ahead of them, two figures stepped from behind the curtain, speaking intently to one another, oblivious to almost everything else, gesturing emphatically in the air. Both were dressed in dingy workman's coveralls that looked like they'd seen extensive use. Recently tools of all sorts and descriptions bristled from their well-worn belts.

Physically, the two were like night and day. One was tall and lanky with close-cropped black hair and a scraggly beard outlining his roundish face. The other was much shorter, slighter of build with sandy blond hair covered by a ball cap worn in reverse.

"I'm telling you, Trevor," the bearded man began, "that won't be necessary. *Hornet* can take a lot more of a shock than you think."

"Yes, yes, you told me about that blasted asteroid around Novolen," the shorter man said pointing with the large wrench in his hand. "So what happens when you try switch to subsystems and the core freezes up you? Awfully inconvenient if you're already under the gun."

The other put up his hands in placation. "Hey, I didn't say it couldn't happen, but space is a big. Besides," he pointed in the direction of the ship. "*Hornet's* my girl, I rebuilt her from the ground up, remember?"

"Next you'll tell me that you that you hatched her all the way from an egg."

"My point," the engineer frowned, "is me and this ship and I have been through a lot together. I think I know what she's capable of more than you."

Coeur and Drop Kick, who had watched this exchange with a bit of humor, finally stepped up.

"Is there a problem, gentlemen?" Coeur asked.

Both engineers stopped and looked at *Hornet's* Captain.

"Hey, skipper," the bearded man said with roguish grin and greeting nod to Drop Kick. "Goodwrench and I were just hammering out some of the details of *Hornet's* newfound abilities."

"So, Crowbar," she said back to her ship's engineer. "What have you done to my ship?"

A rather impish light found its way into his eyes. "You're gonna love it, Red. The brass really came through for us on this one."

"Show me everything."

"Yes, sir," he said gleefully. "Right this way."

He beckoned them towards the ship, with Goodwrench joining them.

"So, everything go all right on your trip?" he said as they walked.

Coeur and Drop Kick looked at each other surprised.

"They didn't tell you?" Drop Kick said incredulously.

The engineer produced a rag from his belt and wiped his grimy hands.

"Tell me what? These guys arrived just after you left this morning with all sorts of new stuff. I've been here all day clearing it away."

Coeur groaned. "I'll fill you in later."

Crowbar shrugged. "Well, whatever it was, I figured something pretty big was up. "

"It is."

"You know, Skipper, I love these little secret trips you two get called away on at moment's notice. Sure, it probably means that were about to fly out to God knows where and face God knows what, but at least I get to play with some new toys. Thought you should know that."

"That's what I like about you, Crowbar," Drop Kick said. "Always an optimist."

The grin grew into a genuine ear-to-ear smile. "I'll bet you will be too when you see the haul we got this time around. Right this way." He brushed back the curtain allowing the four of them into entrance into *Hornet's* inner sanctum.

"Where to begin?" Crowbar said with pride as he looked at the ship.

"What's with the new paint job?" Drop Kick put in.

"Ah, that. It's a kind of synthesized ceramic enamel that helps mask some of *Hornet's* heat signature. Basically, it makes it harder to pick us up on passive EMS. Not impossible, mind you, but they'll have to try to keep us in their sights. But, since it's material-based, it doesn't have electronics that active sensors can burn through like regular ECM."

He pointed to the underside of the ship where the belly ramp was currently in the down position, allowing the teams of engineers access to the interior.

"You see how it's kinda shiny?"

The two noted the strange sort of muted glisten as the light played across the hull, refracting back in an odd way.

"From a distance, you can't tell a difference in the way she looks. Only up close can you tell something's weird. That something is this – the coating also partially deflects lasers. Small arms laser fire would be next to useless and even small ship-mounted batteries won't be as effective."

"Let's hope we don't have to test it." Coeur said.

"Yeah, I wanted to put a racing stripe around her laterals," Goodwrench interjected. "To make her look less plain jane, but that plea fell on deaf ears."

"Hey, my girl looks good just the way she is, okay?" Crowbar turn back to Coeur. "Best part about this? The coating was thoughtfully provided courtesy of Novastar Industries."

Coeur and Drop Kick winced at the mention of Delpero's former corporation.

"I thought they shut down his labs until they restructure." The Marine Sergeant said.

"They did...after the RC raided them."

"Really?"

"Yeah, I guess you don't have to go all the way out to the middle of nowhere to run a SAG operation. Not when there are plenty of goodies in your own backyard." Crowbar chuckled.

"What about the streamlining? Her lines look slightly different."

"The skipper knows her ship," Crowbar mused. "We picked up some extra armor in addition to what we had on our way out to Mexit. We've added least 5cm of superdense armor over the hull. Not enough to stop one of the heavy hitters, but enough to soften the blow of something smaller. Those things," he pointed to the sloped protrusions on either side of *Hornet's* pickle fork prow and around the bridge and engine housing.

"Those are hollow compartments filled with a hardening armor foam. Never knew the stuff existed, myself."

"Yeah," Goodwrench said, "it's silly expensive to make, but it hardens in hours and adds an almost equivalent layer of armor. Doesn't slow you down none in an atmosphere the way conventional alloy does."

The shorter man took off his cap and idly spun it round on his finger before replacing it on his head.

"It only lasts a few months before it needs replacing, but it's hard as hell to detect and adds the equivalent of another 8 centimeters on top of the other plating. Since you can shape the foam however, you like we widened her out a little to stabilize us in the air."

"So far I'm catching a theme," Drop Kick said dourly, "Extra protection that's hard to detect."

"You aren't kidding, just wait to you see the new armament." Crowbar continued his walk, circling around to *Hornet's* port side.

"Armament?" Drop Kick said with obvious excitement.

What is it about boys with toys, Coeur thought. Goodwrench fielded that one.

"First, Red Sun, we installed a newer magazine for your missile launcher. Last time out, you had plenty of ordinance with you, but your autoloader wasn't equipped to carry more than 5 birds at a time. Since we didn't want you to spend time reloading, we upped your autoloader and put in some honest to goodness missile racks, so your load goes from five to thirty two. We had to burn a lot of cargo space to fit 'em in, but I think it's worth it."

Drop Kick whistled. "That's a lot of heat."

"It ought to be," Goodwrench said, "we stripped it out of a frigate."

"I bet Snapshot's gonna love that." Drop Kick beamed.

"Yeah, well, I bet Gyro will love this even more." Crowbar gestured to the sensor array emplacement. "Notice anything different?"

The ship's EMS sensor array was, like the rest of the ship, under construction as showers of sparks flowed off of it from the workman's tools. Aside from the dish and sensor hardware was what looked to be a thick antennae extending out of the rig at a forty-five degree angle. As Coeur glanced at it, she noticed that it was not a single strand, but segmented and interspliced with rings of an odd looking metal.

"Is it some kind of long range communicator?"

"Not quite."

"Then what is it?"

"That," the engineer rubbed his hands together, "is The Stinger."

"Come on, Crowbar, quite messing around. Spill." Drop Kick said impatiently.

"It's a very powerful relic laser cannon." He said with a sideways glance to Goodwrench.

"What's the TL on that, Trev?"

"TL-15."

"Yeah, and when I mean powerful, skipper, I mean she packs a punch like a cruiser."

"What's her yield?"

"She puts out 1200-mj, which is why she comes with her own personal power supply.

Only thing is the power supply had to be slimmed down to fit her in. So, we'll probably only get one or two shots before the battery's depleted. After that she starts draining juice from *Hornet* directly, and that's one heck of a joule sink, Cap."

"A stinger, indeed." Coeur said marveling at the weapon system. Each little detail that Crowbar produced was being meticulously filed away for future tactical use.

"You like the name? Crowbar said with obvious pride. "I thought it up, myself."

"Does she retract in?" Drop Kick asked. "I'd hate think of a relic gun getting clipped by a piece of debris."

"Yep. The attenuators there," he indicated the metal bands, "they collapse down and the whole thing telescopes down to a real small unit. Then the plating it sits on folds back into the ship. We put it next to the array so that someone might overlook it at first glance, maybe even mistaking it for an antennae of some sort."

Coeur nodded, ignoring his minor jab. The tactical possibilities of that alone were staggering. That such a little ship could field such a weapon was amazing.

"Plus, I bet that the internal power system isn't all that easy to detect on sensors either." Red Sun said.

"You got it. It might read as some kind of subsystem or auxiliary unit, but probably not a weapon."

"That's what I thought." Coeur said, pleased. "Anything else, I should know factor into my thinking?"

Coeur thought she detected the two men giving Drop Kick a slight sidelong glance, but then Crowbar continued his litany.

"You remember how her sensors were really sharp?"

"You better believe it. The Hivers invested quite a lot in that department if I recall."

"Well the best just got better. The way *Hornet's* base systems were set up allowed for a greater sensor potential than the external hardware allowed. Well, we fixed that so now the sensor power she was built to handle is fully realized. In essence her sensors are sharper than ever. We've also got an improved ECM suite that will just about make you cry."

"Good to hear. It sounds as though we'll need them."

"It never hurts anyway," the engineer said. "And now we come to the final *piece d'resistance*," he said almost like a ringleader announcing a circus performance.

"If you'll follow me around aft, I'm sure you won't be disappointed," he said with a mysterious glint in his eye. The four of them circled around *Hornet* until they came around behind her.

"You see," Crowbar said, clearly enjoying himself, "we've got better piloting capabilities for you, Coeur. We have a missile launcher for Snapper, a laser for Gyro and sensors for Deep Six. It's fun for the whole family. Ah, but what do we have for the Cavalry Marine who has everything?"

Crowbar walked around to a bulky object covered with a canvas cloth.

"How about this?"

Like a true showman, he grasped the canvas with both hands and gave it sharp tug as though trying to pull a tablecloth out from under a set of dinnerware. Even with the flourish, the object was too large to get the canvas off completely. What it did reveal shown in Drop Kick's face as though he were a boy who just opened a prized birthday present.

It was a tank. Not only a tank, but a grav tank - with sleek silver lines that glowed almost mirror-like in the work lamps. The armor plating that composed its metallic body seemed nearly seamless and gave the impression of not only inestimable strength, but also uncanny swiftness even while it was sitting still. A flattened tube extended out from the faceted blister turret that ran the Majority of its length, speaking of immense destructive power. It was a beautiful predator that enraptured the Marine's attention, and for several moments he sat completely quiet, tracing the lines of the vehicle with his eyes.

"Is this what I think it is?" he said at length.

"It's an A-51 Valiant," Goodwrench said matter-of-factly, "and when it comes to relic vehicles that were completely overbuilt by the Imperium, accept no substitutes."

"It has the 225-mj VX-94 PALADIN fusion delivery system that'll send a bolt through a half-meter of superdense armor like a hot wire through butter."

"Just make sure that you want to destroy whatever you hit." Crowbar said.

This elicited a chuckle from Drop Kick as Goodwrench continued.

"It also has two Whistler missile racks on either side of the turret that are facilitated by a tactical painting laser. So, you've got plenty of pep at short and long range.

"This sucker can move, too. It can nearly go supersonic in an atmosphere and the armor's so strong that it would almost take another Valiant to punch through it, or leastwise something that was *real* serious. It's some kind of titanium polyceramic mesh that sheds heat like nobody's business. Hell, the armor's tough enough on this monstrosity that you can use the whole thing for planetary drop ops."

At 14-tons, the tank was considerably bigger than the 155-1 Intrepid that Drop Kick had at Mexit, and it dwarfed the Pyrrhus support sled that he had on their way to Ra, and ultimately Sauler.

"Now *this* is a tank," Drop Kick said, admiringly. "I think I'm love."

"Careful, Drop Kick, what would Snapper say?" Coeur said. Normally not one of the joking sort, Red Sun did still possess a dry sense of humor that escaped most people that didn't know her. Drop Kick, however, was not one of those people.

"Somehow I think she would understand."

"Well, that's most of the big stuff," Crowbar said, "that pretty much concludes the tour."

"Well, then, we better get inside and secure our gear. We're in the air as soon as she's ready and our team's assembled." She checked her chronometer. "Which should be soon in both cases."

She turned, leaving the two engineers to their work, and made for *Hornet's* belly ramp that was already open, admitting traffic. Drop Kick walked at her side still obviously starstruck from the tanker's dream that had just come true.

"Do you know only three of them have been recovered?" He said, his face looking all the more boyish with the light of enthusiasm behind his eyes. "One of them is on Nike Nimbus, and the other one doesn't run. I think they're studying it in some lab somewhere. I just can't believe I have the third."

"Tells you something, doesn't it, that High Command is entrusting us with all this high-end relic technology." Coeur said as they emerged into *Hornet's* bridge. This place at least seemed relatively unchanged.

"Yeah. Hammer wasn't kidding when he said he was giving us the works. I mean did you ever notice how the tanks I get keep getting bigger and bigger?" Drop Kick said with pride.

Coeur settled into the pilot's couch looking very much at home.

“Ever notice how the stakes keep getting higher and higher?”

* * *

Two hours later Coeur had all her equipment properly stowed and ready. Her preliminary flight checklist would have to wait as *Hornet's* main systems were only partially online due to her facelift. So, when the crew of the ship started to appear, their Captain met them just outside the curtain still surrounding the ship along with Crowbar and Drop Kick.

Two women came into the confines of the hangar, speaking to each other quietly. At the sight of all the activity and changes to the ship, they stopped dead in their tracks as Coeur waved them over.

At distance the two looked very similar in build and deportment. Both were strong and able-bodied but with low centers of gravity due to their short statures. They were even similar in age – but they both had become experienced spacers despite their 23 years. The two even shared a history with Red Sun, as both had been her students at the Academy. She'd hand-picked them for their skills when *Hornet* first returned to her space after an 80-year retirement.

As the two approached, however, differences began to become obvious. Johanna Solomon, the ship's first officer, was a native Aubani with the sun-bleached hair and tan skin that came with it. Not only was she the Executive Officer, but she was also a crack laser gunner, the best in her graduating class. She was a rock, and showed remarkable steadiness even in those times when *Hornet* had found herself in the heat. Her callsign “Gyro” was an apt name for her blossoming abilities.

Beside her was the fair-skinned, red-headed form of Denise Valencia, the missile gunner. A native of Oriflamme, she possessed a fiery temper in keeping with her heritage. Though she had nearly been kicked out of the Academy for the sheer volume of demerits for her stormy temperament, Coeur was quick to see the young woman for the diamond in the rough she truly was. The same fire she had for argument was the same force that drove her to succeed. Fiercely loyal to her friends and strong of spirit, it was no wonder that Drop Kick had ultimately fallen for her. Snapshot was her RC taccode.

“Reporting for duty as ordered, sir.” Gyro said smartly with a salute that Snapshot mirrored.

“Welcome back to *Hornet*, ladies.” Red Sun. “I'm sure you'll find her to your liking.”

Coeur saw Snapshot's eyes dart to Drop Kick for a moment and then back to her. At the Captain's side, Drop Kick did not outwardly react to seeing his bride-to-be, but Red Sun noted the fiery notes in his eyes.

“Get onboard and get set. Both of you have new systems to learn, but that will wait until we're starseide.”

The two nodded, Snapshot with another quick glance at her man, before moving into the ship. A few moments later, an interesting menagerie of non-humans came into view.

One was a young Hiver as evidenced by both the spots on its pinkish-tan skin and the open-eyed curiosity with which it surveyed the surrounding area.

“Hey, Razor is here,” Crowbar said in low tones to Drop Kick.

“I still don't see why it needed an actual taccode,” the Marine replied. “Its name was already two syllables, just like everyone else's.”

“It's the principle of the thing. Everyone has one, even Cicero had one, so Newton should be no different.”

“You mean Razor,” Drop Kick corrected.

“Yeah, whatever.”

Beside the Hiver envoy was a deep-water Schalli, indicated by his mottled grey skin. The only indigenous race to Aubaine, the sub-aquatic Schalli were naturally gifted at mathematics and navigation. Down below the waves of the ocean those gifts were obvious advantages, going hand-in-hand with basic survival. The natural affinity they carried made them greatly prized as navigators, and Coeur could personally attest that Deep Six was worth his weight in gold.

At first glance the Schalli looked like a kind of dolphin or porpoise with a smooth torpedo-shaped body ending in a fluke, a domed head and bottle-like muzzle. There the similarities ended. Both his eyes were set upon eyestalks that extended out a foot perpendicular to his head.

Four barbels that looked somewhat like cat whiskers sprouted from the ends of his snout, which were extremely dexterous and often used as an extra set of digits. The sleek lines of his body were broken on either side by a pair of tentacles, each ending in a flattened pad. As he had no legs for overland movement, he was encased in a water-filled roller chair that made up for it.

Beside the two aliens were three Ithklur, Raptor and the two others from The Ambassador Hotel, dressed in their respective armored body sleeves.

The equipment for the three shock troops had arrived separately and Coeur had seen the manifest. Heavy battle dress, specifically tailored for their alien physiology, gauss and fusion rifles, as well as a few handheld SAM launchers to round out their arsenal.

The unlikely group approached as a slightly bedraggled Physic appeared in the doorway. Respectful of the doctor, Deep Six and Razor slowed their pace to allow her to catch up. The three Ithklur pressed on however and came to stand before the trio.

"Raptor, Hunter and Striker are here to attend our duty," Raptor said, addressing Drop Kick.

"We welcome you," Drop Kick answered. "We recognize the duty you are here to fulfill."

As one, the three Ithklur looked to Red Sun, in respect to the ship's commander, and then went inside without further fanfare or comment.

"Real friendly guys."

"Yeah," Drop Kick said. "They're a real barrel of laughs."

By that time, Physic, Deep Six and Razor came into view. The Hiver was busily munching down a brace of corndogs while typing on its voice modulator.

"Are you sure you don't want one, doctor? They are well-prepared and still quite warm."

Physic, who was a bit the worse for wear, made a slight face.

"Uh, no thanks. Not after last time."

"Very well." The Hiver said as it put a whole corndog in its cloaca, underneath its body, an organ that served numerous functions including as a mouth. "These, however, are not of Hiver creation. They are from a vendor from the circus across the starport. They are of higher quality than I thought to expect."

Physic thought about it for a moment, "Well I am sort of hungry. Giving my statement to the police took a while. I guess it couldn't hurt."

She accepted one and began to take a bite.

"Of course, I had to coat them with a substance to help in the process of digestion." The Hiver said.

Physic hesitated and withdrew the corndog.

"What kind of chemical?"

"It was merely an additive derived from my own excretory enzymes to ensure that I properly breakdown the fatty acids and nitrates found within them."

"Ah. On second thought, I'm not all that hungry after all." She handed it back to the Hiver who then devoured it noisily.

"I have added a case of these to *Hornet's* inventory, should you reconsider."

"Thanks, Newt – I mean Razor," she said as she caught Crowbar's eye.
"I'll keep that in mind."

"How are you doing?" Coeur said to Physic as they approached.

"It's been a long day, Coeur." She said.

"It has indeed. All of you get settled. I'm hoping to leave before first light."

The Schalli bobbed, sloshing tiny droplets of water, clicked three times in assent then and made his way slowly up the ramp. Newton followed him still munching away.

Physic stayed behind a moment longer and Coeur reached out to her friend and drew her into an embrace. Physic accepted it and Coeur felt a tremor run through her body. She held her for a long moment and when they pulled back, Physic's eyes had the sheen of narrowly avoided tears.

"We'll get to the bottom of this, Orit." Coeur said with authority. "I promise you that."

Physic nodded and surreptitiously wiped her eyes with her thumb.

"Thanks, Coeur."

"Now, go get your sick bay in order, and then I want you to get some rest."

"Is that an order?" Physic said with a hint of smile.

"Do I need to make it one?"

Physic picked up her duffle bag and joined the rest inside.

Drop Kick and Crowbar had watched this exchange with a small degree of awkwardness, but that faded as soon as the doctor disappeared inside.

"Is she gonna be okay?" Crowbar said what Drop Kick was thinking.

"Yes. She just needs time to let it out," Coeur said as she turned towards them. "In the final account, Physic may just be the strongest one out of all us."

"I'll second that." Drop Kick said as they waited for the final four members of *Hornet's* crew to arrive. When they arrived, it was all at once.

Three of them wore the green body sleeves of the Aubani Marine's similar to Drop Kick's. There was levity between the three of them, but it was muted from their normal shenanigans. There was the muscular Whiz Bang, who was the grunt, and proud of it. Then there was Bonzo the sensor specialist that was tall and slim like Crowbar, but hardened by the demands of life in the Corps. The third was Mercy, the Marine pilot. Tough even by Marine standards, she was perfectly at home with the other two men and was first to put them in their place or join in their antics as the situation warranted.

Slightly apart from the Marines was a new face. A young woman dressed in a black body sleeve strode beside the three ground-pounders listening to them, but saying nothing. She looked as though she were also a native of Aubaine, but where Drop Kick and Gyro had hair that looked light, this woman's shoulder-length tresses were a snowy white, with one sidelock pinned up with barrette over her right ear. When the foursome caught sight of the welcoming committee, Coeur saw the stranger had arresting emerald green eyes that seemed to take in everything around her as though it were second nature.

Coeur also noted that the RC symbol on her right shoulder was darkened like that of the engineers working on *Hornet*.

"Ten-hut!" Drop Kick barked as they neared the bottom of the ramp. The Marines snapped to attention as did the young woman in black.

Drop Kick looked them over with a critical eye, letting them stand there for a moment before he finally released them.

"At ease."

"Nice to see you, too, Sarge." Whiz Bang said sardonically.

"Yeah, you keep thinking that. I want all your gear racked and accounted for inside 30 or else there's going to be an outbreak of mess duty and extra PT. You get me?"

"We get you, sir!" the three said as one.

"Well, don't just stand there. Get to it."

With practiced precision the three Marines high-tailed it inside and began their work, leaving the white-haired woman standing alone.

"Hello, Captain Red Sun," the young woman said in a sweet voice with the barest hint of a lilt. "Lieutenant Lauren Porfira, reporting for duty, sir." She handed Coeur a small hand held data display. Red Sun took it and looked it over.

"You're from the Intelligence Branch?" Coeur said.

"Yes, sir."

"What's your taccode?"

"Raven, sir."

"Your specialty is..." Coeur said leadingly. She had already read the woman's dossier, but not surprisingly it contained very little actual information.

"Intelligence analysis and counter operations. Commodore Lathrop recommended me to *Hornet* personally."

"I take it you are fully briefed on the situation, including recent events?"

"Yes, sir." She indicated the silver briefcase, handcuffed to her arm. "I have all the relevant materials and data right here."

"Well, keep that under raps for now. I will make my formal briefing to the crew once we're in Jump Space."

"Understood, sir."

"A stateroom's been set aside for you in the loft."

"Thank you, sir." Dismissed by a nod from Coeur, she also went inside.

"Well, / haven't been fully briefed, cap." Crowbar said with mock indignity.

"All in good time. Now I suggest we join the others and get *Hornet* ready to fly." Coeur turned on her heel and boarded *Hornet*.

"Great," Drop Kick said, "a spook onboard ship. That's just what we need."

"I don't know," Crowbar smiled. "Seems okay to me."

* * *

Less than seven hours later all the black-clad engineers had gone, the equipment had been put in its proper place and the umbilical cords were being retraced. Fully fueled, *Hornet* was ready to go a good four hours earlier than expected.

Thus, when the ship lifted off from Berth 57, it was close to midnight locally. On the bridge, Coeur sat comfortably in the pilot's couch with Deep Six's navigation station on her right.

Strange, Coeur thought, as they cleared the berth, *this is the exact same place where I saw this ship for the first time when Scissor offered me the job as her Captain.*

There was the feeling of nostalgia, but she forced it back down inside her. The past might be rearing its head, and the future might hang in the balance, but it was always the present that must occupy her attention.

She switched over from the contra-gravs to HePlars and drove the two-pronged bow of the ship deep into the night sky. The flashing running lights of other craft blinked at her as *Hornet's* own illuminated her hull.

For the second time in a day Red Sun challenged the gravity well of Aubaine. This time it relented as *Hornet* broke through on her way out to 100AU's, the recommended distance from a gravity well to transit into Jump space.

On the bridge, Coeur laid in the course in Deep Six's place as a precaution. This was a practice that Hammer was fond of, however, from past experience Coeur knew that her navigator could work the mental gymnastics of navigation in his head. Consequently, Deep Six deduced that their first Jump point was the planet Phoebus.

"This is becoming something of a tradition when we start out on an important mission," Coeur said. "For that I apologize. You know I would rather you did know. "

"It is completely understandable, Captain," the Schalli said with a customary bob, "and a necessary precaution against possible sabotage."

"I'm glad you understand. And as it turns out I used a Jump plot that was created by a very capable navigator." Coeur said pointedly.

"Thank you, Captain. I recognized the precipitation points from the last time I refined that particular Jump."

"I thought you might. I guess there's no sense in trying to hide it from you." She said, shaking her head, "but then again the rest of the crew will know soon enough."

The Schalli regarded her with its wide-eyed gaze. "Our poets have a saying, Captain," he produced a series of clicks and whistles in his native tongue. "Roughly translated, it means: From light into dark, from sunlight into shadow, my path lies in the deep... and I know not where it shall lead."

Coeur looked meaningfully at the endless starscape that now surrounded her ship.

The Deep.

From light into shadow...

"I can imagine that must sound very beautiful underwater."

"Oh, yes. Much of the harmonics and subtlety is lost when it said through an open air medium." He wagged his barbels enthusiastically, "After all it does refer to a descent where light spectrum is slowly filtered out and colors become dark."

"Of course." She checked her holographic display. "It looks like we're a little less than five hours from our Jump solution. Better settle in."

The crystal blue disk of Aubaine became ever more distant as *Hornet* moved farther away from the warm hearth of Halos and into the cold void of space.

* * *

Once they successfully Jumped, Coeur called everyone together in the spacious dining hall, minus Crowbar who was closely monitoring the interplay of Jump energies and the ship, and Razor who was on bridge duty.

Considering the nature of what was about to be revealed, she wanted the Hiver to be subject to the least amount of attention right now. Although, she thought to herself that his absence might be the subject of speculation. She clicked on the intercom, so that her voice would carry across the ship.

"All right, I know that many of you are wondering what's going on. As you've no doubt noticed the ship has a few more tricks up her sleeve."

There was series of nods and assents.

"Those of you that were here last time know that I had to I keep our mission objectives to myself until we were well on our way. Well, this is a different kind of mission altogether. Our objective this time is not a place, but a ship, and more specifically, the ship's cargo."

They wanted to ask questions, she could tell by the inquisitive look in their eyes, but they remained silent, soaking up her words.

"I'll be circulating the details in a little while, but for now I have this for you," she produced a data crystal from her belt and plugged into the holo system.

On one of the flat panel screens appeared the RC emblem which faded after Coeur punched in the security code into the head and shoulders of Hammer Lathrop. There was bit of a shock that ran through the crowd, save for Raven.

"Greetings to you, crew of *Hornet*. Be advised that this message is only going to play once, so listen up." The Commodore said, as his audience naturally began to concentrate on his words.

"By now you are on your way to Phoebus. *Hornet's* mission is to find a missing ship, the far trader *Hokona*. She carries a very special item that is of paramount importance to the Coalition."

The picture of Hammer switched to that of a shiny silver rod capped on either end with a purplish glowing crystal with a strangely foreign silver touchpad that did not seem ergonomic to human hands. Hammer's voice continued over the image.

"As you can probably surmise, it's of Hiver make. I won't go into details as to what it carries, but suffice to say that it contains advanced technical knowledge that was meant to be disseminated at the Technical Academy."

Well, I suppose that's true, Coeur thought.

Hammer's image returned. "I cannot stress to you how important it is that this storage device is found. Ideally, its safe recovery should be a first consideration, but greater is the need for this *not to fall into enemy hands*."

The image paused a moment and Hammer's eyes seemed to take in the crowd, giving the illusion that he was actually there.

"I expect the very best from each of you, and I know you will not disappoint. That's why *Hornet* was tapped for this mission in the first place."

Hammer leaned toward to camera, and in that moment Coeur could tell that the Commodore had a personal connection with them with this message.

"Good hunting, and God bless." He gave a salute then the flat panel went dark. All eyes strayed to Coeur as she became the natural focal point of the room. She stepped forward.

"We have the rest of the minutiae on file. I want each of you to eat, sleep and breathe it. The more we know, the better chance we have. There's a saying: *Praemonitus, Praemunitus* – Forwarned is Forearmed." She said using the motto of the old Imperial Scout Service. Her dark eyes scanned the assembly.

"Let's do our job and get back home."

* * *

Conscious of the new elements of her crew, Coeur contrived to have their first meal together soon after their meeting. In the past, there was a tendency for the new members to isolate themselves from the regulars. It had been that way with Drop Kick and the Marines when

they first came onboard, and then again with Gaffer and crew of drop troops. She could already tell that the three Ithklur and to a lesser degree the mysterious Raven, were showing signs of this same pattern.

Of course, the more integrated they all were, the more effectively they worked as a team. There was no disputing that fact, among the spacers. For some reason, the act of dining together had the effect of lowering the barricades for bonds to form. Perhaps the act of breaking bread together, and the taking of sustenance was such a commonplace act, that it laid the groundwork for more complex social interaction. Or perhaps good drink and a full belly merely allowed them to relax around each other.

In either case, it worked splendidly. With remarkable skill, Coeur started a conversation between the two most distant sections, the Aubani Marines and Ithklur warriors. They began telling their war stories, starting with the humans. Drop Kick told about the running battle with Emperor Brak's forces on Mexit, ultimately leading to the TED's overthrow. Not to be outdone, Raptor told a spell-binding tale, of how he had survived for two weeks behind enemy lines with no supplies and only the weapons he could scrounge. He spoke in the characteristic clipped, to-the-point way of his people, but there was stark poetry to his words that drew everyone in. By the end, Raptor had managed to cripple the enemy's organization by single-handedly taking out a key communications tower.

After his tale, Coeur had to revise her opinion of the stalwart warrior. While he seemed dangerous to the point of being lethal, he was also apparently well read and could readily converse on just about any topic with the skill of a philosopher. He also had a calm head for tactics and firm grasp of operational realities when things got rough.

At one point Deep Six was moved to recite a poem that he wrote during Jump space called *Reflections on the Void*. Apparently the dramatic piece was part of a larger collection that might soon be published on Aubaine. No one, not even Coeur, had heard of this before. They each, in turn, congratulated him.

A mathematical genius with the heart of a poet...why does that not surprise me?

One by one each of the group contributed a story, amusing anecdote, or showed sort of talent, until soon there was a festive atmosphere in the air. Exactly what Coeur wanted.

Share the good times together to make it through the bad times.

Gyro told of how she handled exercise 61C in the final exam of Red Sun's class at the Academy, and how it had mirrored a situation that Coeur herself had once faced. Snapshot put in here and there, but became strangely quiet as the evening wore on.

Drop Kick noticed this change in her attitude as she toyed idly with a half-eaten carbo stick and propped her head up with hand with an elbow on the table.

When it came time for Raven's turn, Coeur interposed as the white-haired woman stood up.

"Let me propose a toast," Coeur said raising her glass of electrolyte punch, "To absent friends."

"Here, here," echoed across the lounge. Snapshot, however, looked down and seemed even farther away.

Coeur motioned and then Raven took center stage, and to everyone's amazement, began to sing along with musical accompaniment courtesy of the lounge's computer. It was not uncommon for spacers to be able to sing. With the amount of time on their hands during Jump, it was something to occupy their time, just as sea-shanties had played apart in pre-space wet navies.

But this went far beyond just causal talent, the range and control she demonstrated was of professional quality. The song she sang, Coeur recognized as an old song from her homeworld of Terra called *Tears of A Clown*.

Soon almost everyone was clapping and keeping beat as she performed. And it was a performance. Everything from the small dance steps she took to the playful expressions that played across her face were all polished. It was during this impromptu concert, that Crowbar strolled into the lounge after being relieved by Physic.

He stood in the hatchway for a moment looking at Raven, taken aback from what he was seeing. All the scene needed was some colored lights flashing and it could have been a nightclub.

The engineer sided up to Deep Six, whose four barbels were twitching to the notes like a conductor's baton.

"Well," he said over the din, "this is different."

"She is an exceptional talent," the Schalli said obviously enjoying himself.

"Yeah."

Gyro happened to notice Crowbar's entry, and saw the transfixed look in his eyes just as Raven brought the song to a belting finale and rousing applause.

She took the cheers and Coeur motioned for another. Raven nodded and keyed up the music.

What followed was a very haunting, but similarly spirited, song that sounded to Coeur's ears as having a hint of a Russian sound. It was actually an Oriflammen traditional and Snapshot looked up sharply as the familiar tune penetrated her veils.

While everyone else continued watching the show, Snapshot got up and slipped quietly past Crowbar into the corridor. Drop Kick watched her go with interest. Something about the way she moved told him that something was amiss. After a moment to position himself near the door, he followed after her. He was pretty sure he knew where she was going.

Leaving the music and revelry behind, he made his way to *Hornet's* main hold. Sure enough, he found her there leaning against the Valiant, arms crossed, lost in thought.

"Hey there, beautiful, He said as she looked up.

"Oh, hey." She was still half-staring at the bulkheads.

"Everything okay?"

"Yeah, I guess. I just needed to get away. The crowd was starting to be a little much." She said with a glance back towards the main lounge.

"Are you sure that's it?"

The big Marine took up a place next to his fiancée and put his arm around her, drawing her near.

"Well..."

"Yeah?"

She slipped from his arms and walked a few paces away, resting her hands on her hips.

"I was just thinking, about what Coeur said in there."

"About the mission?"

"No, about absent friends."

She reached out and ran her hand along the shiny armor of the tank. "Every time we've gone out, somebody hasn't made it back."

Drop Kick nodded sadly.

"The first time it was Scissor," she continued, "and then Gaffer... and Badger."

He knew that she'd had a budding friendship with the fresh-faced Marine that had lost his life in an accident in the Zloga system. The young man had been an admirer of hers, as well as student of her missile expertise, with few friends due to his Tefladi heritage. She was only getting to know him when fate took him away.

"We keep getting sent on these missions that are more and more urgent. I just can't help wondering if we'll lose someone this time."

She looked up and met his gaze. "I couldn't stand it if I lost you."

He took her in his arms and kissed her forehead.

"You're not gonna lose me, Snapper. You know that."

"But -"

"No buts," he said, stroking her soft red hair. "I'm going to marry you Denise Valencia. You and I have too much of a future together for someone, *anyone*, to come between us. And I pity the poor soul who tries."

She bit her lower lip at his words, considering them.

"Besides," he said flashing his most boyish smile, "I'm a Marine. You know we're too stubborn to die."

She tilted her head, smiling despite herself.

"Don't you mean too thick-headed?"

"Same difference."

He kissed her softly, and she returned in kind.
A future...together.

Chapter 3

The first thing he became aware of was his own breathing as consciousness slowly returned. Daring to open his eyes a crack, he was nearly blinded by the glaring white light.

When he tried to move, however, this head howled in protest. Gingerly he ran a hand over his scalp and touched the feathery soft gauze of a bandage. Still, he pushed through the discomfort and sat up.

He found immediately that he had been lying on a comfortable couch of some kind that seemed strangely familiar to him. As his eyes adjusted to the light around him, he found that he was surely dreaming.

All around him were the trappings and creature comforts of his former life. The room was meticulously decorated in rich red velvet and gold, and one wall off to the side showed a holographic rendering of a brilliant lightning storm inside a gas giant. A fully-stocked wet-bar graced the opposite wall, appointed in richly carved wood and gilded fittings.

"I'm dreaming," he heard himself say aloud. *What other explanation can there be?*

"On the contrary, August," a smooth voice said behind him, "you are very much awake."

He turned to find an attractive red-headed woman dressed in a flowing white dress standing before him as though she had materialized out of thin air. He blinked a few times to see if the angelic apparition would vanish, but she held true. Something was familiar about this woman, who stood there fixing him with a knowing smile, but searching his memory he came up with nothing.

"Who are you? Do I know you? Where am I? What happened?" he was rambling, but his rapid-fire series of questions halted as his head began throbbing. Involuntarily he put his hand to it as he winced in pain.

"So many questions. I'll see what I can do to enlighten you," she said striding over to the bar, pulling out a bottle filled with magenta liquid and two heavy glass tumblers.

"In the meantime, why don't you sit down and rest. You've had a busy day."

August sat down and ran his hand over the tasteful upholstery of the couch, confusion still in his eyes. The woman poured him a drink and set it down in front of him. Her striking grey-blue eyes caught his attention and held it rapt.

"Let's go in order, shall we? Though you probably only half-recognize me, it's me, Vega Zorn – and yes, you know me very well." She smiled a coy half-smile and almost made him spill his drink.

"Zorn?" The space pirate he knew wore a black-crew cut and sported a cutlass scar across her left eye. The woman before him had neither of those, instead having a shoulder-length mane of red hair. The scar was completely gone, but the eyes...they were the same. Her face seemed fuller, and was freckled now. He looked her up and down in disbelief. This was indeed the same woman.

"See, I knew you'd recognize me," she read from the expression glowing on his face.

"But... how?"

"Long story. Let's just say that things change when you're hunted, it's best to change with them. Now," she said, downing her tumbler in a single draught, "back to your other questions. You are currently in Jump space aboard the *Lord Ryan*. I believe it's just the way you left it. We did of course make some modifications."

They were aboard his yacht...or rather his *former* yacht. It, along with all of his personal assets, had been auctioned off during the dismantling of his corporation.

"Yeah, we picked her up at the Trantown Auction." Zorn said. "She's a little ostentatious for our purposes, but it's hard to beat a 4G acceleration with Jump-4 engines. I'll give you this, August, you never did settle for second best."

He nodded his understanding, still half expecting to wake up in his cell.

"Now, as for what happened...well that's another story. I'm sure you're still a little groggy. I must apologize for that. The shaped charged was more effective than I thought and you were

caught in the concussion. Still," she said running her hand across his stubbled face, "you're none the worse for wear."

"You busted me out of prison?"

"You got it. We ran into a few more bumps than I'd like, but we're safely away and the RC doesn't know what hit them." There was slight flush to her fair skin. "I must admit, it was pretty exciting."

Mentally, he was processing all that she was saying, but he could tell that he was not up to his normal acumen when dealing with people. Even shaken, he was staring to come back to himself and staring to fit together the puzzle before him.

"Why? Why did you do it?"

"Well now," she said refilling her glass, "we couldn't just let August Delpero rot in prison now could we? Sooner or later, some two-bit lowlife was going make sure that you left prison in a body bag. Either one of your old enemies would see to it, or some punk acting on his own. It was just a matter of time. There's too much at stake for that kind of nonsense."

"You've said it a few times now," August said. "I've got to wonder, who exactly is *we*?"

Zorn scratched her finger around the rim of her tumbler.

"You don't miss much do you?"

"I try not to."

She had been lounging in the chair despite her ostentatious dress, but in a heartbeat she drew herself up. She was all business now.

"Simply put, the group that I represent, is looking to make, some might say, *sweeping* changes in the RC. You and I both know that the system doesn't work." She stood and made a few paces through the room. "In many ways, both of us have been casualties of it. You see, there are many factors that will affect the future, August. Some we can't control, like Virus or entropy, but others we can. The system that ground both of us down and spit us out is just that, an organization, made up of people just like every other. And like any organization, it can be remade or recast."

He sat back in on the couch, fiddling with the drink in his hand.

"What are you suggesting, Zorn?" there was touch of his old self in that statement and both of them felt it.

"Basically this – you help us set things on a new course and you will not only see Novastar rise from the ashes, but you will gain back everything you had twenty-fold. The ones running this operation are *very* interested in you, August, and when this is over you'll have their gratitude."

A gleam of shrewdness shown in his eyes and, despite his prison coveralls and his ragged appearance, the man that had build Novastar from nearly the ground up sat there where a broken shadow had sat a moment before. He was back.

Zorn took note of this change, but approved. For him to prove his worth to her superiors he would need the full coin of his faculties working for him.

"So, what's the catch?"

"No catch if you play nice."

"And if I refuse your offer?"

"I'm sure we can arrange for you to find your way back to your prison cell." Her eyes were dancing as she said it, and there was no hint of a threat in her words.

"Point taken." He said with the same sly smile she remembered. "But, I want to know more about this group, before I sign in blood."

She glided over to the couch and settled in beside him.

"All in good time."

Sensing that she would not tell him anymore, he reached out and stroked a lock of her glorious red hair.

"I like the new look on you."

There was no mistaking the meaning of his glance.

"Now, August, you know I don't mix business with pleasure."

"Since when?"

"Well now that you mention it, I do seem to remember something about the last time we were together in here, but it's not coming to me."

"Let me refresh your memory."
He reached for her, and her eyes lit with fire.
I could have everything – be everything, I was...and more!
"So, is this business or pleasure?" he said heavily.
"Both."

* * *

Some time later Zorn emerged from the main lounge and into the adjacent meeting room. Two men in sharp business suits waited for her there. She knew them only as Mr. Halafast and Mr. Kim – the liaisons she had between her operations and the driving force behind them. Though they both possessed the polished urbanity of lawyers, Zorn had been around enough to know that both men were extremely dangerous.

"So," Mr. Halafast began, "how is he? I trust he's comfortable?"

"He's sleeping now, but other wise fine."

"Will he cooperate?" it was Mr. Kim.

"Definitely. He'll hem and haw a little, but he's in."

"Good," said Mr. Halafast. "I was, of course, skeptical when you first brought this matter to me, but I think you may have found a true believer in the cause."

"And," Mr. Kim said, "one that has much in the way of capital to bring to the table. Good work."

"Thank you." She said with a slight bow of her head. "The real test, of course, will be at Spencer and we're still more than two weeks out, even with our 4 parsec stride."

Mr. Kim put his hand to his chin, a sign of measured thought. "Keep him occupied." He said. "He will be naturally curious about us. Allay his apprehensions, but don't give him too much at one time. Once Spencer is behind us, and our forces fully marshaled, then we can gauge whether or not we can disclose more to him."

"I can do that."

"Excellent," Mr. Halafast said. "I'm sure Command will be glad to hear it."

* * *

His Excellency, Delvin Garrett, Hereditary Steward and Protector in the stead of Imperial Archduke, Lord High Regent over the Sovereign Lands of Phoebus, sat alone in the trophy room of majestic Stonecurtain Keep, little more than a prisoner.

All around the room were mementos and prizes that the Archduke and even his own ancestors had taken as tokens of glory from past campaigns. An Imperial Standard bearing the royal sunburst, a set of metal dress gauntlets that once belonged to the Emperor, a platinum crown taken from a rival at the overthrow of his lands, even a magnificently jeweled scimitar given to the Archduke as a token of loyalty from the Kaliphate of planet now dead from Virus. The myriad artifacts resonated with history. Each had their own story to tell, each was an inspiration to those who would take up the mantle in the future.

In this very room Admirals and Archdukes, arrayed in their finery, had met around the long oaken table and discussed their plans and designs. That was why the Lord Regent came here, to feed off the energy of those that had come before him and decide what he could do to salvage his kingdom.

He sat at the head of the table with both his elbows on the crimson coverlet, supporting his chin on interlaced fingers. How long had things been this way? A year, perhaps more?

The days were starting to run together. He had heard that once a man was imprisoned for so long, time became a transient and mutable quality, where after a while it meant nothing at all.

He rose from the table and strolled out onto the veranda overlooking the striking green of the valley below him with his hands clasp behind his back. Outwardly, he might still look as he should, clad in the silver and gold dress uniform as befitting his station, but little more than a slave to the powers that had supplanted him.

Even if they had left him a measure of dignity, if nothing than for outward show, the velvet and muslin curtains might as well be iron bars – the ornate filigreed doors the rude portals of a jail cell.

He had become a puppet to be trotted out at public functions to smile and laugh and put people at ease, else the repercussions could be too terrible to contemplate. Inwardly, he was hollow.

What would the Archduke think of his kingdom now, I wonder.

He would probably execute the Regent for allowing his lands and his goods to be compromised. Perhaps he should have seen it coming, perhaps all the signs were there from the first. Was it greed that had led him into the jaws of the trap, or was he just too blind to the cunning of his foes?

Their emissaries had come to him with the normal platitudes and empty words that most diplomats seem fit to spew. But once those pleasantries were out of the way, they spoke plainly to him. They had simply asked if he was happy with the current government of the Coalition, of which Phoebus was a member.

His answer had, of course, been no. Even with a Regent, Phoebus was still a kingdom, where the few rule the many. The democracy of Aubaine was almost an affront to their sensibilities, and yet the capitol of the Reformation Coalition was their closest neighbor, just one parsec away.

However highly Garrett might think of his station and his holdings, he knew that being so close to the heart of the RC made them little more than a glorified refueling station. Since The Collapse, they had lost their technology where ox-powered carts and rudimentary firearms represented their highest accomplishments. Thus, with no technology, they had become dependant on Aubaine to allow them to compete in the stellar community.

That support had ultimately garnered resentment from many of his subjects, as their benefactor possessed radically different political views from their own. Even Garrett himself was not untouched by this need to not be out from under Aubaine's sphere of influence, which had led him to look for assistance elsewhere.

He walked over and leaned upon the artfully decorated ferrocrete rail and sighed mournfully.

The emissaries were more than understanding to his plight and offered him everything he could've wanted – autonomy from Aubaine, a ruling body that was much more in line with his own political beliefs and technology enough to rise above their downtrodden state to heights of power to rival the old days.

So skillfully did they present this to him that he accepted their offer without weighing the possible consequences. They had told him what he wanted to hear, in exactly the way he wanted to hear it. He had allowed himself to believe. Once he had signed on to their plot, they left behind advisers to help ensure their long term success. These men were little more than guards armed with modern weaponry, armor and equipment to ensure Garrett's continued loyalty. Without firing a shot, the planet had silently fallen.

Now Phoebus had become a pawn to another power, expressly what he had hoped to avoid with Aubaine. There were rumors now of people disappearing from the surrounding townships, those that asked too many questions. Even a few of his servants had been "detained" with no explanation. The Regent himself could no longer leave his own gilded cage without permission.

His grip tightened on the rails in frustration and his jaw muscles clenched tightly. How could he have been so foolish? How could he have not foreseen this? With his planet in the silent grip of terror, he was powerless to stop it.

Or was he? He was still alive and in full possession of his wits. He still commanded the loyalty of those closest to him and his own guards. That was something, at least.

He turned and left the veranda and came to stand before the Imperial sunburst. Beside it hung the colorful heraldry of the Archduke's house, depicting a phoenix rising nobly from the ashes amongst purple flames. Once again he could feel the energy of these relics fill him and strengthen his resolve.

His was not the first kingdom in history to fall under a dark influence, many a ruler in the past had thrown off the oppressor's yoke, no matter the odds, no matter how outwardly hopeless

it seemed. Wars were won and lost in the will, and there as he traced the lines of the sunburst and phoenix with his eyes, his will was set.

He would find a way.

Even if it cost me my life, I will find a way!

But for now, he must wait. It was cunning that had undone him – it would take cunning to restore him. He would wait and watch for his opportunity, and play the foil if he must, but he must not let his captors know anything is amiss. Sooner or later they would relax their guard...and then he would strike.

A shuffling of robes behind him caught his attention. He turned and found his Major domo, Rikart Orlaf, wringing his hands nervously. Already a man in his late forties, Orlaf had seemed to age ten years since the emissaries had first come, but his placating demeanor had changed not one iota.

"Ah, master, I hope I'm not disturbing you."

"What it is?"

"Our, um, guest wishes to speak you, master, if you have a moment."

Garett knew that his personal time meant little to his guests, but it was nice to hear the pretense anyway.

"Of course, show him in."

The little man in muted robes nodded quickly and stepped back into the corridor. Immediately, a man clad in black stepped into the room, looking almost the part of a court sorcerer. He was flanked on either side by two of the Regent's guards, dressed in steel breastplates and brandishing halberds.

"Guards, leave us." Garett said with authority. As they did so, the man in black bowed, a symbol of deference that had lately become increasingly shallow in both spirit and gesture.

"Do rise and be at your leisure," the Regent said as though to one of his subjects, "Please join me. My home is, of course, yours."

He carefully manufactured the sound of the statement to prevent the acid from showing through at that last statement.

The man righted himself and pulled himself to his full impressive height.

"You do me honor, oh, great Regent."

"You wished to speak to me, so by all means, please do."

"Ah, yes," the man considered his words before speaking, almost like snake coiling to strike, "we have detected a ship which is shortly to land. She's the RCS *Hornet* out of Aubaine."

"Captain D'Esprit, I believe?"

He nodded, but eyed the other warily, "You know of them?"

"Indeed. The ship and her crew have come through here a number of times. What of them?"

"We wish to know where they are bound."

"I see, and why is that?"

The man paused again, his grey eyes probing the Regent.

"The ship and her Captain are an ill-omen, an albatross to us here. We know that Captain D'Esprit is a staunch defender of the Aubani regime, and as such is often tapped for important errands of their behalf. We wish to know why she is here."

Garett put his hand to his chin and nodded. "Very well, that is easily discernable. I have dealt with this Captain directly in the past."

"Very good, Excellency, I will leave the matter in your hands."

The man bowed again, this time with less emphasis than before, and departed.

RCS *Hornet*.

Perhaps there is hope after all...

* * *

Coeur raised an eyebrow as she looked the holographic comm panel. "Confirm that last part, Gyro."

The holo-image of the XO in her starboard turret shrugged. "The transmission came directly from the Lord Regent. He says he wishes to speak with you personally."

This kind of attention was what she'd hoped to avoid. During their initial week in Jump Space, she had turned it over in her mind whether to refuel dirtside or at one of the gas giants farther out from the primary. While their mission was obviously one of secrecy, she ultimately came to the conclusion that it would look less suspicious to land and refuel as tradition mandated when moving through the trailing direction of the RC. Plus, refueling on Phoebus proper was much faster, given the planet's relatively small size and extremely short surface-to-Jump time.

"All right, signal an affirmative." She said with slight frown, "his air raft's probably broken down again." She looked up at Gyro.

"I want you to go get us some fuel while I'm gone. I doubt I'll be too long. The sooner were off this berg the better."

Gyro nodded, "Shall I take Physic with me?" It had almost become a tradition on *Hornet* for the two of them to buy the fuel together when they passed this way. Coeur could read Gyro's concern given recent events.

"No, not this time," Coeur said as she settled *Hornet* into the final approach to the remains of the once elegant Elan Diego starport. "We've probably beat any news coverage of what went on at Aubaine, but Physic's starting to be well known. We need to keep a low profile as much as possible."

Gyro grinned. "So does low profile include rubbing elbows with the local regency?"

Coeur shook her head as the far trader landed in the open grassy field with a slight *ka-thunk*.

"Still, I think you should be careful," Coeur continued. "Have Mercy go with you as back-up."

"Yes, sir."

"And don't let anyone get too nosy about the ship. This time we *really* don't want the locals getting too curious."

The image of Gyro nodded then disappeared.

Coeur checked the readouts on her console before unfastening the restraints on the pilot's couch. Instead of shutting down the flight systems, she instead put them on standby.

"Keep our subsystems active." She said to Deep Six beside her. "We want to be in the air as soon as possible."

The Schalli clicked and wagged his barbels, as a sign of thought. She paused in the act of gathering her things together as it clicked in her head.

"Something on your mind, Sixer?"

"An oddity, Captain. Perhaps it is nothing."

"Let's hear it."

"Well," one his barbels flicked towards the starport, "Phoebus has never been that sophisticated in their tracking or communications equipment."

"Yes, that's true."

"And yet this time, they identified and signaled us before we had the opportunity to land." He cocked his head in her direction, "They've never done that before."

She absorbed the information and factored it immediately into her thinking. Something was not right this whole set up. A knot began to form in her stomach. Deep Six had vocalized the concerns that were still unformed and not fully realized in her head. They came sharply into focus and her face tightened.

Instead of reviving her comm station, she left the bridge and went aft to the engine room, where she found Crowbar tinkering with the engines. His normal mischievous smile disappeared at the sight of her.

"Red? I know that look. What's up?"

"I want you to power down the engines, but not all the way. I want them to be back at full power at a moment's notice."

"That's workable. Everything okay?"

"It's just a feeling I have."

Crowbar shook his head. "It gives me the shivers when you start talking that, Red."

"Just be ready to get us moving."

"Will do."

Coeur turned and palmed the intercom. "Raven?"

A moment later her voice crackled on the line. "Yes, Captain?"
"Meet me at the air raft in ten minutes. You and I are going to see the Regent."

* * *

"Are you sure you don't want one of us to come along?" Drop Kick said a little more forcefully than the last five times he'd asked. "If you think the situation is suspect, then the prudent choice is to have armed backup."

Coeur waved him off. "I somehow think that powered battle dress might be a little unsettling to the locals. The Regent has asked for us to pay him a visit, and that's what I intend to do."

Drop Kick shook his head and started to find another way to object. She raised a hand to forestall further comment.

"The fewer people we have off *Hornet* the better." she said flatly, "I need you and the Marines here. Stay alert and make sure the barn door stays open."

Drop Kick was far from happy, she could tell, but he would do as she asked. Truth be told she would rather have him at her side, but she felt her reasoning was sound, given the situation.

"Roger," he grumbled.

At that moment, Raven descended from the ship's belly ramp. While she had kept pretty much to herself the week they spent in Jump, her appearance was remarkably changed. Her white hair was now an attractive golden brown with just a hint of russet. Trace amounts of makeup made her features seem harder planed than they appeared normally. Her space black uniform was replaced by a standard body sleeve with a blue long-sleeved jacket over the top of it. On her right shoulder was the standard version of RC insignia, and on her left shoulder was *Hornet's* unit patch depicting a hornet in flight with the ship's motto, *Cave Aculem*, emblazoned upon it.

She smiled ever so slightly as Coeur and Drop Kick almost did a double take. As she neared the bottom of the ramp, she saluted to the both of them.

"Ship's Logistics Officer, Mariah Brannen, callsign 'Foxfire,' reporting for duty."

She truly did look like a completely different person, which Coeur realized was the point. Even still, the result was impressive. Even her mannerisms and the way she moved were very different, transformed from her usual unconscious grace to the sure movements of a veteran spacer. Just then Bonzo edged the air raft from its bay between the port and starboard horns of the prow and descended to the ground.

"Here you go, skipper," The Marine said as he put the air raft in hover and stepped down to the ground. "Mercy could probably tell better than I could, but this baby's a step up from our last raft. She's enclosed like our last one, but she's got compensators. She's got a lot more power too, but her handling's about the same, so don't let her fool you."

"I won't." she turned back to the newest member of her crew, "Shall we, Foxfire?"

The young woman nodded, noting the muted surprise of Bonzo as he exchanged glances with Drop Kick.

Within moments, the air raft was climbing and heading on a least time course to Stonecurtain Keep, the center of the planetary government.

"Did the Regent say why he wanted to speak to you?" Raven said as the scenery shrank beneath them.

"Negative. All Gyro got was that he wished to speak to me personally as soon as possible."

"And you think something's amiss."

"Yes. Maybe I'm just exercising a healthy case of paranoia, but that's why I want you along. If something is going on here, I want you to keep your eyes open for it while I keep them talking."

"You got it, Red."

"Okay. We'll be there inside fifteen, so hang on."

The oblong craft accelerated, but there was no lurch or feeling of motion to accompany it. Coeur did not fly nape-of-the-earth, or NOE, but was low enough to see the knotted green carpet

of tree tops blurring beneath the craft. The air raft sailed through a valley, then another, until at last the mesa on which the castle sat came quickly into view.

Like many of the structures made to resist orbitally-deployed drop troops, the castle possessed many needle-like spikes that protruded from all over the structure to deny would-be invaders purchase or landing space. In that respect, the gleaming ferrocrete structure seemed extremely modern. The long, narrow road that switched back up the mountain, the flags snapping smartly in the breeze, and the men in plate armor patrolling the battlements seemed to overwhelm the modern elements. Even as Coeur brought the air raft down on the landing pad, it felt as though they had stepped into another age.

Waiting for them was a fawning man in dark green robes, escorted by three surcoated guards. He bowed and motioned them to come forward.

“Ah, Captain D’Esprit, what a pleasure it is to see you again!” The little man said with enthusiasm. “I trust your landing was a safe one?”

“Indeed it was, Master Orlaf. Allow me to introduce my logistics officer, Mariah Brannen.”

He reached out and took her hand, kissing it lightly in the manner of gentleman. Foxfire smiled coyly at the gesture. “I’m honored. Please call me Rikart. I do not stand on ceremony as much as my master would like,” his wizened face drew into a smile.

The group of them made their way inside the castle trailed by the three guards bearing polearms.

“My master will be most pleased that you were able to attend us here. Most pleased.” Rikart seemed to speak more to himself than anyone else.

“Master Orlaf – er, Rikart,” Coeur said as they walked through the ancient looking hallways, “I’m greatly honored by the Lord Regent’s invitation. Might I enquire as to its nature?”

Orlaf was wringing his hands together, “Ah, yes, my master wished to speak with you on a matter of great personal importance to him. I trust that he can count on your discretion, yes?”

Coeur made a sweeping gesture akin to a bow, “Of course.”

“Very good, my master will be pleased to hear it. This way please.”

Orlaf lead them to the southern tower and up a series of winding stair cases. A corridor, then another, and the two women found themselves in the presence of the only vestige of royalty remaining in the Coalition.

To Coeur’s eyes he looked almost the same as the last time she had met with him face-to-face. That had been on *Hornet’s* first voyage towards Ra. At no other time had he ever personally requested their presence, until now. Now, as she stepped into the room filled with remnants of a by-gone world, he seemed at once older than his years.

His aura was dominant in the room as he stood resplendent in white and gold with his hands behind his back. As Orlaf ushered them in, the Regent acknowledged their presence with a slight nod of his head. Orlaf and the guards quietly withdrew to the hallway.

“Welcome once again, Captain, to my humble home,” the Regent said.

The two women bowed deeply until he bade them to rise. Coeur introduced Raven once again as her altered identity. His eyes flicked over her a few times and then returned to Coeur.

“You must be tired having newly come from space. Please sit and make yourselves at ease.” He motioned to the tall backed chairs, each graven with the image of a rising phoenix.

“I understand that it is the policy of the RC not to imbibe spirits while on duty, which is quite admirable. So, I’ve had some fruit juice as well as food and refreshments brought up. Please, I implore you as a host, enjoy my hospitality.”

Upon the long oak table were several artfully decorated serving dishes cast in silver. Aside from the crystal decanter filled with a violet liquid, the dishes contained all manner of spiced meats, bread, cheeses and even a powdered confection that smelled like absolute heaven to the two spacers.

Although just about anything smells good after chomping down dry fish cakes for the past week, Coeur thought.

Knowing that it would be an insult not to at least sample the food, Coeur and Raven took a glass and some food and settled into a chair. The food was excellent, and both women savored the flavor, storing it in their memory for the time when bland carbo sticks would once again be the order the day.

The Regent himself made a show of making sure their needs were met before settling into his chair at the head of the table.

"We are very gracious for your kindness, your lordship." Coeur said just as Raven seconded the sentiment.

Garett dismissed it. "A courtesy to my honored guests. Now I can imagine that you are curious as to why I asked to you join me."

"The thought had crossed my mind, my Lord."

"Quite right." He said with a disarming smile. "You see, Captain, I greatly prize individuals of resourcefulness and discretion. Those qualities I fear are all too rare in the modern day."

He rose from his chair and stood by the Imperial flag that hung on the wall. A tremor ran through Coeur at the sight of it. Even though she had taken her codename from the red sunburst insignia of the Imperial Scout, she had never cared much for the Empire itself. The autocracy and nobility had never sat well with her more democratic-minded ideals. To see the old standard in such an obvious place of honor was hauntingly familiar and disturbing at the same time.

She looked him in the eye, letting him know that he commanded her attention.

"As I understand, Captain, you once served the Third Imperium," he nodded towards the flag to underscore his words.

"That was a long time ago, my lord." Coeur said, and once again she felt the old wound threaten to rip free of her mental stitches. Whether she meant to or not there was a bittersweet tone to her voice.

In her mind's eye, she could still see the stenciled number "16" on the cryo-tube that had brought her into the New Era, bought and paid with the life of a man she barely knew. Even these many years later, she didn't know what had made him decide that her life was more important to the future than his own. She blinked back the memory, glimmering like a painful sunset on the horizon of her mind. Garrett caught her gaze.

"It is nothing to be ashamed of, Captain." He said in his whiskey smooth voice. "I have heard those speak the name of the Imperium as though the very word itself was ash in their mouths, an anathema. Whatever it became towards the end of its reign, I believe Cleon was just."

Garett turned towards the sunburst and seemed to lose himself as he spoke, his words seemingly far away. "Those that condemn the Imperium forget that once this sunburst stood for honor, majesty and the mandate of the righteous."

He turned back to look at Coeur.

"I believe you, of all people, Captain, can truly appreciate that."

Coeur nodded wisely, but didn't actually feel what she projected.

"I know that you, Captain, are an individual of singular competence and moral decency. In times past you have proven yourself in my eyes, and for that reason I had hoped to enlist your services once again."

Coeur glanced at Raven and washed down the last of a biscuit with a draught of grape juice.

"If it is within my power, your lordship, I will do what I can."

"Well and good," He said. "First then, let me ask, what is your current assignment? Where is your ship bound?"

Hammer had made sure that there were extensive information packets with painstakingly crafted cover stories in the event that someone would ask that very question. Coeur had memorized them, made them apart of her, where she answered without slightest hesitation.

"We are on a re-supply mission to the Naval Base at Aurora, your lordship." *You just lied to a planetary leader*, the moral part of her brain, the part he had just praised a moment ago, yelled at her.

"And what is the nature of your cargo?"

"Payroll mostly, as well as military correspondence from Aubaine."

"Ah, I see." The Regent said, "then perhaps not."

"Your lordship?"

"From the sound of it, your ship is headed in the opposite direction than I what I require, and with cargo I cannot justify delaying." He folded his hands behind his back. "After all, each soldier must receive his wage, lest he start to doubt his employer and rethink their arrangement."

We cannot have that.” He looked at Coeur pointedly as he spoke, clearly enunciating every word. Something about his voice was out of place, and she couldn’t quite put her finger on what it was.

“Of course, your lordship.”

“It is interesting that you speak of correspondence. You see there is a letter that I wish to send to the government at Spires, the contents of which are highly sensitive. I had hoped that you might be able to deliver it for me quietly.” He made a sweeping gesture with his hand.

”Ah well, perhaps another time.”

Coeur nodded, as did Raven. The Lord Regent clasp his hands in front of him, a signal that their time together was at an end.

“Come then, I shall not delay you on your errand any longer.”

Both women stood and Raven palmed a handful of crème puffs as discreetly as she could.

“We thank your Lordship for his time and his understanding.”

“A trifle on both accounts.” he said. “I hope this will not be the last time that you should grace my hall with your presence, Captain. Good journey to both of you.”

Almost on cue, Rikart Orlaf appeared from the hallway and escorted the two women from the Regent’s presence. Coeur glanced back one last time at the charismatic leader who stood framed against the backdrop of the Imperial Sunburst.

A moment after the two spacers were gone, the emissary crept back into the room. Garrett ignored the fact the man did not bow at all upon entering once again into his presence.

“So I trust, you heard what you needed to hear?”

“Yes.” The Emissary said, ice cold. “We heard enough.”

* * *

Orlaf took his leave of Red Sun and Raven not far enough from the landing platform where their air raft was parked, with many flourishes and overly-polite gestures.

“I’m glad that’s over,” Coeur said, letting a deep breath out.

Raven unclipped a small ring box from her belt and clicked it open. Inside were several green and yellow capsules. “Here,” she said fishing one out and handing to Coeur, “swallow this.”

The Captain took it and eyed it for a moment, “What is it?”

“A precaution.” The other woman said putting the capsule in her mouth.

“Not sure I like the sound of that,” she said as she followed suit. “So what was your impression of all that?” Coeur said as the two walked down the stairs to raft.

“He was trying to tell us something. As to what, I would prefer to talk about when we’re far away from here.”

“Agreed. We’ve done our bit for diplomacy, now let’s get the hell out of here.”

The two reached the platform, but no sooner had their feet touched the tarmac than the metallic clank of steel-shod feet came from behind them. Turning they found a pack of the Regent’s guard spilling onto the platform with intent.

“Hold!” One of them, presumably the Captain, barked in their direction. In a matter of seconds the two RC’s were surrounded in a circle of steel. The sharp points of six gleaming halberds were trained on them.

“Put your hands up,” the same one said.

The two spacers reluctantly did as instructed.

“What was that you said about diplomacy?” Raven said out of the corner of her mouth. Coeur shot her a look that screamed: *Not now*.

“What seems to be the problem, Captain?” Coeur said with as friendly a tone as she could muster.

“Where’s the letter?” the man demanded.

“What letter?” the two almost said at the same time.

“The letter you stole from the Lord Regent,” the man growled.

“I’m afraid there’s been some kind of mistake, if you-“

“Silence!” the man cut Coeur off in mid-sentence, “search them.”

Two men lowered their halberds and roughly frisked them. The one on Raven held up a piece of parchment bearing the Regent’s official seal.

"Found it, sir," the guard handed the item over to his superior.

"Hey!" Raven cried, "You planted that on me!"

The Captain of the guard ignored her pleas and made a show of holding up the parchment. As he did, Coeur noticed the man's ungloved hand. It had smooth, unblemished skin without scars or calluses – not at all the hands of soldier, particularly on a planet as low-tech as Phoebus. Perhaps the man had acquired his position through privilege, but it was an inconsistency that stood out.

Her eyes darted to the other men in the circle. One looked very uncomfortable in the heavy steel breastplate he wore. Another held his weapon aloft at an odd angle, and she could've sworn that another wore modern boots beneath his leg greaves.

"I'm afraid I'm going to have to place the two of you under arrest." He said with a cruel smile. "Bring them."

Raven heard a muffled metallic sound behind her. While these wore lots of metal, the character of this sound was quite distinctive. Without even needing to look, she knew that it was hammer of a *modern* firearm being thumbed back.

Without hesitation, she spun around shoved the man that had frisked her into the older soldier that had drawn the anachronistic sidearm. The soldier had been training it on the back of her head. From the black protrusion that extended off the barrel by several centimeters, it looked as though his weapon bore a silencer.

The shot went awry and ricocheted off the ferrocrete. Raven stepped forward elbowing the man in the face then grabbed his wrist and twisted, neatly disarming him as he fell.

In front of Coeur, two of the men lunged with the top spike of their halberds. Their thrusts were clumsy, but the threat of being impaled on razor-sharp steel was real enough. She dodged to the side and managed to land a restraining hand on the haft of the weapon nearest her. Pushing it away, she came nearly face-to-face with her assailant. She read the surprise in his eyes, but mixed in was a deadly menace that she recognized all too well.

I guess it's a bit late for talking...

Using his forward momentum, she planted a hard left cross to his jaw, then shoved him weapon and all into the other that had attacked her. It caught them at the moment when they were off balance and both clattered to the floor with a terrific clang.

Another of the men in the circle stepped towards her and swept the blade through the air at her in a long arc. Instinctively, she threw her backward in avoidance. She felt a cold sensation at her midsection, followed by a sickly warmth.

She didn't have to look down to see that she was hit. The guard reversed his weapon in a sharp moulinet and closed in to seal the deal. The wooden haft of the blooded polearm exploded in his hand in mid swing. He continued forward in his motion, but now the weapon did not have the reach. The ragged end passed in front of Coeur's face. As it did so, she took full advantage of his vulnerable moment and kicked him in his exposed knee, right in the gap between the metal plates of his armor. The knee collapsed under her attack sending him into a kneeling position in front of her. Balling up her fist, she stepped up and punched the soldier in the face, sending him sprawling.

There was a scraping of metal as the Captain, and the remaining guards still on their feet or recovering, got up and ran towards the entrance of the platform. The Captain of the guard was yelling and flailing his arms in the air as he went.

That's when Coeur felt the hundred pinpricks of pain from her stomach. She put a hand to the wound. Red blood flowed between her fingers as she turned and found Raven with a pistol in her hand, single wisp of smoke trailing from the end of the silencer. At her feet one of the guards reached inside his armor.

"Behind you!" Coeur said, pointing. Raven turned and expertly shot the man in the leg, then kicked the gun from his hand. He yelled and put his hands to his leg, his face twisted in pain.

Coeur put the heel of her boot on the man's neck and let him feel the pressure enough to know she was serious, but light enough that he could talk.

"Who do you work for you? The Regent?" There was thunder in her voice.

Behind the ornate nasal of his helmet the man shook his head.

"No."

"Who then?" Raven said pointedly with the gun.

"I don't know."

"Why is it," Coeur said emphasizing her words with more pressure, "that I don't believe you?"

"I swear, I don't know! I'm just a merc!" he croaked as Raven aimed her weapon at the man's other leg.

Raven looked at the entrance of the platform. "Captain..."

Coeur heard it too – the sound of many boots rushing up the corridor. Reinforcements.

"Alright, we're gone," Coeur said, catching Raven's eye and nodding at the man on the ground.

Raven deftly reversed her pistol and cracked across the side of the man's head.

Then the two were sprinting across the tarmac to the air raft and threw themselves in. Coeur grunted as she settled into the pilot's seat, and saw spots before her eyes. She blinked them back and hit the start-up sequence.

The raft lifted quickly off the ground and spun in the air on its contra-gravs, before accelerating in the direction of Elan Diego starport.

"What in Gaia was that about?" Coeur said, breaking out into cold sweat.

"Don't know," Raven said breaking out the emergency first aid kit from the wall, "I'm glad we're not sticking around to find out. Those men meant business back there." She held up her new-found pistol and silencer.

"Serious business."

Coeur grimaced, "Tell me about it."

"I can say this, though, the Captain back there wasn't a native of Phoebus." Raven said as she measured out a strip of sealing tape.

"What...makes you...say that?" Coeur managed as she struggled to breathe her words out.

"His accent. Good part about being a singer is you listen closely to the sound of other voices. He was trying to disguise it, but his tonal quality was from Spencer. I'm sure of it."

"Long way...from home, right?"

"You're right about that."

It was a difficult thing, dressing Red Sun's wound, while she was flying the craft, but Raven went about it quickly and efficiently. It could have been much worse.

"How bad is it?" Coeur said not wanting to look down. She knew it would only make it worse.

"Doesn't look like it cut completely through the muscle, but you're bleeding pretty bad. I'll see what I can do."

Through the haze of rising pain, Coeur actually laughed. "Drop Kick is going to kill me, assuming nothing else does first."

Raven sealed the wound, placing a protective covering over it. It wouldn't hold forever, but hopefully long enough to get back to the ship.

"Radio *Hornet*," Coeur said, "tell them to get ready to fly."

Raven turned and punched up a secure channel.

"*Hornet*, this is Foxfire. *Hornet* this is Foxfire, do you read?"

Gyro's voice answered.

"Roger, Foxfire, we hear you five-by-five. What is your situation?"

"We're on approach, but the raft is running hot."

"Affirmative, Foxfire. How hot?"

"I think she's busted the regulator completely. Will you have Crowbar make preparations?"

"No problem, Foxfire, I'll let him know. *Hornet* out," Gyro even added in a friendly giggle at the end to mask the seriousness of the code she just received:

We've been attacked. Get us in the air. We're making a run for it.

Coeur focused straight ahead, staying alert. With her flying, she knew that she couldn't take any meds for the pain. Even at their cruising speed, *Hornet* was more than twelve minutes away, but she was sure she could shave off at least four minutes off that time. The verdant scenery began to whiz by them faster and faster.

The seconds ticked by like centuries.

Stay with it, girl, she told herself silently, *you've got twelve minutes in you.*

"Were we followed?"

Raven swiveled around in her co-pilot's chair to the sensor panel, her eyes dancing over what she found there.

"Negative. It doesn't look like anything's in the air behind us."

"That's something, at least."

Coeur was flying low, almost NOE, dodging through the canyons and valleys of the mountainous region. The raft was not the most agile of craft, but Coeur had the pilot's knack of feeling the craft, knowing just what she would do before she did it, which is why she knew something was immediately wrong when the engines surged without warning.

She pulled hard on the controls as they barreled toward the flattened top of nearby mountain she had been maneuvering to avoid. Easing back on the throttle had no effect, and their speed continued increase.

"Hang on," she said gritting her teeth as she pulled up, fighting to keep control. On her console, she saw her flight speed indicator continue to climb. The massive pillar of rock loomed in front of them filling the entirety of the cockpit's view.

Had the mountain been pointed such as you find on Aubaine, she would have surely crashed in the side, as it was she skimmed over the summit barely five meters above ground with a plume of gravel and dust surging in their wake.

"What's going on?" Raven said, her eyes wide.

"We're speeding up," she tried powering down the throttle again to no avail, "and we can't slow down. Sabotage."

The vehicle shot from the top of the mountain and back into the labyrinthine confines of the mountain range. With a death grip on the controls, Red Sun nosed the vehicle toward the middle of the valley as possible. The faster they went, the harder it would be to maneuver.

"See if you can find the hack." Coeur said to her companion. "Hurry."

Raven unbuckled herself and went aft. Altering the raft's pitch as much as she dared, Coeur pulled the craft higher into the air.

If I can just get us out of these canyons, that'll give us some breathing room.

"Captain?" Raven's soprano echoed out from behind her.

"You find something?"

"Um, yes. I think we've got a bigger problem."

"What is it?"

In the back compartment, Raven knelt by the open avionics hatch and the bad news she had found. Deep in the maintenance hatch below, she could see the angry red glow of a digital display. The display bore two numbers. One set of numbers read: 2500.

The other read 1242, which was their current speed. As Raven watched, it continued to climb, perfectly in synch with their acceleration. While obviously a foreign device, there was no mistaking that the timer was set upon a shaped charge – the focal point being the inertial compensator housing."

"The compensators are rigged to blow once we reach 2500."

Raven heard the Captain swear under her breath.

"Can you disarm it?"

"I can try."

"Do it. Trust me, I know... what happens... if that goes off."

Images of Eight Ball and his wingmen over the skies of Aubaine flashed into her mind.

Not exactly the way I want to go.

That was the thought going through Raven's head as she shimmied down into the maintenance bay and pulled a multi-tool from her belt. Snapping open the scissors, she began her surgery. Luckily the cowling was not booby-trapped, so she did not have to spend precious seconds dealing with it. They were already at 1500 when she unmasked the circuit board on the detonator. She could already start to feel the telltale vibration in the deckplates. The little chamber she stood in resonated like drum. Sweat dripped down her face, but she didn't dare wipe it away.

The charge was not a big one, but it was sufficient for its task. At this close a range it would probably liquefy her if she set it off.

Of course, if it goes off and kills the compensators at 2500kph, the effect will probably be the same.

In the cockpit, Coeur was trying to keep her wits. The pain in her stomach was growing, and the growing nausea would not go away. Her hands were shaking of their own volition.

Breathe. This is why you get paid the big money, to handle situations like this. You can do it.

She made a mental note to ask Ritter for a raise when she got back.

There. You're above the mountains and in deep sky, just keep on target towards the port. Keep to the cloud cover. Concentrate on that.

The controls shuddered in her hands, this time originating from the raft itself. She spared a glance at the air speed indicator. It read: 1809.

With infinite care, Raven, clipped the first wire. Nothing happened, which wasn't good, but the bomb didn't go off either. From the contact points and the materials, she could tell that the bomb had been hastily put together, probably rigged up in the short span that she and Coeur were in chambers with the Regent.

A more sophisticated model might have had false leads or even a proximity detector to prevent someone from disarming it. This one seemed simple and straight to the point. It was no less deadly, however.

Her hands remained steady as she began separating the detonator from the explosive component, a painstaking process. She cut a connector cord, then another, careful to do it in the correct order. Out of the corner of her eye, she could see that the ship's speed had just topped 2000.

This is going to be close... Good Gaia don't let me fail now.

Seconds passed in tense agony as one-by-one she closed in on the last connector lines. 2059. 2101. 2187. 2239. 2367.

Lauren Porfira took a depth breath and held it, keenly aware that it could very well be the last she ever drew. The clippers felt hot in her hand, and she was strangely calm, almost as though she were outside herself, a spectator looking in at the grim spectacle.

A second later the last line was severed, and she could only vaguely recall telling her hand to make the final movement. 2484. The chamber outright rumbled as the raft screamed at break-neck speed.

The number continued to climb as though she had done nothing. A stab of doubt crept into her mind. Had she done it correctly? Every step she had been sure of the way, but now she didn't know.

2492. 2497. 2499.

Had she stopped it or killed them both?

2500.

Sparks flew from the severed detonator as it tried to send the signal to its explosive counterpart. She drew back involuntarily, but nothing else happened.

The side-by-side displays that now each read 2500 blinked and went dark.

From the cockpit she heard Coeur's ragged voice.

"You got it. We're slowing down."

A wave of relief flooded through Raven.

She had done it. *She had done it!*

Climbing out of the maintenance bay, she rejoined Coeur. Both women were bedraggled and sweat-soaked, but they were alive.

Raven noticed, however, that the ASI was still over 2400kph.

"Captain?"

"Even with compensators, this tub won't stop on a dime." Coeur said her eyes focused through the pain. "I've got to slow us down before we shake apart."

"How long until we reach the starport?"

"About thirty seconds ago." She said with a cough, "I'm bringing us around, but it's in a long arc. She turns like a battleship."

The viewport was completely obscured by the shroud of clouds they flew through. Thus, it was hard for Raven to visually gauge their turning arc. But as the raft rattled and bucked in protest of its abuse, their speed fell away slowly but surely until it read safely under 400.

The raft broke cloud cover and sunlight lit their faces. Hovering in the distance amongst the billowing of cumulus clouds was the familiar sight of *Hornet*, beautiful beyond belief.

Despite herself, Coeur smiled.

"There she is. There's my girl."

Light gleamed off the two prongs of the ship's bow as she ship grew from the size of a child's toy to many times the air raft's size. The vision of that approach was one of those moments that Coeur would remember vividly for the rest of her life, shock or no shock. Her ship, her crew, ready and waiting for her. It filled her with pride.

The loft hatch, located between and slightly above the prongs, yawned open. The raft into it.

When the air raft was down, Raven helped the Captain up from her chair and eased her over to the ramp. As it lowered, Drop Kick, Gyro and Physic stood there waiting for them.

Gyro spoke into her wrist comm. "They're down. Mercy, get us out of here." Before the words were fully out of her mouth, Physic, medkit in hand, was at Coeur's side.

"What happened here?" she said examining the wide slash across the Captain's stomach.

"A little disagreement between me and mercenary posing as one of the Regent's guards is all," Coeur said.

"She's a little giddy." Raven put in.

"It's shock," Physic stated. "Drop Kick help me get her to the sick bay."

Drop Kick's square jaw as set in place as though it were carved out of stone. "That's the last time I let you go into a dangerous situation alone." He said steadying her. "Orders or no orders."

"Noted and logged." She craned her neck around to her XO. "What's our status, Gyro?"

"Our course to Kruyter is plotted and laid in, sir." She said as they moved towards sick bay. "We're fueled up and good to go. Sixer says we should be in Jump Space in less than three hours."

"Good. We didn't make a lot of friends today."

"No, sir, I would imagine not."

They made it to the sick bay and Drop Kick helped Coeur up onto one of the medbeds. Raven came around to stand beside the Captain, surprised when Coeur reached out and took her hand firmly.

"You handled yourself pretty well today." Coeur said as Physic began removing the bandages for a more complete treatment.

"Thank you, sir. You didn't do so bad yourself."

"Well, it was the first time your life was put in mortal danger with us. I doubt it's the last." She said, her voice suddenly sure and clear. "If you weren't before, you're a part of the family now."

Physic measured out a dose of sedative into a syringe, holding it up before her to double check the quantity. Satisfied, she administered it directly to Coeur's neck.

Red Sun's eyes grew heavy, until it looked as though she could barely hold them up. She squeezed one last time on Raven's hand as she drifted off.

"Welcome to *Hornet*."

Chapter 4

Whiz Bang widened his stance and stepped lightly on the balls of his feet as he circled his opponent. Opposite him in the ring was Hunter, who stalked his prey with uncanny grace and power. They both eyed each other, taking in not only the intense look in each other's eyes, but the subtle shifting of weight that would telegraph their next movements. They each banished the gazes of their comrades that stood outside the circle as spectators. In their minds, nothing existed outside the circle.

The Aubani Marine kept his wrestling guard up and never let his hands set still. It was, after all, easier to start moving if you were already in motion than from a dead stop, at least for humans. It also served as a constant distraction to the eye...at least that's what he hoped.

Hunter stopped moving for a fraction of a second, and in that instant he unwound like steel spring. Leaping forward, he kept his forward motion as horizontal to the ground as possible to throw off the other's depth perception.

To his credit, Whiz Bang managed to move aside, but Hunter's long arms snaked around his torso, seeking to put him in a joint lock. Whiz Bang managed a half-turn before he felt the rough scaled arms lock into place. Unfortunately his turn had actually helped the Ithklur get in behind him. Using the human's unbalanced state, Hunter deftly brought him down to the mat with a meaty thump. Then the arms began to squeeze in like a vise. Whiz Bang gritted his teeth, seeking to extricate himself from his opponent's harsh embrace. One of his arms gave a little, but the Ithklur merely adjusted the contact of his hold, which made things, if anything, more painful.

The crushing pressure vanished and Whiz Bang was left on the mat, groaning.

"Winner, Hunter," came Raptor's sibilant baritone with what the Marine thought was unconcealed smugness.

Whiz Bang drug himself to his feet and wiped the beads of sweat from his brow with the sleeve of his wrestling uniform.

That makes three in a row, the Marine thought sullenly. Hunter had managed to best three Aubani Marines. Bonzo had been first, but he'd been quickly been slapped down to the mat. Of the three, Mercy had come to the closest to putting Hunter down. At one point she had maneuvered onto his back, unbalancing him to bring the conflict the ground. Once there, however, Hunter's girth had managed to get the best of her. Now that Whiz Bang had been defeated, Hunter had triumphed over all the human contingent of Marines, except Drop Kick.

The Sergeant Major himself looked on from the sides, but kept apart from the others. While he wore the training uniform like the rest of them, he busied himself with cleaning his gauss pistol, only looking up only once in a while.

"Next match?" Raptor said eagerly with a glance at the humans who sat in varying states of hurt.

Raptor looked over to Drop Kick.

"Sir," he said in the Sergeant's direction, "would you join me for a match?"

Drop Kick didn't move or look up.

"Sir..." he said more loudly.

"I heard you."

"I note that you do not join us here, sir? May I ask why?"

Drop Kick blew on the barrel and brought it up to his face to examine his work. Satisfied, he holstered the weapon and got his feet.

Raptor's eyes glowed as Drop Kick approached the circle and met him with a confident gaze. Hunter became the referee as the two combatants took up their positions. Comparing the two together, Raptor was several centimeters taller than Drop Kick, and outweighed him by several kilos. What's more, Drop Kick knew that the Ithklur commander could move with blinding speed for his size. Still, he was unperturbed and faced the larger being calmly.

"Begin!"

Raptor did not immediately strike, but instead swayed slightly from side-to-side, circling his opponent. The two had never wrestled each other thus far on *Hornet's* mission, and both could feel all eyes watching them with anticipation. In many ways, the two that faced off represented the best of their respective contingents. Raptor was the largest and most skilled of the Ithklur – Drop Kick was toughest and most experienced of the humans.

Wary of his new opponent, Raptor sought to test his opponent's defenses. He made a few false steps forward, seeing how Drop Kick would move in reaction. To his delight, Drop Kick seemed to favor dodging to the right. Drop Kick also sought to feint here and there, but Raptor responded differently every time, giving him nothing for his efforts.

Raptor's yellow eyes were penetrating, as he sought to peel back the layers of his opponent to predict his next move. To his surprise, the Sergeant's eyes were slightly glazed and almost unfocused as though he were seeing through the Ithklur and not looking directly at him.

Then as Raptor watched, Drop Kick stilled his movements for an instant. Knowing that he was surely about to attack, Raptor opted to for a pre-emptive strike. Lunging forward, Raptor's hands sought his opponent, but they closed around thin air.

It was then that the Ithklur knew that he'd been had. Drop Kick had lured him into committing himself to a fight on the human's terms.

Drop Kick floated aside to the left, nearly weightless, and seized Raptor's thick wrist with this right hand. Before the Ithklur could tighten up, he wrenched the arm towards him and planted his left arm lengthwise across the back of Raptor's shoulder. Twisting the scaly wrist as he made his body perpendicular, Drop Kick leaned on the shoulder joint, forcing the big alien to bend at the waist.

Raptor sought to turn out of the lock and engage his opponent, but once again Drop Kick was a step ahead of him. Threading his right leg across the back of Raptor's left thigh and in front of his right knee, Drop Kick stopped his turn cold.

Normally, a situation like that would necessitate a full roll forward to get out, possibly taking your opponent with you, but Raptor could plainly see the red boundary marked on the deck in front of his face. Doing that would put him out of bounds, and that was unacceptable.

He tried once more to twist his way out of the hold, using sheer muscle power, but Drop Kick leaned in harder and adjusted the angle of the arm, forcing it to go in directions it was never made to bend. Then, he kicked out Raptor's right leg and forced him forward to the ground. Adjusting his new stance, the Sergeant merely went down on his right knee. Struggle as the Ithklur might, the use of Raptor's strength had been neatly taken away from him. With a glance over his shoulder, Drop Kick looked at Hunter.

"Winner, Drop Kick," he admitted reluctantly. The human Marines shouted their praise and applause from the side lines.

The Marine helped the Ithklur up from the mat. Raptor nearly shivered with rage.

"How?" he growled, "No human has ever bested me."

"That's because most humans don't understand you," Drop Kick said picking up a towel from the bench.

Raptor tilted his head to side, "Explain."

"You always stop moving for an instant before you make your move. My guess is that it's instinctive."

"Yes, and?" Raptor demanded, his arms dangerously balled into fists at his side.

"So you assume that everyone does the same," Drop Kick said patting his face and neck. "Fact is, most humans are already moving when they need an extra burst of speed."

Raptor was still fuming, but said nothing.

"I can count on you to always be the aggressor, so I just made you attack before you were ready. After that it was just a matter of leverage. Doesn't matter if you're human, Ithklur, Aslan or Vargr, the elbow is only made to bend one way."

For a moment, Drop Kick wondered if Raptor would actually attack him. Though the three aliens had been put ostensibly under his command, they were not Aubani Marines and not subject to their regulations and strictures. A tense moment passed before Raptor relaxed and centered himself.

"You speak the truth, sir," he said. "I must go and contemplate this new wisdom." He turned on his heel and marched out of the main cargo hold. The other two Ithklur followed three steps behind.

As soon as they were out of sight, Drop Kick grunted and sat down on the bench favoring his left shoulder.

"Go going, Sarge," Whiz Bang said with a pat on his superior's back.

"Yeah," Mercy chimed in, "you really took that scale-head to task."

Drop Kick waved them off.

"Good Gaia is he *strong*. I think I might almost dislocated my shoulder just holding him in place. "He glanced towards the hallway. "It got the job done, at least."

"What do you mean?" Bonzo looked puzzled.

"Actually, this was Razor's idea, this whole business here." Drop Kick said flashing his characteristic boyish smile.

"What?" the other three said at once.

"I spoke with our Hiver friend just after our three guests arrived," he said, massaging his shoulder. "He thought they might have problems seeing any of us as an authority figure, so we came up with this."

Mercy cocked an eyebrow, "a manipulation, sir?"

"Precisely," came a synthesized voice from the hallway, as Newton shambled into the room. "And an effective one as I understand." It regarded the humans with its six eyes, curiosity burning in their liquid depths.

"You could say that," Drop Kick sighed. "Of course, we can't afford too many lessons like this one. We can't be too broken up in training where we fold in the thick of things."

"An accurate assessment," Newton agreed. "And yet, I feel you have demanded that the Ithklur respect your abilities, as you have bested the most skilled of them. I predict that joint human/Ithklur operations from now on will be at least 62% more efficient than their pre-manipulation state."

"Well, I guess that makes some kind of sense," Bonzo said to the Hiver. "You're probably a lot better at dealing with them than any of us."

"Indeed. You see, the Ithklur find few that they consider their physical equals, but establishing in their minds a mental or operational competence is paramount in cultivating a working relationship with outside races."

"Well, let's hope they take it to heart," Drop Kick said rising from the bench. "I need to have Physic check out my shoulder, but while I'm at it I should probably have my head examined."

The Marines snickered under their breath, but Razor turned his hexocular gaze towards the Sergeant.

"Why is that?"

"I must be sick in the head to let a Hiver convince me to step in the ring with a giant Ithklur for the express purpose of making him mad." Drop Kick shook his head, "let's hope my condition's not contagious."

* * *

Coeur sat in her quarters going over the daily engine reports that Crowbar was apt to send her every daily cycle they were in Jump Space. While such reports were tedious to read, she forced herself to absorb them each time. For a spacer, especially one in Jump, there was no greater enemy than boredom. Coeur had been a spacer for well more than a decade, and she

had long realized that becoming complacent was an unhealthy habit if you wanted to come back from the stars alive.

She examined every line of the report and compared the engine readings to the one before, then mapped the power readings against all the other Jumps that *Hornet* had undertaken since she had first assumed command of her. The chart told her plainly that things were nominal some sixty hours into their Jump.

Sitting back from her desk, she put her hand to her stomach. Physic had done an amazing job. She bonded the skin skillfully enough that the doctor doubted that the wound would even leave a scar. Still, she was having to take it easy for a few more days at least before she could go back to her usual regimen of exercise.

It's amazing how much you miss your abdominal muscles until you can barely use them.

Not one to be kept from her duty, she had actually had Physic set up a workstation from sick bay, so she could do her work while being patched back together. Some 36 hours after *Hornet* had slipped out of Phoebus, Red Sun was cleared for a return to active duty, with the caveat that she should avoid any kind of heavy lifting or strenuous activity.

Aside from governing the ship, and making sure her house was in order, she also had to ponder on what had actually go on at their last port of call. The Regent had tried to tell them something, but what? Men had tried to kill them, but why? All these questions and more floated around in Coeur's head, spiraling around like a nebula.

Her comm panel beeped.

"Red Sun."

"Captain," Raven's voice came over the line, "could you join me in the loft? I believe I have something you'll want to see."

It was fair bet that their recent dealings and their possible ramifications were *not* just drifting aimlessly around in Raven's mind. From what Coeur had read of her profile, she was a collating, cross-referencing machine. According to her service record, she possessed an eidetic memory, which couldn't hurt either.

"I'll be there shortly."

"Roger. Raven out."

Coeur got up from her chair and glanced around her rather spartan quarters. She carried few personal possessions with her into space, aside from her painting canvases and an easel. Her lack of personal effects made her small stateroom seem much larger than it actually was. Switching off her console, she stepped into the corridor nearly running into Razor as she did.

"Pardon me, Captain," it said affecting a human idiom of apology. "Your sudden appearance was unexpected."

"Are you taking a bridge watch?"

"Affirmative. I am about to relieve Deep Six."

"Very well. Just keep us running smoothly," Coeur said as she turned to walk down the corridor.

"My goal as ever, Captain," she heard the voder faintly utter as she walked away, shaking her head at its choice of words. She made her way to the top deck, which was unofficially named Marine Country.

In the corridor she caught sight of a bedraggled Mercy, favoring her left knee with a limp, slip into her quarters and seal the hatch.

Dragging a little low are we?

Coeur made a mental note to speak to Drop Kick on their accelerated training regimen as she approached Raven's door, the forward-most stateroom on the port side.

She palmed the intercom. "Red Sun here."

The door whirred open to reveal a compact, though tidy stateroom. Like Coeur, she carried little if any personal mementos, but everything was in its own place. There was, however, a definite 'lived in' quality that pervaded the room.

Opposite the bed was tiny nook where she placed her desk. On the desk rested her sleek notebook computer surrounded by dozens of colorful storage media. Raven sat in her chair and waved Coeur over, motioning towards an adjacent chair.

"You've got something?" Coeur said sitting down.

"Several somethings, actually," she said with a glance at a covered plate. "Would you care for something?" she pulled back the blue cloth to reveal a platter full of the delights that Garrett had offered them.

"You managed to pilfer more than I thought."

"I only steal from the best," Raven said with a peal of silver laughter. "Help yourself."

Coeur reached down and popped one into her mouth.

"I ran some tests on them," Raven indicated the plate of goodies, "and it looks as though the Regent was trying to drug us. If we hadn't taken that anti-agent, both of us would have fallen asleep inside of 5 minutes after ingestion."

Coeur stopped in mid-chew and looked at her sharply.

"Oh, don't worry. I sprayed them down to neutralize the drug. They're perfectly safe."

"Thanks for telling me in advance."

Raven smiled and popped one in her mouth. "Well, it just goes to show that someone wanted us out of the way. If it wasn't a bullet in the brain it we would've been asleep at the wheel."

"Do you think the Regent knew?"

"Unknown, but if you remember, he didn't have anything to eat or drink while we were in his presence." Raven shrugged, "but that's not uncommon for a man in his position. The act of eating in front of your guests can sometimes be construed as base or rude."

Coeur nodded, "So what was he playing at?"

"Well, I've gone over our conversation many times and there are some things that definitely don't – or rather *do* – add up. First was his general demeanor. I read his dossier very closely and he is observed to be very modest and reserved towards outsiders, only dealing with them when things are serious."

"According to him, though," Coeur said with another bite, "things were serious with the business about the letter."

"That's true, so we can conclude that whatever the situation, things actually *were* serious. However, once we were in his presence, he was overly polite and even served us some of these portions himself."

"So..." Coeur's voice trailed off leadingly.

"So, performing such mundane tasks himself is completely outside his personality profile. He's a planetary leader in one of the last vestiges of the old system of nobility. All accounts point out that he would never stoop to be a server, regardless of what guests he was entertaining."

"Okay, so he was out of sorts, perhaps he was being courtly."

"That leads me to my second point. If you recall, he told you about the important letter *after* he told you that you were going the opposite way that he needed. Why would he reveal the existence of the letter when he knew that you could not possibly carry it for him?"

Photographic memory, indeed.

"You've got a point, it didn't strike me as that odd then, but now that you bring it up, he did mention it out of turn."

"He also mentioned the Spires system by name, which I find particularly interesting."

Coeur stared off for a moment, letting her words soak into her brain, seeking to find a larger meaning to them.

"Perhaps that's where the trouble originated for him?"

"Or where he wanted us to look," Raven replied.

"He also made a mention of the 'soldier's wage being paid, or else.' I think that might have been a clue to his predicament."

"Yes?"

"His tonal quality deliberately changed when he said those words, as though he wanted them to be memorable."

"So what are your conclusions?"

Raven sat back and chewed on the end of her computer stylus.

"Armed insurrection."

Coeur blinked twice as though hoping she had heard her wrong.

"I'm serious, Captain. He calls us in, acts strange to get our attention, makes a clear reference to mutiny, and not ten minutes later mercenaries jump us with intent to kill...and that leads me to my third point on the subject."

Raven reached into a metallic drawer and pulled out a clear plastic bag. In it was the pistol with the silencer that she lifted off the mercenary.

"This is a Devlin-5, 9mm automatic pistol." She pulled it from the plastic sleeve and handed it handle first to the Captain. "Standard issue sidearm to the Marine detachment of Spencer. Looks like our friend in chainmail might have actually been in the uniform before going rogue."

"Are you sure about this pistol?"

"Yes, sir. I had Razor run a full metallurgical scan on it. From what I've been able to pick up, the pistol and the silencer were both manufactured on Spencer. And if that weren't enough, the firing pin has been filled down and the sights have adjusted in a way consistent with the Marine Corps. Even the ejection system has been similarly modified in the 'shaved and clean' manner that they favor, which also seems to support my theory.

"Given the presence of foreign mercenaries posing as the Regent's men, armed with weapons of far superior make," she nodded towards the pistol, "it looks to me as though Phoebus may have experienced a quiet coup from within, perpetrated by a faction with extraplanetary ties, if not one that is extraplanetary all together."

"Are you suggesting that Phoebus has been compromised by an outside faction?" The picture Raven was painting was full of dawning terror at what it could possibly mean for the Coalition.

"You noted yourself that Phoebus had us identified and tagged before *Hornet* ever set metal to dirt. Last I heard the planet didn't have that kind of technology, which means..."

"Which means, "Coeur finished for her. "That it had to come from someplace else."

"Exactly. And that brings me to my final bit of information on the subject – the bomb."

Coeur took a deep breath and held it. What had happened in the air-raft had been close, as close as they come.

"I had a chance to examine the explosives and the detonator in detail. The explosive agent itself was nothing to write home about. It was had enough juice to do its job, but little else. The shaping of it, however, is a different matter."

She took another treat from the plate and continued.

"The way they vectored the charge to go off was expertly crafted. Whoever rigged it knew what they were doing, using the least amount of explosive for the greatest effect. The crash of the air raft might have been enough to cover the fact that it had ever been there in the first place.

"That kind of skill is beyond anything on Phoebus, which again leads us to a foreign power. That, and the detonator."

"What about it?"

"It was designed for that purpose – blowing the compensators once the resulting negative gees would prove fatal, or at least debilitating, for the pilot and crew. The expertise to do that is not commonly known."

"So who does know it?"

Raven paused, and collected her thoughts before answering.

"From time-to-time, we've received reports from the Thoezenth subsector on special ops teams rigging pursuit vehicles to blow like this to cover their escape after SAG missions." Raven looked directly into Coeur's eyes. "There's only one foreign power that I know of that pulls that kind of trick. The Solee."

"Good Gaia."

"Yeah, so what we're looking at is a force of mercenaries or commandos that could possibly have been trained by the Solee, operating planetside just one Jump away from Aubaine."

Coeur realized that she was on her feet, heart pounding in her chest. "Worse yet, they could be operating on Aubaine itself."

Raven nodded quietly, as though she had already arrived at that conclusion.

"The interceptors."

"You better believe it. Eight Ball and his team died the same way those mercs intended for us in the air raft. I'll bet whoever rigged those *Cobras* to blow learned how to do it from the same teacher as those on *Phoebus*."

Raven regarded her for moment, taking in her words.

"Ever thought about joining the Intelligence Branch, Coeur? You'd make a spectacular spook."

"Only one per ship. That's my policy."

Raven swiveled in her chair and eyed her notebook. "Well, if the picture I'm painting weren't bleak enough, I also have this." She punched up a file on her the notebook display.

"You mean there's *more*?" Coeur said incredulously.

"There's *always* more," Raven replied keeping her eyes on the screen, "If anything my job has taught me that."

On the display appeared what looked to be the readouts of a sensor station. Dominating the workspace was a flawless depiction of a starscape with the familiar azure blue disk of Aubaine cutting into the bottom quarter of the blackness. Off to the sides of the screen were several other EMS readouts and telemetry panels for a sophisticated sensor array.

"What am I looking at?" Coeur asked, moving to look over the woman's shoulder

"Sensor logs from *Kukulcan*," Raven said the light of the screen bathing her face. They were taken during the Delpero escape. "

In light of what they had just discussed, the whole event seemed to take on a much more sinister tone that even before.

"Watch." Raven pressed a key and the log began to play.

The *Redwing*-class cutter soared up out of Aubaine deploying pinwheels of sand to stave off the incoming laser fire. Off to the side of the sensor display, an amber icon appeared a few dozen kilometers away. The point-of-view changed from the cutter under fire to the new contact. Even though it was on the side of Aubaine facing the sun, the ship was hard to make out. Painted a deep black, it moved between the darkness of stars like a ghost. As Coeur watched, grey plumes fired outward from the ship and the indistinct lines seemed to reform themselves

"It hard to see, but those are the attitude thrusters firing," Raven said. "The ship is turning to receive its guest."

The cutter moved into view and disappeared into a brief lighted area, that was surely a cargo bay or similar hold. Then it vanished completely in the folds of the mystery ship. The outline of the ship became even harder to make out until they melted away entirely. A few seconds later, blistering laser fire filled the area, coupled with the searing white detonation of multiple warheads going off in the area. Then the action froze in mid-readout.

"It was a bit difficult at first to get a read on it," she ran the footage back to the point where the ship fired maneuvering thrusters. She zoomed in on the seemingly amorphous shape as it turned. It stopped abruptly. "Right here," Raven said putting her finger to the screen, "just as she turned, the sunlight managed to reveal enough of the hull to give me a starting point."

She punched another key and yellow lines began to encircle the black shape forming a rudimentary wireframe.

"It took a while extrapolate the shape. It helped, though, having the visual clues of the thruster fire and airlock to help fill out the rest."

"Were you able to I.D. her?"

"Yes, Captain, I was." The lines on the screen continued to knit themselves together, forming a picture of the ghost ship as the dots connected.

"I ran this through every military registry I had in my databank, "she shook her head. "No joy. Then I sifted through active civilian merchants, tankers, and still nothing."

She held her hand up, "Then, on a hunch, I compared our girl to the ships in *Hornet's* memory. That's were I found a perfect match."

The lines finally resolved themselves into the sleek shape of a commercial yacht with an elongated prow and swept back Jump cowling. Another image appeared next to it rotating in perfect synch, this one rendered in perfect color and detail.

"It was the *Lord Ryan*," Raven said.

"You're sure?"

"Yes, sir. From stem to stern, it's a 100% match."

Coeur sat back down in the chair and ran her fingers through her brown hair. "So, you mean to tell me that Vega Zorn broke August out and took him away *in his own fikken ship*?"

"That is exactly what I'm telling you, Captain. And considering that yacht can handle a 4G acceleration without breaking a sweat, she was long gone before *Kukulcan* could get a bead on her."

Coeur rubbed her hands on her face and then sat back in her chair. "She's also got Jump-4 engines on her, too. She could be anywhere from Lancer to Aurora by now."

The more of the puzzle that seemed to be revealed, the worse it looked. A half-hour ago, Coeur was just a starship Captain on an ultra-secret mission. Now she was still on an ultra-secret, but one in which the whole rest of the universe seemed to be falling in around her. One in which the party had already started before she had even arrived on the scene.

At Raven's command, the detail version of the yacht filled the screen along with her technical readouts and deckplans.

"Well, she's not streamlined, so at least they can't just hit gas giants on their way to wherever. It's not much, but it's something."

Coeur met her gaze. "Let's hope that's not our epitaph for this mission."

Despite her words, they were not really defeatist. If anything, Raven could tell that her resolve becoming even stronger by the moment to press on.

"Any idea how she managed to vanish right in front of *Kukulcan*?"

Raven shook her head as a negative. "No, I'm still working on that. Were I to venture a guess, I would say it's some kind of relic ECM that *Kukulcan*'s sensors couldn't handle. Although considering the range between – which was *very* close I might add – it must something really powerful. As with most ECM, the closer you get, the less effective it is. That didn't seem to hinder them."

Coeur nodded. Whatever it was that allowed to them to escape was a *major* threat to the RC. This time it was a converted pleasure yacht that had displayed this ability. What if next time it was a warship? The permutations sent chills down Coeur's spine.

"Once I knew it was definitely *Lord Ryan*, however, I was able to check her history."

Raven continued. "After Delpero was arrested on Ra, the ship was brought back to Aubaine and was sold at The Auction."

"I don't suppose you happen to know to whom?"

Even given the gravity of the situation, Raven flashed a devilish smile.

"I do." She ejected the red memory rod from her notebook and popped in a green one.

"I was downloading information from the central infonet right up until the stream was shut down for take off. I didn't know what I might need out here, so I took everything from financial records to military service dossiers, to my favorite recipe for redstone pudding."

"Pudding?"

"Well, it's not as useful in a firefight as say a gauss pistol, but then again a gun's not as useful for driving away the mid-Jump munchies either."

Coeur shook her head at the levity. "I'll try to keep that in mind."

The growing weight of their predicament seemed to abate, and the Captain realized at that moment that it was what the situation demanded. If they succumbed to the growing pressure that they both plainly felt, it could distract them enough to lose sight of their mission, and more importantly how to go about *accomplishing* their mission. There was no room for baggage.

Unlike the stereotype of a military spook, Raven was neither closed off nor enigmatic, and her use of humor showed Coeur an insight into her character that she found reassuring.

"So, who was it that bought *Lord Ryan*?"

Raven turned back to her notebook and brought up file. From the looks of it, it was a ledger, filled with rows upon rows of transactions. One particular transaction was outlined in blue and filled the screen for Coeur to view. It was the bill of sale for the starship's auction and at the end was the name of the recipient.

"Allied Resources, Inc.? I've never heard of them."

"It's not surprising," Raven said as she brought up several other file on her screen. "I had never heard of them until I started doing this research."

"Who are they?"

"From what I've been able to excavate from The Auction's financial records, they are a holding company on Aubaine. *Lord Ryan* was their first and only purchase. Even though they are supposedly based on Aubaine, there's no physical office present, and they did the bidding on the ship anonymously through one of the legitimate representation firms that people hire to bid for them at The Auction.

"I dug a little deeper to see if I could find anything else. I followed the paper trail, however scant it was, but as I did I found that it had intentionally manufactured feints and dead-ends."

"Someone was trying pretty hard to cover their tracks," Coeur said.

"That's right," Raven said and pointed the screen, "but it was nothing I haven't had to sort through before. It took a while, most of the Jump from Aubaine to Phoebus to be exact, but I managed to trace it back. Each layer I peeled back only revealed another underneath, but I was able to take this lead as far out as I could."

"And what did you find?"

"A reference to a parent corporation called Omnicorp. Can you guess where this company supposedly has its headquarters?"

"Where?"

"Spencer."

"I had a feeling you were going to say that."

"Unfortunately," Raven shrugged, that's all I was able to find out on that particular lead from the information I was able to bring with me."

Coeur paused a few seconds before asking her next question, taking what was said to heart.

"So, is there anything else I should know about?"

"Just one more thing, Captain." Raven said with a ghost of smile still on her lips.

"All right go...what is it?"

"Something that brings us back to where we started."

"Go on."

"Well, I showed you information about *Lord Ryan*, and the strangeness around it, but what of the cutter that helped whisk away our illustrious Novastar exec?"

Raven turned and reached into another drawer, producing another plastic bag. Only this one didn't contain a firearm, but a ragged piece of metal sporting burn marks and heat blisters all along its forty-odd centimeter length.

"And what is *that*, dare I ask?"

"This," she said unwrapping the metal, "is a piece of the hull plating that *Sparrow* managed to shear off before the cutter caught its ride out. There's no serial numbers or markings on it, of course, or at least none that survived Drop Kick and Raptor plinking away at it. I somehow doubt from the evidence we've seen so far that there would have been any if this had come straight off the assembly floor."

Raven paused taking in Coeur's calm, but attentive look before she continued.

"I had Razor test this hunk of scrap at the same time he was working on the Devlin-5. I was hoping we could get something out of it."

Coeur crossed her legs. "And?"

"Nothing. That's what we found – absolutely nothing. There were no molecular stamps, special compositional identifiers or trace elements that would give us shipyard or manufacturer."

"Not much to go on then."

"Yes and no," Raven smiled sweetly with a gleam in her eye, "The fact that there weren't any obvious clues is in and of itself a clue. What that means is that someone wanted her off the books, completely. Unless she was dressed up to appear like a *Redwing*, she wasn't a relic, which means she was built recently. From the performance she demonstrated, it gives us a general idea of the capabilities of whoever built her."

"Such as?" Coeur said leadingly.

"Whatever shop built the getaway vehicle was at least TL-12, with some 'bleeding edge' elements of TL-13. I base that on the speed and maneuverability she demonstrated as well as the

fact that somehow, they managed to fit a fairly sophisticated sand caster system, albeit a miniature one, on a frame that wouldn't ordinarily be possible."

Coeur turned inward for a moment, processing the new information to her growing understanding of the situation. "If the yard that made her is TL-12 that puts her just about on par with Aurora or Aubaine."

"Exactly," Raven replied, glad that Coeur had quickly seen where she was going. "And that tells us that unless this cutter was built at either of those two shipyards, which is extremely doubtful, then she didn't come from anywhere in the RC."

"And that leads back to thinking it's an outside power."

"Pretty much, yes, the way I see it."

"Who has that kind of facility?"

Raven fell silent, and several seconds ticked by before she answered.

"The Guild, some private corporation outside the Area of Operations, or it could be..."

"The Solee," Coeur finished for her.

With resignation, Raven nodded in an affirmative.

"I have half a notion to turn this ship around the moment we get back to Kruyter and head back to Aubaine. Something's brewing here, something big."

Raven nodded at the Captain's obvious dilemma.

"Well, if it helps you any, RC Intelligence would have already figured most of this out by now," Raven motioned towards her research materials, "with the exception of the business on Phoebus, they have access to the same information that I do."

Coeur considered it. Hammer had sent her on the mission to recover the Alpha Bank, but here was compelling evidence that one of the member worlds of the Reformation Coalition had already fallen to some unknown aggressor. And now, Jump Space was not her ally. Even if she wanted to turn *Hornet* around, she would have to wait at least four more standard rotations to precipitate at the asteroid facility at Kruyter. It would take time to refuel and then Jump out again.

Since returning to Phoebus was out of the question, they would have to make use of the ship's collapsible fuel bladder. The handy addition, courtesy of Crowbar, allowed *Hornet* an extra 1 parsec Jump at the expense of yet another week in Jump space.

What it amounted to was eighteen days of travel time at the very least, with the weighty possibility of more time being heaped on to that estimate. Either way, she didn't like it, and Raven read that through her mask-like expression.

"So what are you going to do, Captain?"

Coeur rose from her chair and smoothed the surface of her vest, a sign that their meeting was at a close. She reached down and snatched another confection from Raven's tray.

"Whatever it takes."

Chapter 5

Excerpt from *Signs of the Time*

By Dr. Rupert Manfro, Professor of Sociology, University of Aurora

The Legacy of Damocles - The Impending Solee Threat

Of all the pseudo-intellectual axioms bandied about by present day academia, none is so virulent as the expression, "History repeats itself." The very notion that human behavior is predictable enough that, given time, certain patterns surface and resurface is, of course, utter poppycock.

Those that cling to the banality of this idea are quick to rush to its defense, and who can truly blame them? After all, Humaniti once again clings tenuously to existence after the fall of a star-spanning empire. Those of us that remain among the ashes are left trying to hold back another Dark Age from which civilization may never recover. Surely *this* has been repeated throughout the totality of human history. Hasn't it?

Yes and no. None can deny that humankind finds itself once again in dire straits, without factoring in the contagion of Virus. But, one should look deeper into the events that led us down the path to where we now stand. Human behavior has always been erratic to a greater or lesser degree – but the sociological and economic demands that guide those actions, those remain uniformly the same. Consider this, each us has the need to eat, to sleep and procure some measure of safety to our existence. The communities we build for ourselves are ideally meant to ensure that those basic things in our hierarchy of needs are met.

All too often, however, the resources are too few, and the need for stability so great, that those communities are subject to become despotic and totalitarian. One need only look at the myriad of technologically-elevated dictators that abound in our own backyard to see the end point of that road. But again, what tends to drive this behavior is not a predictable set of human responses per se, as much as it is a basic need to *survive*.

Thus, human *behavior* has little to do with it – rather it is human *need* that is our motivating factor.

It then becomes possible to see our societal structures as merely a glorified method of survival, of meeting the needs their people. Each type of community we bring into being deals with the available use of resources (which represent the potential to meet the needs of the populace) in different ways.

Perhaps the most dangerous of these ideas is the concept of an Empire. In times of prosperity, the greatest venom is taken out of its sting...but in hard times, where basic survival itself is a challenge, an Empire is a malignant cancer and a force of social entropy.

As strange as it may seem, the concept of an Empire has almost as many proponents as the idea that history repeats itself. Even here in the Reformation Coalition, a society founded on almost diametrically opposed ideals, you can still find those that are quick to defend the very idea.

Why? Simply put, an Empire gives people hope. It plants in the mind of its subjects (no matter how inflated or self-deluded it may be) that, regardless of their station, they are part of something far grander than themselves. After all, hope is in short supply these days in many sectors. This glittering sheen has a very attractive edge – and appeals not only to our need to survive but to our egos. Once our needs for survival are met, we move up the chain towards self-actualization, and the idea of an Empire facilitates this. From the outside looking in, an Empire would seem to represent not just *surviving*, but *living*.

Unfortunately, Empires come with enormous amounts of social baggage. Leaving aside the obvious abuses of power that can be perpetrated on its subjects, all Empires have one thing in common.

Expansion.

Whether it is an Empire that spans the stars such as the Ziru Sirka, or one that exists as a small part of a balkanized world, an Empire must continue to expand for the entire time it exists. If an Empire is not expanding, it is decaying (though it is possible for it to do both simultaneously). For an Empire expansion is not merely a good idea, it is a *necessity*.

Eventually, a successful Empire that achieves that critical mass, and does not succumb to outside hostilities, internal conflict or calamity, will grow too large to govern its gains. When it reaches this level, a “bridge too far”, then the stage is set for a collapse under its own geopolitical weight, complete with the resulting Dark Age. Such was the case with the Rule of Man, though to be fair they did “inherit” most of the decay from their immediate predecessor.

As stated previously, an Empire existing during peaceful days *can* be a strong force of stability, exploration and technological development. However, an Empire that comes to be during economically depressed times can be very dangerous indeed. Expansion takes on a much more sinister character here, as the Empire in question seeks to annex its neighbors, all too often by force, so that it can further prop itself up using the pilfered resources of the vanquished.

Such is the case with our next-door neighbors, the Empire of Solee. During the tenure of their existence, they have continually demonstrated every negative aspect and stereotype of an Empire – decadence, cruelty, ultimate disregard for human life, and, of course, a violent expansionistic agenda. What is perhaps more disturbing is their tendency to incorporate cultural elements of the Third Imperium, though these traditions are twisted and nightmarish by comparison. Whether they see themselves as the scions of sunburst is unknown, but it is clear that they regard us with contempt and only thinly-veiled belligerence.

It is unfortunate for us that such a power resides only a few scant parsecs from our own territory. Make no mistake, a confrontation is brewing between our two nations that is not so much a matter of *if*, but *when*.

It is inevitable.

They have fleets of powerful relic warships, a will to use them and a legitimacy to uphold. They must expand, for them there *is* no choice.

And we are in their way.

Aside from Virus itself, the Empire of Solee represents the single greatest threat of our time. Like the mythological Damocles, we have looked up and found a sword poised above our heads, with very little to keep it from falling.

We *must* make ready for this threat. If we falter, if we hesitate one iota to meet this challenge when the hammer, or sword in this case, falls, we will be consumed utterly, offered up to the altar of our own desultory ignorance.

And then history really *will* repeat itself.

* * *

Multiple bogeys lit up the targeting display. Within the dark confines of her turret, Snapshot grunted at the situation as it unfolded.

Three hostile targets were screaming down on her off *Hornet's* starboard bow, accelerating fast. Another two hostiles were on an irregular course in speed almost directly in front of her. The only reason that all five were not able to actively engage at the same time was the glittering sapphire of a planet below that looked suspiciously like Aubaine. *Hornet* was keeping her port flank to the planet, using it as cover as much as possible.

It had only taken Snapshot a moment to divine their intentions. The cluster of three contacts, identified as gunboats, were driving her towards the other two. From what the sensors could read, the two ahead of her were more heavily armed, possibly light-duty pickets. Once *Hornet* reached a particular spot, she would be in the weapon envelope of all five ships. That's when they would launch to maximum effect.

In many ways it had been the irregular course of the two pickets that had given away their pincer movement. Doing the math, she had found that critical juncture where their weapons could all be brought to bear on the *Hornet*. She tagged it on her display as Point Alpha. Still, *Hornet* was still thousands of clicks from Alpha, and she had a little time to prepare her response.

The enemy strategy depended on two things – one, that *Hornet* would not divine the importance of Point Alpha until it was too late, and two, that all five ships be unified in their firing pattern to annihilate the tiny ship without any question as to its survival.

In doing so, that meant they could be dealt with individually as threats, provided they could do so before *Hornet* reached Point Alpha.

Snapshot studied her tactical displays intently. One thing the hostiles did not know was that *Hornet's* missiles were far more powerful, and possessed far more range, than a far trader had right to. The vectors the three accelerating gunboats were on meant that they would come into Snapshot's missile range well before their designated firing point. *Hornet's* missileer was about exploit that for all it was worth.

The distance fell away, coming closer and closer still. Snapshot had already tethered five missiles together beneath her missile tube, so that she could launch an initial salvo greater than normal. The tethers were anything but standard on a far trader, as they had been lifted from the remains of a missile frigate, but they were worth their weight in gold...just like the autoloader which would allow her a faster rate of fire.

The triangular icons on her display that represented the three gunboats turned from red to green, indicating that they now fell into her range.

She waited a few more seconds until the targets were no longer on the outside edge of her range before flipping off the safeties and launching her salvo. Six missiles streaked out from *Hornet*, homing their way towards the target. Snapshot had opted not to spread the fire over the three targets, but rather concentrate it fully on the middle ship of the three. That would mean that it could possibly saturate any point defense or countermeasures they had. Because the two ships were more than three light-seconds out, it took a few moments for the tactical plot to update itself.

When it did, she smiled fiercely at what she saw. The bomb-pumped X-ray lasers had found their mark and the middle gunboat was gone. So too was its companion off its port side, no doubt destroyed when her sister had gone up. The third ship seemed to have survived, but its drive emissions looked wrecked and weary. They hadn't even gotten off a 'farewell' throw.

It was as good of a return as she could've hoped.

Already the autoloader was replacing its stock from the magazine, and a blue 'all's ready' icon popped up on her screen. She would not be able to re-tether more missiles at the moment, but she could keep up a sustained rate of fire at the two remaining pickets.

Hornet altered her course, still keeping the planet below her, but seeking to slide away from the two targets on an angle that was previously covered by the three now-wrecked ships. Like a bullfighter using his cloak to cover his movements, *Hornet* was now using the planet to their advantage against the remaining hostiles.

Seeing that their plans for Point Alpha were now gone, the two ships disgorged their missile racks in an attempt to hammer them before they could cut loose.

While the two pickets did not have the missile tethers, they each had two missile tubes to *Hornet's* one. That meant that four missiles shot out towards the fragile ship. Snapshot

immediately fired countermeasures. These devices, which were set to mimic the ship's engine emissions, drew the fire of two birds. The EMS dampening systems of *Hornet* itself ensured that another would lose its way. That left one more incoming missile that was out for blood.

A split-second before it had the chance to expend itself into a lance of X-ray energy, the missile simply exploded and disappeared from Snapshot's tactical display.

In the turret on the opposite of the ship, Gyro would no doubt have a smile on her face as she nailed the target with The Stinger. It was an impressive shot considering the range, and one that *Hornet's* original 125-mj laser could not have made with any accuracy.

Gyro's Stinger would have to recharge now that it had fired, not that the XO held any hope of striking the two remaining pickets at their current range. Only Snapshot's missiles could hope to reach them now.

Snapshot returned fire and then less than five seconds later fired again, then again, until she had answered the hostile salvo of four missiles with four of her own. As the ships were traveling side-by-side, one was more visible on a straight-line course as *Hornet* used the curvature of the planet to hedge out the its companion. It was on the exposed ship that she again concentrated fire.

Even though the lag time in firing each of her missiles was only a few seconds, as opposed to the *minutes* it had been before the autoloader, it meant that her salvo was staggered and therefore more prone to being picked off by their countermeasures.

Denise Valencia had accounted for that too. Careful study and instruction under Red Sun's tutelage had seen to that. Since these missiles themselves were little more than a delivery system for an x-ray laser, she had set the warheads to detonate at a flat interval instead of when they each came into range as individuals. Since X-ray lasers traveled at the speed of light, that meant that all four lasers would arrive at the target at virtually the same instant in spite of the disparity of their ranges. The result was not quite as effective as the tether method, but it still served remarkably well.

Minutes later the targeted ship staggered under the blow. While it did not go up, it did start to fall out of formation next to its sister. The tactical plot updated its threat assessment, and the icon representing it turned from red to yellow.

She smiled once again, but then her display updated again and the smile vanished. From what she could see, the undamaged sister ship had broken away from its sibling the moment that *Hornet* had disappeared around the plane of the planet, trying to cut the angle on its small, yet extremely dangerous foe. The picket was accelerating with what appeared to be every bit speed it could squeeze out its drives.

Snapshot had assumed that it had remained by its companion ship the whole time, instead of tearing space to get at them. She spared only a moment to remember what Red Sun had said about making an assumption in space combat, and how deadly a misstep that could be.

In the space of the time that her display could update a few more times, the ship was in a radically different posture than it had been previously. From her calculations, that would them in range in about twenty seconds.

When the missile tube had a five-second reload rate, however, twenty seconds could prove to be more than enough. Just as before she fired, a few seconds later the familiar blue icon appeared. She fired again.

Unlike before, the icon didn't disappear. It seemed to become static for several precious seconds. Worse yet, the missile tube didn't read as empty, which meant her bird was still inside. A second later the missile fired, and the ready icon appeared almost instantly, only this time the missile tube *was* empty. The computer apparently thought that the next missile was ready to launch, when in fact no missile was loaded in the launcher at all.

Snapshot cursed, feeling her native Oriflammen temper starting to rise. Her cheeks felt flushed. Her palms began to sweat as she gripped the controls.

On her display, the last remaining ship fired its missiles. Those two missiles, looking like cold javelins of light, raced towards them. The two inbound missiles passed Snapshot's own warheads in space.

An orange light flashed as the autoloader signaled a malfunction. The missile gunner gritted her teeth. She should've been able to pump two more rounds out her tubes, but her computer's confusion had prevented that. That put *Hornet* on equal footing with the ship that was

overtaking them. Much of their combat effectiveness depended on not being damaged. For a ship as ultimately fragile as a *Hornet*, they *never* wanted a straight up fight.

But that was what they had.

Snapshot had time to see one of her own missiles taken out by point defense fire before the other one struck home, crippling, but not destroying, the target.

This time, however, the foe had factored the Stinger into their thinking. Their missiles spent themselves earlier. This had the result of decreasing their accuracy, but increasing their survivability. Once the missiles shot their X-ray bolt, no amount of countermeasures or trickery in *Hornet's* bag of tricks could stop their deadly flight.

The commander of the hostile ship had almost certainly thought the decreased range offset the missiles degraded accuracy – that shooting from the hip was worth it if he could land a hit. That assessment turned out to be correct.

One of the X-ray beams missed *Hornet* completely, arcing off into space. The other, however, found its mark, striking the small ship right above her starboard horn. Even with her improved armor and the laser-protective coating, the bolt went through them like a warm knife through butter, sheering off the entire starboard side.

A moment later, her engines went up, utterly obliterating the small ship that had once been RCS *Hornet*.

* * *

“Well, that could have gone better,” Snapshot said to herself inside her darkened turret. Upon *Hornet's* “death” the lights had flared and then gone out.

The portal to the outside whirred open, filling the darkness with harsh white light. Gyro's compact frame was outlined there.

“Looks we're space dust, Snapper.”

The missile gunner unstrapped herself from her chair and stepped out of the turret.

“Yeah, I know. We gave 'em a heck of a fight though.”

Gyro shook her head and chuckled. “That's true, but let's hope that next time we can give them 'a heck of a fight' *and* come out of it alive.”

“We can only hope.”

The two women walked forward towards the port prong of the *Hornet's* bow, which was entirely taken up by Razor's quarters and workshop.

“You know,” Snapshot began, “for being a pacifistic Hiver that doesn't care much for fighting, he can sure throw us for a loop in the sims.”

Gyro nodded her assent as they arrived at Razor's quarters. The door opened just as they arrived and the Hiver within beckoned them forward with a wave of his tentacled prime. To Snapshot, the Hiver's prime limb, which she instinctively thought of as its head, looked like a six-petaled sunflower when the digits were splayed outward. The addition of the six eyestalks that sat between the 'petals' always gave her the impression of a six-eyed creature that was hiding behind the flower and peering cautiously through its cover.

Razor busied itself looking at his strange hiver-morphic computer. Two of its eyestalks rose and regarded the two visitors.

“A moment,” the artificial voice said, “I am compiling the results of the simulation.”

Scattered around the room were a myriad of tools, circuit boards and projects in the works. Razor possessed little need for personal effects, and so his actual living space took up only a small portion of the room. But despite the clutter, both spacers knew that Newton's workspace was an essay in organized chaos to human eyes. The previous Hiver envoy, had kept almost the same arrangement. Indeed, seeing the alien sitting on his toadstool-shaped chair it almost seemed as though Scissor was still with them.

Gyro felt a wave of nostalgia pass over her like a summer breeze. One look at Snapshot's fair features told her that she felt the same, only there was more to it than the caress of familiar memory, a sadness resided there also. A bittersweet smile manifested itself on her lips in the seconds that they waited.

“Done,” Razor said at last.

"Okay, Newt, I've got to ask," Snapshot said coming out of her reverie. "How did you come up with those odd angles and approach vectors?"

The Hiver looked up from his screen.

"Ah, I programmed the simulation to utilize tactics that the K'kree were known to the employ during the war with the Federation."

"The K'kree?"

Both spacers were surprised at this. Neither of them had ever dealt with the so-called "space centaurs" before, but from stories that they'd heard of the race's innate, almost fanatical hatred towards all meat-eaters, that was just fine with them.

"Indeed. Often their preferred method was to wait until as many ships could fire on a single target as possible so that they could destroy their opponent in a single overwhelming strike. They became adept at maneuvering their opponents as well as their own ships so that they could take maximum advantage of that strategy."

Gyro glanced at Snapshot, "It's a good thing we found their optimal firing point, or else *Hornet* would have *really* been toast."

"We were toast, remember," Snapshot said sourly, "but we at least gave more than we got." She felt an angry resurgence in her temper. "And we would've had them before they got their missiles off if someone hadn't programmed in a weapon's system failure at the critical moment," she said jabbing a finger at the Hiver.

"Perhaps I should point out at this juncture," the Hiver said, "that the malfunction was not programmed into the scenario."

"What?"

The Hiver, used to having to repeat itself to humans when critical or unexpected information was communicated, continued.

"I programmed every aspect of the simulation. The missile malfunction was not one of them."

Snapshot frowned, narrowing her eyes. "Well, its timing was *awfully* convenient then."

Gyro put a calming hand on her shipmate's shoulder. "If that's the case, then how can we be sure that this simulation was accurate? If the point of the exercise was to test our combat readiness with the new systems, then how can we be sure that we're doing that correctly, given what happened?"

The Hiver's six digits on its prime closed like a human hand and touched their points together out in front, giving the sudden impression that the face had grown a pseudo "snout."

"As you probably know, the simulation has much more strategic value in Jump Space than in normal space. Systems such as weapons and sensors, which are largely useless in Jump, but generally active in real space, can be fully integrated in the exercise. By careful selection of electronic pathways in those systems, a simulation can be created whereby the ship's systems respond in the virtual environment just as they would in an actual combat situation."

"So, what you're saying is that *Hornet* actually *thinks* it's under attack."

"Affirmative. If a malfunction occurred in any of the ship's systems during this exercise, then it is indicative of a separate technical difficulty."

"You know Newt," Snapshot said sarcastically, "you have a rare gift for breaking news gently to people."

"Thank you. It is a particular type of social interaction that I have been striving to master."

Snapshot rolled her eyes and sighed.

"Well, if our little misfire is outside the sim, then we should probably get Crowbar to look into it. Better to iron out any bugs before we get ourselves into an actual shooting match. I better report this to the Captain."

Snapshot patted her friend on the back. "An XO's job is never done is it?"

"If you would direct your attention to the readout," the Hiver interjected, "I believe I can properly quantify your combat responses for analysis."

Considering the last few times Razor had "analyzed" their combat training, it had been very dry, both women settled themselves down for a long interval of statistics and mathematical review.

A beep sounded from a far corner of the room. Razor left its chair and walked towards the source of the sound. Its willowy digits opened the front face of a silver box on a shelf and

withdrew what looked to be a platter. Steam rose from the contents of the tray, and as the Hiver turned they saw several tube-like shapes occupied it.

Razor shambled over to the two women, presenting the tray to them.

"But before we begin, could I interest either of you in a corndog?"

* * *

"So that's the main issue, Captain," Gyro sat across the desk from Red Sun, who was listening to what she had to say with hawk-like focus.

"Well, I suppose it was bound to happen, given how fast the engineers had to install the new systems to get us going," Coeur said.

"Yes, sir. Given that the systems were all salvaged from vastly different sources makes it difficult to really network the systems together in unity. *Hornet* just wasn't built with this kind of hardware in mind."

Coeur folded her hands on the table in front of her and looked at her first officer. Gyro would, of course, have brought this problem to her attention at the earliest possible moment, but not without bringing along possible solutions to fix it. Anticipating the Captain's needs and providing them in advance was part of her job.

This kind of diligence and attention to detail was why Coeur had never once regretted her decision to make Gyro, *Hornet's* XO.

"What did you have in mind?"

Gyro smiled. "I know that you prefer to see problems and solutions presented side-by-side, so I took the liberty of preparing just that."

Coeur concealed her smile and simply nodded. "Go on."

"With your permission, Captain, I would like to pull Crowbar in and have him take an extended look at our new hardware. I am certainly thrilled that we have such high-tech equipment for this mission, but I would like him to see if he can work the kinks out of the *physical* machinery, and get these disparate systems synched up. Additionally, I would also like to have Razor start working on a custom software package tailor-made to integrate our new systems together, and one which will be designed to Snapshot's and my own specifications. I even have a name for it – Project Bulls-Eye."

Coeur considered it. What her second in command was saying rang true. Even with the constant sims and combat readiness drills, there had not been time for a proper shakedown of all the bells and whistles that *Hornet* now possessed.

"What timeframe are we looking at here?"

"Well, sir, that will depend on just how different the systems really are beneath the skin. I would venture to guess however, that it will occupy a large block of both Crowbar and Razor's time. Just how much remains to be seen."

"That's a large drain on the ship's resources, Gyro. Are you confident you can produce tangible results?"

Gyro returned her gaze levelly.

"I do."

Coeur unclasp her hands and straightened in her chair.

"All right, you've sold me. I want an initial estimate from both Razor and Crowbar on what we're looking at in twenty-four hours. Also include whatever else you and others think you might need in the way of materials and supplies."

Gyro beamed. "Yes, sir!"

"Well then, you better get to it."

Gyro stood, gathered her things and exited. She didn't quite hide her jubilation.

Coeur smiled at her youthful exuberance, which was more and more being overlaid by a solid core of tempering and seasoning. Johanna Solomon had all the makings of an expert spacer.

Reaching across the desk, Coeur switched on the intercom.

"Sick bay." Physic's image filled the screen. "Yes, what it is Coeur?"

"You know how you've been itching to take on a few more Jump watches in your downtime?"

"Yes. Aside from the occasional bruised-up Marine or nearly disemboweled starship Captain, it can get pretty dull around here."

Coeur raised an eyebrow at the last comment, but let it pass.

"Good. I'm pulling Crowbar off for another project. So if you've been itching to see what life is all about for an engineer, I daresay you'll get your chance."

* * *

The distinctive whirring of Crowbar's air ratchet punctured the quiet of the autoloader housing. Four bursts of that high-pitched, yet somehow satisfying sound, and the access panel came away in his hand, revealing the beautiful symmetry held within.

Once again he had to marvel at the architecture he saw before him as he lay on his side in the cramped compartment. Unlike other junctures in *Hornet* that would've revealed a hair tangle of wires and circuit boards, the inside of the autoloader was all hard planes and smooth geometry.

Not too often that I get play with actual molycircs, but you won't I hear me complaining.

He smiled inwardly at the thought. He loved working on technology this advanced, if nothing else for the sheer novelty. Since they had left Aubaine, he'd been given the chance to play caretaker to hardware that most engineers his rank only read about in textbooks. Every moment he spent adjusting and handling these systems filled him with childlike glee that reminded him of why he had become an engineer in the first place.

Despite the daunting task in front of him, or perhaps because of it, he had thrown himself feet first into Project Bulls-Eye. It was not without its frustration, of course, but the joy of getting to tinker with TL-15 systems more than offset and negatives he might have felt.

Besides, all I have to do is make sure that the systems are wired together in a uniform way – now getting them to talk to each other, that's Razor's job.

The Master Fire Directors, or MFDs, tied *Hornet's* missile systems together needed an overhaul that much was certain. In fact, he had made that his first priority. If the goal was to get everything working together, the MFDs would be the artifice that was largely responsible for making that happen. It was the heart.

After the MFDs he had branched out to the other systems one-by-one, trying to see each of them with new eyes, rewiring and rerouting when necessary.

It did look as though bringing Bulls-Eye to a satisfactory result would take time. Already this was the fifth Jump watch that Physic had covered, and he felt that there would be many more to come.

Reaching in the access space, he attached his palm sized monitor to the forward system node and checked the readings.

The monitor confirmed what he had suspected about the autoloader system. *Hornet* had been designed with one missile tube and the tactical software they possessed had used that as its central focus point. The presence of the autoloader complicated things with its increased speed. In many ways the system was *too* fast. It was one of those exceedingly rare cases where the physical machinery was actually more in tune than software governing it. That had been one of the first hurdles that Razor had been tasked with fixing.

Sitting up he took a wrench from his toolkit that sat on the lip of the hatch. He flipped it up in the air in a tight arc and caught the handle in anticipation.

Time to go work.

As he loosened the brackets on the inside to bring the smooth circuit boards to the fore, he heard boots thumping on the deck above him. Crowbar looked up and found the pleasant features of Raven looking down at him.

"Well, well," Crowbar said whimsically, never missing a turn with his wrench, "If it isn't our resident entertainer. If you've come for a private concert, I'm afraid all I know are bawdy spacer tunes."

Raven tilted her head and smirked. "I'm sure you do."

"So, what brings you to my part of the world?"

Raven rubbed her temples slightly. "My eyes were burning from all my reading. I thought I could use a bit of a walkabout to clear my head."

"I hear you," he said, blowing on the board mounts before dislodging it. "I know I get that away when after I've read a few top secret documents. I think it has something to do with the prose." His tone was delightfully sarcastic without losing even a measure of its deadpan delivery.

Raven laughed, and Crowbar marveled at the power it possessed. A laugh and look like that could brighten a room.

"Well, state secrets *can* be a bore at times." She wrinkled her nose.

"I'll bet." Crowbar held the board to the light, examining it with a critical eye. He looked back up to Raven. "Could you hand me that fuser up there. It's the red-handled one."

Raven rummaged around for a moment and then handed it down to him.

"Thanks."

Sitting up, he crossed his long legs under him and set about his adjustments.

"Are you working on Bulls-Eye?"

"Yep, I want to make sure that the old girl is tip-top." She read it in his voice – in his mind the ship existed not just as hull full of electronic parts, but a living-breathing person.

Raven, who had been down on one knee, shifted her posture where she sat near the hole, supporting her weight with her right arm.

"You love this ship, don't you?"

Crowbar paused in his work, surprised at her question. Then slowly he nodded.

"From stem to stern. Every weld and seam."

"I thought so," Raven said. "You don't hide your feelings in that regard."

He resumed his work with a shrug, "I helped bring her out of retirement at the Technical Academy and get her Jumping again – an act that I take no small measure of pride in."

His adjustments complete, he leaned lay back down and re-installed the module. "I've been through quite a bit with this ship, and though she can be temperamental as hell sometimes, she's always brought us back. I've had my chance to go to other assignments on larger and newer ships, but that didn't seem right somehow."

He ran his hand lovingly across the housing and gave it a light pat.

"*Hornet* just feels like home."

"You know," Raven said quietly, "even though I've only been here a short time, I've felt it. There's just something about this ship that radiates...warmth."

Crowbar looked at her and smiled crookedly behind his scraggly beard.

"Well for a newcomer you're certainly well on your way to becoming part of the family."

"The Captain said as much to me."

"Really? That's not something she hands out to just anyone, let me tell you. Red demands the best, but that's because she gives nothing but *her* best. That's just the way she is. She's not an easy one to impress, but I'd wager that the stunt you pulled on Phoebus did a lot in your favor. Ahh...nuts!"

"What is it?" Raven said to his sudden exclamation.

"Ah, it's nothing, I just mounted this bracket to the wrong post. Nothing life-threatening...this time."

"I'm distracting you from your work." Raven sat up as if to go. "I should probably leave you in you peace."

Crowbar's heart suddenly skipped two beats at her words. "That's okay," he said a little too quickly, "You don't have to go...that is, if you don't want to."

It was times like this that Crowbar was thankful of his dusky complexion and full beard. It covered the times when his skin flushed, which admittedly wasn't very often.

Come on now, Glaive, get yourself together, man. You're the unflappable one of the crew, remember? The one that's too cool for school. Now you're acting like a schoolboy with his first crush.

Crowbar took his silent reprimand and kept working.

"Well, if you're sure."

"Yeah," he said calmly, back to his normal tone, "I am."

From what he was able to garner from his inspection of the autoloader, this would not be the only time that he would find himself down here. Of all the weapon systems, the missile launchers were the most dependant on hardware, and thus fell under his operational umbrella. Reaching in he began unfastening the opposite board cluster for inspection.

"So, what did you do before coming to *Hornet*?"

"I was a Lancer," Crowbar said. "Visited some nice places...and some not so nice places, if you take my meaning, but I had visited all of the planets of the Dawn League by the time I was twenty." The board clicked and came away in his hand.

"You surprise me, Raven."

"Why is that?" She toyed with a wayward strand of snow-white hair.

"I figured you would've just read that off my service record. You *did* read it, right?"

Turning the board in his hand, he adjusted it just like the one before.

"Yes, I did," She said without any trace of embarrassment. "But I still like to ask people. It's much more real when they say it to your face instead of just reading it in flat text. Does that bother you?"

Crowbar passed it off with a wave of his hand. "No. It's part of your job, just like fixing the ship is part of mine...even at times when she is being honery." He waved the board at the open bay like a mother pointing a finger at a misbehaving child.

"I know it can bother some people, but information is my business. I comes with being a spook." A slight winsome timbre colored her voice.

"Lady, you are about the most *unspooky* spook I've ever met."

"Thanks," she said with a slight giggle, "I'll take that as a compliment."

"Yeah, for my part, I'm kinda glad people know that kind of stuff about me." Crowbar said, his adjustments complete on the second board. "It saves unnecessary explanation time. What else did my record tell you about me, aside from all the boring stuff like birthdays and graduation dates."

Raven ticked off the points on her fingers as she said them.

"First, it said that your real name is Glaive Ertani, but that you don't like being called that. Your friends and shipmates call you 'Crowbar' almost exclusively."

"Yeah, that's true. Always thought that being named after an ancient, bladed pole-arm didn't have the right ring to it for an engineer."

"Please," Raven said with a shudder, "I think I've had my share of sharp antiquated weapons recently, thanks."

"See what I mean?" he said with a smirk. "Go on."

"Second, it said that, out of everyone onboard, you are the closest thing to a pirate in experience and demeanor."

Without missing a beat, Crowbar said: "I'd wear eyepatch, too, except that they're not really in fashion this year. I do, however, yell out 'Avast!' in the hallways randomly to no one in particular. I hope that counts for something."

"Third," she said shaking her head, "It said that you have a particular soft spot for dried fish patties, the more processed the better."

"Guilty as charged. I love that stuff. I sometimes think I joined the RCES just for the food." The circuit board, meanwhile, glided back into place with an audible *click*.

"It also said that you were the one responsible for coming up with many of *Hornet's* tricks, like the collapsible fuel bladder and the air-foiling."

"I told you, I couldn't let our girl here go into space without being dressed up real nice. Although, the last couple of times she's been tricked out, it wasn't me that came up with the hardware. Take this autoloader here."

Crowbar sat up and wiped his hands idly with a rag. Just as he did, an alarm beeped overhead. Light beads flashed in the corridor and Red Sun's voice came over the comm speakers.

"Precipitation alert. All hands make ready for transit."

"And that," Crowbar said bolting the access panel back on, "would be Kruyter."

"Already?" Raven looked at her chronometer in surprise.

"Well, time flies when you're hip deep in the ship." He turned back to the autoloader and waved his air-ratchet at it, "I'll be seeing you later."

Crowbar went to stand and Raven extended her hand to help him out of the hole. He took it and found her grip firm and sure.

"Thanks," he said, realizing that he held on to her hand perhaps a fraction of a second too long.

"My pleasure," Raven said warmly.

"Well, let's go get suited up. Who knows who will be shooting at us *this* time."

Chapter 6

Within seventeen minutes of the magical 168 hour mark, *Hornet* glided smoothly out of Jump Space, the endless arcing energy giving way to the twinkling starscape of normal space. The precipitation had been needle sharp in its execution, a fact that was not lost on the Captain.

"I've got to hand it to you, Sixer," Coeur said from her pilot's couch, "you're shaving them closer and closer. At this rate, one of these days we're going to arrive *before* we've left."

The Schalli's luminous eyes tracked over to her station. "I must say I have never heard of such a phenomenon, Captain. Although, I can see that such an occurrence would be useful in a situation such as ours."

"It was a figure of speech, Sixer."

"Oh...of course, Captain." The astrogator had long been fascinated by the human mode of speech. The shading and nuance it possessed were very different from the song-like languages of his own people.

In particular, he found human humor the most interesting, as it again illustrated the differences between the two peoples. Still, his study into the subject was not without its rewards, for he had found a few phrases in Anglic that were able to elicit a laugh from his fellows— such as the time that he had referred to Physic as 'Big Mama' during an examination.

"Well in that case, Captain, I suppose it is now time to kick the tires and light the fires."

Just as intended, the phrase drew a laugh from *Hornet's* CO.

"I suppose it is that."

"All stations reporting in, sir. All systems nominal. Atmosphere has been restored."

"Good," Coeur said. "That's just what I like to hear." She reached up and unlatched the seals of helmet. They gave way with a sharp hiss of air as she raised off her head and racked it on the back of her pilot's couch.

A few thousand kilometers off *Hornet's* bow was the edge of the asteroid belt that formed a necklace around the system's cold red primary. Most habitable planets in the RC had a full planet or moon to call their own, but this field of floating rocks suspended in the night comprised

most of Kruyter's terrestrial mass. It was here that the industrial arm of the Kruytercorp megacorporation made its home, mining the belt for its precious ore and minerals.

"Kreuzung beacon, bearing one-one-seven, Captain," Deep Six said, "Range is 19,000 kilometers."

"Beam our ID and recognition code."

"Aye, sir."

Coeur once again had to marvel at the alien at the station next to her. Given the vastness of space, precipitating in less than 50,000 kilometers from a target was like landing a pinnace on the head of a pin.

Not only did it put them within immediate communication distance, with only miniscule lag time across space, but it also landed *Hornet* right in their sensor envelope which would immediately burn through the passive ECM the ship possessed. Since the distortion was immediately dispersed, it was unlikely that a sensor tech would even notice that it had been there in the first place. It would have been a very different story if *Hornet* had materialized farther out and the sensors had to combat it all the way in.

"Kreuzung Control to *Hornet*," a steady voice came over the comm channel without video support, "Your authorization code is confirmed."

"Roger, Control," Coeur said. "Could you please put me through to Mr. Achmed Ben-Abdul, please?"

"Confirmed, *Hornet*. Please stand by."

Coeur collected herself and put on her best poker face. If things went the way she intended, the next few hours could definitely be *interesting*.

A few moments later, the forward viewscreen came alive with the handsome countenance of Ben-Abdul, the liaison to Kruyter's Director of Operations, Tirese Serene.

"Ah, Captain D'Esprit," he said with a well-polished smile, "how good it is to see you again."

"Likewise." Coeur said, adding a nod of acknowledgment.

"What can I do for you, Captain?"

"I need to speak to Director Serene in person at her earliest convenience."

"I see. May I enquire as to the business of your visit?"

"Tell her," Coeur paused for perhaps half a second in thought. "Tell her that I have news that, as one remnant to another, she needs to hear."

Ben-Abdul drew back from the pick up just a space, an intrigued look up on his swarthy features.

"How very cryptic."

"I know." She said without further explanation, but with a look that added an unsaid *please*.

"Very well, Captain, can you stand by?"

"Of course."

Ben-Abdul's image was replaced with a black screen bearing the logo of Kruytercorp. Like many megacorporations that pursued business in an interstellar community, their emblem was simple, easily recognizable and pleasant to the eye – a result of countless hours of focus groups, marketing discussions, and strategic planning to produce the avatar of their corporate identity.

In Kruytercorp's case, the letters of the name itself were meticulously formed for readability at a distance, but also aesthetics. To Coeur's eye, the letters seemed reminiscent of the old Russian style of typesetting, each character textured as though made of brushed metal. In the background behind the letters sprang an azure triangle with each of the three points terminating in a circle. Underscoring it all was the Kruytercorp tagline:

Building The Foundations of The Future.

About three minutes passed before Ben-Abdul finally reappeared.

"You must have struck a chord, Captain."

"Oh yes?"

"Quite so. The Director will see you as soon as you are docked at Kreuzung." His dark eyes lit with an inner laughter. "I'm impressed. There are very few people I know of that she'll clear her entire schedule to meet."

"Send my thanks." She said with a smile. "We're on our way. *Hornet* out."

To her right, Deep Six twitched his "whiskers" in thought, his two large eyes still fixed on the blank viewscreen.

"Sixer?"

"I am curious, Captain. You wish to speak to Director Serene in person, even though it is well known that she possesses telepathic abilities, of which you have first-hand knowledge."

"That's correct."

"Would that not, perhaps, jeopardize the security of the mission? If I speak out of turn, sir, my intent is not to question your judgment."

There's that signature Schalli depressed streak again...

"No, Sixer, that's a perfectly legitimate point." She said levelly. "It could be a breach of security to speak with her. I've just got to make sure that it *isn't*."

* * *

The six spacers were somewhat cramped as they composed themselves in Red Sun's quarters. Normally, a meeting like this would've taken place in the larger dining area, but Coeur had started to develop a taste for meetings in her quarters, particularly when the subject matter was sensitive.

Gyro, Drop Kick, Physic, Raven and Razor were present in the stateroom. Anticipating the Hiver's presence, Coeur had wheeled in a mushroom-shaped stool for its express use.

"I do intend to speak with Director Serene in person about our current situation." All eyes were on her and a range of emotions from surprise to trepidation, and even a hint of shock lit their faces - all except for Razor who regarded her impassively as ever.

"Now before any of you point out the obvious, yes, I do remember that she's a telepath. While it could put a wrench in things if she picks up any stray thoughts about our mission, I believe it is ultimately worth the risk."

She reached across her desk and activated the holo-controls. A star map of the spinward planets of the Reformation Coalition blinked into existence, floating in the space above the table. At the top of the map was the icon of the Ra system while at the bottom was Aubaine. A system of connected hexagons overlaid the entire map, measuring the space between the worlds in parsecs.

"Consider this," Coeur said directing their attention to the map. "We know that the *Hokona* was last seen here." She pointed at the Ra system and the icon turned blue.

"If she was going to go by the route we know, she would have Jumped from Ra to Nike Nimbus," she drew her finger from Ra to the star system two parsecs away spinward, leaving a blue line connecting the two systems. "She would've moved from there to Kruyter itself. Now, if she had a Jump-3 engine, she could have bypassed Phoebus altogether to get to Aubaine in a single Jump."

She finished tracing the path so that a line now extended from the top down, following the *Hokona*'s purposed route.

"So, here's the way I see it. Even if she did get diverted from Ra and Jumped past Nike Nimbus to Eos here," she pointed to the star system neighboring Nike Nimbus to spinward, "she would still have to come through Kruyter unless, of course, she wanted to go the Aurora route. Her orders were to take an express route to Aubaine, so the chances of *Hokona* coming through here at some point are statistically very good. That brings me to Director Serene's involvement."

She deactivated the holo-map and folded her hands on the table in front of her.

"We need to have a pair of eyes that we can trust which will remain here if *Hornet* needs to continue down the line towards Ra. If *Hokona* came in behind us while we were Jumping out, we could be chasing a ship that has already come into port. In that eventuality, we would also need someone to direct *Hokona*, and for that matter any other Coalition ship, away from Phoebus, should her Captain wish to go there."

Coeur had not disclosed all of Raven's findings to her staff just yet. Even with the few pieces of the puzzle the intelligence officer had put together, there still was not enough evidence to ground any real conclusions. As she was painfully aware people are wont to fill in missing

details with speculation, and that could be demolish morale and detract focus. Besides, there was nothing any of them could have done about it while in Jump Space anyway.

"All of that adds up to Director Serene. She's worked with us before and is trustworthy not only in my eyes, but in the eyes of the RCNI, correct?" she directed her gaze to Raven.

"Yes, Captain." The intelligence officer said. "Everything we have on her says that she's a focused, dedicated businesswoman whose demonstrated unwavering support for the RC both publicly and privately."

"It's funny you should know so much about the 'private', huh?" Drop Kick said good-naturedly. Raven smiled coyly and winked back at him.

"The point," Coeur interjected, "is that we have a potential ally in the search with access to the resources of a megacorporation. Plus, we don't have to tell her *everything*."

Gyro raised her hand as though she back in Coeur's classroom at the Hiver Technical Academy. Coeur gave her the floor with a glance.

"Even if Serene doesn't probe your thoughts deliberately, isn't it possible that she could read your surface thoughts and possibly learn something she's not supposed to?"

"That is a possibility." Coeur said. "However, it was apparently a scenario that Hammer thought of when he sent us our new equipment. I was looking at our cargo manifest when we left Aubaine and this caught my eye."

Coeur reached behind her desk and pulled out an odd bullet-shaped helmet with an opaque face shield, presenting it for all to see.

"Well, I don't believe it," Drop Kick said, surprised. "They actually gave us psi-helmets this time out. Who would've thunk it?"

"Hammer was very thorough in his assessment of what we might need in the field." Coeur said, smiling inwardly at their collective surprise. Even Razor regarded the strange hat with curiosity.

"So what's your plan?" Physic asked.

"We go in to meet her wearing these and have a conversation as though it were anyone else."

"I may be able to assist in this as well," Razor said. "I am immune to human psionic phenomenon."

Coeur nodded in agreement.

Physic, meanwhile, had picked up the helmet from Coeur's desk and held it in front of her, turning it over in her hands, examining it from different angles.

"Not very becoming is it?" she said to no one in particular.

"It's not a fashion accessory, Physic, it's a tool." Coeur responded.

"Well," she said wrinkling her nose, "obviously the designer wasn't going for form over function."

Coeur looked around the room to gage their reactions to her plan and found Raven, who pursed her lips slightly and was looking at the ceiling in thought.

"Do you have something to add, Raven?"

Raven turned towards her, and the Captain could see the wheels turning in the young woman's head.

"A couple of things, Captain. First, as Physic pointed out, these helmets aren't exactly conspicuous. Their presence will be noticed, and if Phoebus has taught us anything, it's that we don't know what parties may take an interest in what we do here."

"Go on."

"Second, wearing these in front of Director Serene could be construed to mean that we don't trust her, which could be detrimental as we are going to ask for her help."

Coeur sensed a third point about to surface and her instincts were proven correct.

"Third, by wearing these we all but admit that we *do* have something to hide not only to the Director but by everyone else who sees us in them."

Coeur accepted these points as valid. "So what do you propose?"

"Almost the exact opposite, Captain. Instead of forcing her out, I suggest we encourage her to come in."

This drew more surprises from the room than Coeur's original declaration of intent. A slow smile rose on Raven's lips.

"I take it you have a plan to make sure that our avenues of information are sufficiently covered?" Coeur said.

"As it turns out, Captain, I do." Raven said, holding her wry smile.

"I thought you might."

* * *

After docking at Kreuzung asteroid, and making their way through the dilapidated lower levels of the base, the representatives from *Hornet*, which included Red Sun, Physic, Foxfire, Razor and Drop Kick – the latter being inalterable in his choice to come along - found themselves once again in the plush inner sanctum of Kruytercorp.

The ornate doors cycled open revealing a large outer office that utilized actual sunlight collected from the system's primary to illuminate the rooms. The effect made the office seem as though it were outside, banishing any trace of claustrophobia that often came with hollowing out a rock in space.

Coeur herself could attest that after a while even the most spacious caverns on Kreuzung felt as though the megatons of stone around you were pressing down on your shoulders. Director Serene had fashioned a place of devoid of any such distraction for her and her staff. As the sunlight greeted the visitors, a familiar figure filled the hatchway.

"Ah, Captain," Ben-Abdul said with impeccable politeness, "you are right on time. As you can imagine, Director Serene prizes a punctual guest."

"Well, we aim to please." Coeur said.

"Of course. Right this way."

Ben-Abdul led them deeper into the lavishly-furnished outer office.

"Oh, Ms. Bisby," Ben-Abdul said to the rather bookish woman sitting behind a desk wrought from a single stone slab. "Would you see to it that our guests are not disturbed while in chambers with the Director?"

The woman nodded. "I'll hold all calls unless they are emergencies."

"Excellent. Thank you Ms. Bisby."

The liaison walked them down a richly-carpeted corridor that terminated in a mauve doorway. Exquisite paintings of haunting alien landscapes adorned the sides of the corridor, rendered with striking fidelity in oil colors. Coeur, who was a disciple of the paintbrush, had to marvel as she passed by them.

Perhaps Kruytercorp is doing better these days than last time I was here.

Ben-Abdul keyed a code into the touchpad and the door slid open. With a sweeping gesture of his hand, he bade the four humans and the Hiver into the room.

The Director's chamber was not as ostentatious as the outer offices, nor as spacious as one might expect for a person in her position. In fact, the office looked more like the study or library of a well-off academic than the throne room of a corporate power. The furnishings were all well-worn wood with hints of antique brass fittings. Bookshelves with actual hard-copy books lined almost every wall, with a subdued rainbow of colors showing on their spines.

Square in the middle the room was an expansive green rug on which the Director's desk sat. Like the rest of the room, it was also age-marked with character and lit by a green-hooded lamp that lit the desk with a warm yellow glow. Only the presence of a very modern personal computer similar to Raven's stood at odds with the rest of the room's comfortable, well-worn feel.

Despite the quaint antiquity of the room, it was not nearly as impressive as the director herself. Director Serene was not quite as tall as Coeur, but her sharply tailored business suit made her seem larger than she was. A striking mane of auburn hair fell from a central part, cascading down to her shoulders, and her vibrant green eyes were mirrors into a wonderfully agile and intelligent mind. Given the chance, she could have been a holo-star as she shared the same dramatic good-looks and statuesque build in much the same way Physic did. It was no surprise that Kruytercorp's advertising department made frequent use of her image in the holo-campaigns.

Perhaps the most striking quality about the Director was that she looked extremely young for a person of her position. Gazing at her youthful vitality, it was sometimes hard to reconcile the fact that the woman in front of them was in her mid-eighties.

And she lived all those years the hard way, unlike me, Coeur thought.

Director Serene rose to greet them, revealing as she did her well-trimmed form apparent even through her suit. That million-credit smile was their reward as they entered, but it abruptly disappeared as her the door closed behind them.

Those green eyes turned to ice and fixed upon Raven with a startling intensity. Raven silently raised her hands in placation, holding true under the Director's scrutiny. The air in the room seemed instantly charged, almost crackling, but then Serene tilted her head to the side and nodded.

"Well, Captain, you certainly have a way of making an entrance."

The rest of the *Hornet's* crew had watched this silent exchange in various states of confusion, not knowing what to make of it.

"What you have to tell me must be pretty damn important for you to bring a blocker into my presence." Those eyes turned once again to Raven, "Tell me little one," she said a hint of annoyance shading her voice. "Where did you study?"

"Here and there," Raven said coolly.

At this, Physic and Drop Kick stood in shocked silence. Only Red Sun was the very picture of calm through the implication.

That's something you won't find in any personnel records.

Coeur inserted herself between the two women. "It is merely a precaution, Director, for your protection as much as ours. If we may?" she said motioning towards the leather-back chairs in front of the desk.

Serene motioned for them to sit and the tension in the room receded noticeably. Coeur breathed an inner sigh of relief.

"Now then," Serene said settling into her chair, "Why don't you start talking?"

Coeur nodded. "Newton. Why don't you tell the Director what we found on our way back from the Mexit Depot?"

The Hiver padded up to a prominent position and launched into a long didactic account of finding a Virus-infected satellite in the remote expanses in the L'steich system. It added that *Hornet* believed it had destroyed it at the time, but lately it was thought to have resurfaced on the black market of Fija, some 10 parsecs from its original position.

The story, of course, was utterly fallacious and merely a cover to play to any possible listening devices that might be recording – with or without the Director's foreknowledge. At first, Coeur was hesitant to ask Newton to participate in such a stratagem, until the Hiver pointed out that telling such a "tall tale" as the humans called it, was merely a manipulation of perception. Newton had come up with a surprising amount of detail for *Hornet's* imaginary exploits, embracing the role with enthusiasm.

Just as the Hiver was getting into *Hornet's* initial encounter, Coeur caught Serene's eye with a slight movement of her hand. Serene's eyebrow canted slightly in silent question.

Coeur casually reached up and massaged her brow, but as she did tapped her index finger twice on her forehead. Serene sat unmoving for several long seconds, those eyes fixed squarely on the woman opposite her. Finally, Coeur felt the odd sensation of a voice inside her head.

You wanted to talk with me this way?

Yes, Coeur said strangely unfamiliar with this unorthodox form of communication. *Keep facing towards Newton as much as possible. He's going to go on for a while so we can discuss what really brings us here without anyone being able eavesdrop.*

All right, Captain, you have my attention. I must say I'm intrigued by the pageantry of it all.

Before we get started, though, is there a way to bring the others in on this?

A familiar presence filled Coeur's mind. It was Raven.

I'm here, Coeur.

Director Serene looked over to where Drop Kick and Physic sat, and blinked twice. The auras of Red Sun's two friends joined her own, ushered in by Serene.

Wow, this is weird, she heard Drop Kick's mind voice say.

You'll get used to it... sort of, Physic comforted the Marine. On their previous visit with Serene, the doctor had talked with her in a similar fashion and thus her mental "muscles" were already somewhat developed. With the addition of the last two, now there was a five-way mental conversation that was taking place.

So what's this all about? You invite me to speak telepathically, and yet your girl here is screening your minds from me. It's like talking to someone on the other side of a wall. I'm hearing only your voices. There was a note of annoyance to her thoughts.

Trust me, it is for a good reason, which I will believe you'll see in a moment. Simply put, Director, we are an errand of the highest priority to the Reformation Coalition, and we need your help.

Stranger and stranger, Serene mused, *I don't believe you would pull such a stunt with me unless it was warranted. Very well, what can I do for you?*

We are looking for a ship, the Hokona, a free-trader that was last seen at Ra. Its planned route would take through here. Have you had contact with such a ship in the last few weeks?

No, Serene said after a moment, *there's been no ship through here by that name. Could it have been running under an alias?*

Coeur looked at Raven in the seat beside her with a questioning glance.

Raven shook her head. *No, its transponder would definitely have broadcast as Hokona.*

Well, no ship with that registry has visited this system recently, at least one that announced itself. Serene tilted her head to the side. *Although...*

Yes? Coeur eagerly thought in her direction

There was an incident a few weeks ago in the outer system. I'm not sure if it was your mystery ship, but it certainly was a mystery to us.

Tell me.

About three weeks ago, one of our SDB's, Integrity, picked up a distress signal coming from out beyond the belt. It was very faint, and heavily distorted. They identified themselves as the Chiron's Star, a far-trader out of Trybec. It wasn't in any of our registries, but that's not all that uncommon. Apparently they were having some kind of reactor problems that had them dead in space as soon as they precipitated in to real space. Integrity went to out render aid, but before it could arrive, one of their magnetic bottles must have blown. Integrity registered her death throes. There were... no survivors that we could find.

Coeur closed her eyes for a moment and choked back the emotion that threatened to well up inside her. Of all the ways a spacer could die, being stranded in space, helpless and defeated by your own ship was one of the worst. This she knew first-hand.

Any wreckage, or identifying marks?

No. Whatever happened to her incinerated her completely. That's why I'm inclined to think their reactor went up. That would put the ship at ground zero of a nuclear detonation. There's not a far-trader I know of that could withstand that.

Okay, then we'll start with that. I'm going to need everything that Integrity recorded from first contact till its destruction. I'll need it done quietly, perhaps piggy-back in some official Kruytercorp correspondence.

Done, was Serene's decisive reply. *Tell me, Captain, why is ship so important that you had to go through all this trouble?* She glanced over at the Hiver who was still busily rattling away facts from the fictitious voyage. *Surely you could have gone through official channels. What I've told you is hardly classified.*

Two reasons. First, official channels take time, and believe me when I say that time is of the essence. Second, this method, however strange, is to protect both you as well as us. We've already had complications to this mission, and I don't wish any heat to come your way because of us.

And the ship?

I am not a liberty to say why the ship is important, suffice it to say that is.

A flare of annoyance surged up from Serene's mind like a solar prominence. Coeur quickly continued before it got out of hand.

Look, I don't care for the 'need to know' mentality, and you know that. Whenever possible I prefer to deal with people squarely, but this situation is volatile in the extreme. So, please, just

take my word for it. We need to find that ship and might need additional resources from you and Kruytercorp to do it.

Despite the play of emotions that were transmitted over their mental link, Serene withdrew into herself as she considered what Coeur had said. Her face was completely passive, her composure impeccable.

Very well. I will do what you ask. A slight smile crept upon her lips. Let it never be said that I'm not a team player.

Thank you, Serene. I know we're asking a lot from you.

Actually, you and the crew of Hornet have done a great deal for Kruytercorp whether you realize it or not.

What do you mean?

Serene looked over a Physic with a bittersweet smile. I'm sorry to say it, but since Delpero was busted and Novastar's assets were frozen, Kruytercorp now has some much needed breathing room. With one of our chief competitors in legal limbo, we've been able to gain considerable market share throughout the Coalition. We've got a line on some lucrative government contracts that were originally slated for Novastar. So, whether you intended it or not, your actions have gone a long way to keep my corporation out of bankruptcy court. That alone is worth any effort I can put forth on your behalf.

Physic's mouth became a grim line on her face and she looked down at the floor, her jaw muscles clenching visibly at the mention of her ex-husband.

Serene's green eyes darted to the doctor, discerning her discomfort even through the block.

Physic, what's the matter?

Coeur answered for her. Remember when I spoke about complications? One of them is that August Delpero had escaped from prison.

Broken out is more like it, Drop Kick put in.

I see.

There's one more thing, Serene, and it's very important. Any traffic though Phoebus needs to be rerouted immediately. It's imperative that no more ships, particularly those belonging to the Coalition, enter their space.

Good Gaia, Captain, it's never a dull moment with you around is it? Am I allowed to know why I need to send ships two, possibly three, Jumps out of their way?

Coeur answered coolly. There is an as-yet undetermined...instability within the government of Phoebus that could be dangerous to any visitors.

You speak from experience on this?

Affirmative.

Does Aubaine know about this?

No that we are aware. We just found out about it on our way here. I don't suppose you have any Jump-3 vessels handy would you? We could Jump past Phoebus altogether.

Um...no, we don't have any couriers with that kind of Jump capability. What about Hornet, can't you squeeze an extra parsec out with that fuel bladder of yours?

The thought has crossed my mind, but believe it or not the mission we're on to find Hokona actually takes precedence over a planetary emergency. What we're doing affects the Reformation Coalition as a whole.

The chips are really down this time, aren't they?

In every conceivable way, Serene.

"If indeed that were the case," Razor said in closing, "the presence of such a construct could represent a catastrophic danger to the entire infrastructure of the Kruyter system as well as any passing ships. The sooner we can take action and discover its location, if indeed it is here at all, the more favorable the outcome will be for all parties involved."

Serene swiveled in her chair and laced her fingers under her chin in thought. "Very well," she said out loud, "Tell me what you need, and I will make it happen."

She looked directly at Coeur, her green eyes flashing like tiger.

"Whatever it takes."

* * *

Seven hours later, Coeur once again found herself sitting in Raven's stateroom. She still maintained her Foxfire appearance even though her mannerisms and dialect were normal. The mixed effect of Raven and Foxfire elements could not conceal the young woman's excitement.

"I see you've got something."

"Yes, sir, I do." Raven turned her comp's screen toward the Captain to give her a view at her findings based off of *Integrity's* sensor logs.

"A match?"

"A possible match, not a definitive one."

"Explain."

"From the spotty readings, *Chiron's Star* fits in general terms the sensor profile of what we have on *Hokona*. So it's a possibility that two could be one and the same. She definitely fits the timeframe."

Coeur regarded her sharply. If what she said were true, then *Hokona*, along with all souls aboard, could be nothing more than particles floating in the cold depths of space – a fairly gruesome fate to elicit such an excited smile from the intelligence officer.

Perhaps sensing the possible non-sequitur, Raven's smile grew.

"There is more to it, Captain, than what is first apparent. And *that* is the really interesting part."

She keyed her notebook and two sensor timelines appeared side-by-side.

"The first one is the audio message that was broadcast out to *Integrity*. The second one is the readings they took on *Chiron's Star* herself. Watch this."

Intermittent static flowed from the audio output. Above the first timeline, a readout appeared measuring the sound wave, while over the next second timeline the abstract shape of the ship glowed amorphaously as its shape was unresolved by the sensors.

The static cleared for a moment and a clipped, cultured accent could be heard through the clutter.

"Kruyter Cont... this is free...der Chiron's Star, requesting immediate assist...all systems down due t.....inoperable cont...upon....massive radiation and multiple casual...can you help us Control?"

The sound of desperation rang heavy, and again Coeur couldn't help but feel a stirring in the pit of her stomach. Had there been anyone around years ago aboard the *Altinak*, would her voice have carried the same note of pain and helplessness?

"Even when *Integrity* sent an acknowledgment, *Chiron's Star* didn't respond," Raven said.

"It's possible that they no longer had the ability to receive messages, only broadcast them." Coeur said.

"That's what I thought as well. Their message repeats until this part." Raven cued up to the sensor logs to the appropriate place and the same voice could be heard again.

"Lost all power...life support fail.....three dead, six wound....please respond, Control! Radi....continues to spread....at this rate.....til levels reach maximum.... Wait, something is....going to have to try manual.....NO! NO! Oh, my God...."

The voice surged to a crescendo and on the second sensor timeline, the indistinct shape flared to life like a sun, and then faded to darkness, leaving nothing behind.

"So what about it?" Coeur said, a distinct hole in her normally placid mask.

"I should've been a sensor tech, Captain." Raven smiled triumphantly.

"I think I missed my calling, I really do."

"Your point?" Coeur said.

"The problem is in the timing. You see, the explosion and the message don't exactly synch up. Even accounting for the lag time over the distance, there is a .39 second delay from the time that the explosion starts and the message ends. In other words, the man you heard was still speaking almost a half-second *after* the explosion started."

Raven sat back in her chair and beamed. "A half second is a long time, particularly if you happen to be standing at ground zero of a nuclear explosion at the time. If you assume that the explosion started in engineering, and our friend here was on the bridge, those two points wouldn't be more than about 50 to 60 meters apart, given the ship's size. An explosion in engineering would reach the bridge almost instantaneously

“So what are you suggesting?”

“I thought you’d never ask.” Raven’s eyes glittered with glee, “Everything I’ve seen here would fit with someone trying to simulate the destruction of a vessel without actually doing it. “ Raven dove into her supporting reason as the first sign of Coeur’s dubious look.

“You’ve got a ship that’s not in anyone’s log books, a cry for help to establish its presence to the locals, and then an explosion that just so *happens* not to leave any wreckage behind for identification.”

“That’s quite a leap in logic.”

“Yes, but I think it’s the correct one. I believe the time gap we’re seeing was caused by a miniscule delay between the fake message and the detonation of a nuclear device. Someone missed their mark, and I would be willing to wager hard money that the ship is still intact and whole. Given the complicated smoke and mirrors they would’ve had to use to pull this off, I can almost guarantee you that the ship is still in the system stashed away somewhere.”

Raven nodded emphatically at the last part, punctuating her thoughts. Opposite her, Coeur sat statue still, her gaze turned inward.

“Okay,” she said at last, “We’ll check it out. Hammer said we should take leads as we them. This one may very well be our first.” She stood to go.

“The way things have been going for us on Aubaine and Phoebus, maybe it’s time the pendulum swung the other way for a change.”

* * *

To her credit, Director Serene did not bat an eyelash when Coeur asked her to bring Kruyter’s two SDB’s, *Integrity* and her sister ship *Independence*, in on the operation. If anything, she was eager to get her people into action even if she herself did not have all the facts.

At Coeur’s behest, the two system defenders would redeploy to slowly be able to cover more ground throughout the system instead of congregating at the static positions within the system, while *Hornet* would similarly be out looking for their fictional Virus-laden satellite. To avoid any undue attention of those that might be on the lookout for such a change in activity, Coeur even used a variant of the SDB’s regular sweep pattern throughout system. Director Serene was even able to scare up some small prospecting ships used for extracting ore samples from the myriad asteroids in the belt.

Each of the searching ships that were quietly on the hunt were given a specific wavelength and ordered to constantly emit a carrier signal on that band. The frequency itself was nothing spectacular – in fact, unless you really knew what to look for it, the signal could just as well get lost in the normal amount of background ‘noise’ commonly found in space. No explanation was given to crews, and it was made clear that questions in this case were strongly discouraged. It was an enigma to the crews, this sudden shift in posture, but seeing as how the orders came from upper management, and the all the ships including the SDB’s were staffed by Kruytercorp employees, they obeyed without question.

The signal was meant to trigger a response from *Hokona*, if indeed she were actually in the system. It was yet another thing that Hammer had included in his profile of the missing ship, so that *Hornet* would know she was close to prey if and when she came into range.

The difficulty was that the finder signal only had a range of approximately 150,000 kilometers, or a half of a lightsecond. Given the vast gulfs of empty space within any star system, that range was infinitesimally small. Canvassing it would take time, even with the small task force that Kruytercorp had provided. In just every way applicable, *Hokona* was a minute needle in an astronomically big hay stack.

The time issue was the most troublesome for Coeur, when her orders had been cut, they had carried an immediacy that in her mind was likened to a hovercycle race than any other assignment she’d ever been handed. The fact that Hammer wanted that ship found *yesterday*, only underscored the speed with in which she was expected to carry out her duty.

Coeur was a spacer at heart, and any veteran that had earned their spurs could attest that any prolonged activity in space would take copious amounts of time to execute. Time was the very thing that Coeur was convinced they didn’t have.

What's more she was operating under an assumption that carried a lot of qualifiers. *If Chiron's Star* was still intact. *If* she was still in the system. *If* the ship turned out to be *Hokona*. There were far too many *ifs* than Coeur would've liked, but that again was the nature of conducting operations in space.

Then again, this was the best lead they'd come across since departing Aubaine, and so Coeur resolved herself to leave no stone unturned in the case of *Hokona* and the inestimable value of the Alpha Bank. She at least could take a small amount of comfort in the fact that, more than likely, whatever fate had befallen the free-trader, had *already* occurred.

Several days went by as the *Hornet* and the SDB's searched the more likely hiding spots in the outer system while the smaller ships combed the belt. They found nothing but empty space and rock.

As the days went by, Coeur could feel the tension starting build up in her neck and shoulders. If something did not turn up in the next week or so, she might have to consider scrapping the search and moving on to Ra and work back from there. There was a similar weight that appeared over Raven as well, and began to make itself more apparent with ever down-turned glance and frustrated gesture. After all, the entire operation had been based off of *her* recommendation.

If it all turned out to be a waste of time....

* * *

"So, why do you think we're *really* out here, boss?" sensor tech Mullins asked his Captain with no small amount of curiosity. "I mean, this seems a little long for a drill, don't you think?"

Across the miniature 'bridge' aboard Excavator-37, lovingly called the *Mole* by her 4-man crew, Captain Fontain shrugged.

"I dunno." He said a bit sullenly. "Who knows what's going in the heads of upper management types anyway? They live in a completely different world than you and I."

"I'll say." Mullins replied. The crews of the small ships like the Excavators were known for being close-knit and informal. "It just seems to me that every day we're out here doing whatever it is that we're doing, that's another day of ore production that we lose. And just when the company is finally catching a break, too."

"Hey, you don't have to tell me," Fontain said sourly. "We're finally back up to the same benefits we had three years ago. I'll be the first to say I don't want them to dry up again because of some kinda wild goose chase!"

"You know what I hear?" Mullins said a hint of conspiracy coloring his voice. "I hear that there's a computer floating around the system somewhere that's infected with Virus, and this weird signal turns it off."

Fontain just shook his head. "Now Mullins, you should know better than that. Virus don't *have* an on/off switch. That's the *problem*."

Mullins frowned at the rebuke. "Well, I also heard it was pirates, lurking around, or maybe The Guild."

"I suppose the signal we're squawking is supposed to shut *them* down too, eh?" The Captain said to his junior. He was a good kid, but by Gaia he could be dense sometimes.

"Besides, you know why we ain't gonna find what they're looking for?"

"Why's that, boss?"

"Because *we're* looking for it!" Mullins stepped right into that one. "The big dogs in the outer system will probably turn up whatever it is, not us. We've barely got enough sensors on us to see the space ahead of us. Probably didn't want make us feel left out, or so some hair-brained morale officer thought."

"Well, I don't...."

Mullins was preparing his verbal retort when he stopped short. His sensor panel was bleeping at him. Both of them turned and stared at the flashing light in semi-shocked silence. Mullins' hands danced across the board in response.

"What've ya' got?"

"Not sure," the sensor tech said as his panel began streaming data from the external feed. "Whatever it is, it's on the same frequency as our mystery signal. Think we ought to log it?" Exasperation was apparent on Fontain's leathery features. "What do you think? Of course we're going to log it! Send a dispatch to Kreuzeng Control right now." Mullins turned to carry out his orders. "What should I tell them?" "Tell them we found their Virus-ridden Guild pirates, what else?"

* * *

"Signal confirmed," Raven said, barely able to keep her excitement at bay. "It's a 100% match. That means *Hokona* is definitely here!" Coeur sat behind her desk, and let the effect of Raven's words wash over her like rain on a hot day. They had hit paydirt at last. "Is it possible that there might be another transponder running around tuned that same frequency?" Drop Kick said, careful not to tread on the growing feeling of relief building in the room. "Negative," Coeur said. "The receiver was custom made to receive this signal on that frequency at a specific modulation. If there's another one of those in this entire subsector, it would be *quite* a coincidence." "Just checking," the big Marine said with a glance over to Raven, "Do we have a definite position on her?" "Not yet, but it's going to be within a lightsecond of where Extractor-37 picked up her scent. Unfortunately, she wasn't able to get a very good direction. The long range sensors on those buckets are um...unreliable at best." "Well then, I think *Hornet* needs to make a sweep through there." Coeur said. "And a quiet one at that." She met Raven's eyes. "Do you know if the return signal '37 picked up might alert any anyone around here." "Yeah, it would be something of a let down if return the signal lit the bridge up in flashing lights, and tipped our hand before we move in." Drop Kick put in. The man was wound up like a tiger in a cage, and he could tell the gates would soon be opened to let him out. "No," Raven said. "It was an entirely passive system. I should qualify that by pointing out we don't know what state the *Hokona* will be in when we find her." Or *what's left of her*, was the unsaid subtext. "From what we know right now, that communications unit could have been ripped out and cycled out of the airlock." "All the more reason that we take *Hornet* in to look for ourselves." Coeur turned to where Gyro sat. "I think this will be an excellent shake down of our new ECM and stealth capabilities." Gyro nodded. "Yes, sir." "For now though," Coeur continued, "Let's have the SDB's and small craft keep on their patrols. A change in routine now could alert them that we found something if, presumably, they don't already know." She glanced around the room, taking in the expression on each face, including Razor's curious sixed-eyed gaze. For once, it seemed, they had the initiative, and Red Sun vowed that they would take utmost advantage of it. "Okay, people, let's move like we've got a purpose."

* * *

Quietly as they could manage, *Hornet* broke off their normal search pattern and headed in system to pick up where Excavator 37 had left off. At Raven's behest, they even beamed a false communiqué to *Independence* and *Integrity* that said that expressed their intent to move farther *out* in the system, just in case there was anyone listening. Once they were far enough out, *Hornet* engaged her ECM and rigged for silent running, wheeling about and heading towards their destination on the belt. That feint, coupled with the regular transit time, would take the better part of three day and night cycles to accomplish.

This left Coeur and Gyro ample time to scrutinize the lightsecond area where the return signal was found. The Kruyter belt itself lay scattered about the system's ecliptic in slow orbit around the primary. Much like the rings of a gas giant, the belt also contained asteroids large enough to serve in the same capacity as shepherd moons. Even though the planetoid that once existed was in tiny fragments, the asteroids themselves had similarly aligned themselves around gravitational Lagrange points. The terrestrial mass that lay within at each of those points constituted a definable sector of asteroids, which is what Kruytercorp used to keep track of their operations throughout the belt. The space in which the return signal was discovered lay squarely within the Lamda Sector, which was almost opposite from Kreuzeng Control on the other side of the sun.

Unlike her previous excursion to Mexit in search of its relic depot, Coeur was more concerned with what to do once she found their target, than the process of finding it. As Raven had pointed out, they had no idea what they would find once they had *Hokona* in their sights, and it looked as though someone had gone to quite a bit of trouble to mask her presence here. She had Physic prep the sick bay for incoming wounded, and had Drop Kick break out the battle dress and prepare for hostile boarding actions.

Drop Kick had used the intervening time to relentlessly drill his Marines, including the Ithklur, in full battle dress to get them "back in the habit." This also marked the first time the three Ithklur had donned their own powered armor. In sharp contrast to the smooth, almost fluid lines of the RCMC armor, Ithklur armor was stylized and ceremoniously decorated to strike fear into the hearts of their enemy. Their space-black face bowls were shaped like a horizontally elongated diamond, and to reminded Coeur of the ancient jousting helmets she'd seen on Terra. Combined with their impressive height and width, Raptor, Hunter and Striker looked every bit the lethal predators that they were.

Coeur also ordered the weapon systems brought to standby, even though Crowbar was still hard at work putting Bulls-Eye into service. Whether it would be up and running by the of their arrival, however, was uncertain

"We don't know what's in the Lamda Cluster," Coeur said to her XO in her stateroom. "It's not outside the realm of possibilities that we'll see combat." She waited for Gyro's silent acknowledgment before continuing.

"I need to know. Is Bulls-Eye ready?"

Gyro wore the look of a woman who had expected the question to come up, but did not possess an answer that satisfied her.

"No, sir."

"I see." Coeur said. "And why is that?"

"The systems have proven more dissimilar than we originally thought, so unifying them has proved equally difficult." Gyro said flatly, laying it on the line for her Captain. "However, that is not to say that progress is not being made. Crowbar has the Major systems mapped out, and Razor has an early beta version of the Bulls-Eye software, but it is *definitely* not complete, sir."

Coeur nodded thoughtfully. This project was Gyro's baby and admitting that it was not ready for trial use was obviously difficult to say aloud. To her credit, she did not try to dance around the subject or spin it in a favorable light.

"On the plus side, Captain, we have a greater familiarity with the systems, if nothing for the sheer amount of time we've had our hands on them. I believe that that has increased our efficiency using the systems already in place."

"Very well, then I will need to order Crowbar to close up all the systems and bring us back up to normal. I'm sorry Gyro," Coeur said after a moment, "but if things get hot, we'll have to do it without Bulls-Eye." Though she was trying desperately not to show it, Gyro's face fell. Beneath the desk, the XO's hands clenched into fists.

Sensing her distress, Coeur intentionally softened her tone.

"Let us both pray that where we're going, we won't need it."

* * *

"All right, Sixer, we're in position," Coeur said to her navigator, ensconced in his roller chair. "Start piping the query signal out." From her pilot's couch, the Captain brought the ship to a slow crawl after gliding her gracefully into the zone where the signal was first discovered. It had taken some tricky plotting on the Schalli's part, coupled with some inspired piloting from Red Sun, but the far-trader had managed to coast into the area with minimal power readings, adjusting with attitude thrusters alone. For all intents and purposes they were ghosts floating among stars.

Deep Six's bottle-like muzzle bobbed in acknowledgement and, with a deft flick of his 'whiskers,' *Hornet* took to the trail of their missing ship. At less than a light second from its source, the answering signal came immediately.

"We have it, Captain, though it is very faint."

"Can you get a fix on its position?"

The astrogator played his top two tentacles among *Hornet's* holographic control panels. Even for a race that was born and raised underwater, the boneless movements of his appendages were pinpoint precise.

"No, Captain, it looks as though the signal is being broadcast omni-directionally."

Coeur bit her lower lip in thought, an affectation that she was *sure* that she had given up in middle school. Even though they had narrowed it down by a titanic amount, a space roughly the lightsecond was still a lot of ground to cover. If the signal was being broadcast by the source in every direction, there were no solid bread crumbs for them to follow. Even still, instead of trying to find a needle in a haystack, *Hornet* was now looking for a single apple on an apple tree.

"If I may make a suggestion, Captain?" the alien said somewhat sheepishly, turning its wide gaze toward her.

"Of course, Sixer, always."

"I can reconfigure out our transmitter to send out a burst of the query signal instead of a continuous stream. If I can measure the response time it takes for the return signal to reach us each time it answers, I can attempt to gauge our position relative to the source."

Coeur smiled inwardly. Deep Six did always preface many of his greatest ideas almost as he were somewhat bashful about presenting them. However, in this case, Coeur was quick to see where he was going.

"Do it. I'll move us off so you can begin to triangulate it."

"Thank you, Captain, I was about to suggest that exact course of action."

How did I know that, I wonder? Coeur thought to herself.

With the need to keep their presence shrouded high, and their energy emissions low, it took them several hours playing an advanced game of 'hotter, colder' to reduce their search area from about 300,000 kilometers from side-to-side down to a modest 50,000.

Deep Six never wavered or let his attention be distracted by the repetitive task of pinging away and then logging the result. Slowly but surely, however, his diligence was paying dividends. A picture was forming of the signal's origin, and was being constantly refined to narrow the search area. Even after a long double watch, when Coeur could start to feel fatigue starting to work its way behind her eyes and down the middle of her back, the Schalli was still going strong.

Mercy came to the bridge to relieve her at the helm. The top of her head nearly scraped the top of the portal with her additional height. Mercy had left right in the middle of battle dress drills. Her unhelmeted head looking distinctly at odds with the rest of her proportion, but it did not keep her from settling into the pilot's couch and start working the controls still armored.

"He wouldn't let you take it off first, would he?" Coeur said to her as Mercy adjusted the seating to fit her metallic form.

She flashed a can-do smile. "That's right, Skipper. Drop Kick thought that it would be a good exercise, seeing as how you *don't* normally need a suit of powered battle armor to fly a starship."

"Fine," she said, stifling a yawn. "Just don't break anything in that monkey suit."

"Aye, aye, sir," the Marine put an oversize metal hand to her forehead in a sharp salute.

And to think, there was a time when I had trouble with the concept of a jarhead flying my ship. Funny how things change.

Even though Mercy was more at home flying an assault vehicle, she had more than proven her worth when she was given *Hornet's* reins. Many of the RC's were, of course, trained in basic starship operations, but what they were doing out here went far beyond even the most

elastic definition of basic. Newton could have probably handled the sprint and drift kind of maneuvering they were pulling, but he was still hard at work on the software aspects of Bulls-Eye, which was continuing even as Crowbar had to temporarily close up shop. Thus, finding that Mercy could fly competently was a great boon, given the small amount of people Coeur had to draw from.

Wandering back to the autogalley, she broke out a carbo-stick and washed it down with a healthy swig of a nutrient drink that tasted like someone's idea of strawberry who hadn't had the luxury of actually tasting one. Then she settled into her quarters, worked her way through a number of ship's status reports, then hit the sack.

When she awoke some hours later, the burn of fatigue had not completely left her. *Better get used to it girl*, she thought stretching her taut muscles, *you're wound pretty tight. You probably won't get a decent night's sleep until you're back in Jump, and maybe not even then.*

When she arrived on the bridge again, Mercy was still there, only Bonzo sat in Sixer's position now, similarly dressed in battle dress and helmetless.

Having Newton out of the loop certainly makes for some interesting occurrences in the duty roster. Good Gaia, now I've got Marines at both stations. Scandal!

She reminded herself that whimsical trooper was, after all, a sensor tech. She did have to wonder, however, just how much the *Hornet's* sophisticated sensor suite had in common with the kind of sensors he was used to running. "Report," she said crisply, looking at the main viewscreen. The search area had narrowed even further, but looked as though it were reaching a point of diminishing returns.

"We're refining the search, sir." Mercy said without any hint of fatigue showing in her demeanor, "there are several loci that are solid possibilities. Sixer logged the ones he scored with a higher probability before he went off duty."

She handed a data display over and Coeur quickly began poring over the details that she found there. Out of curiosity she examined the timestamp on the Sixer's last entry, and found that it had only been about an hour beforehand. In effect, the Schalli had worked a *triple* shift, and from she knew of him, it had probably executed without the slightest complaint or request for relief.

Even if her astrogator was burning the candle at both ends, he had outlined at least a dozen spots, with statistically favorable locations given the data. It was top notch work. As she studied the different points, however, something strange struck her, though she could not put her finger on it. There was a tickling in her mind as though the thought was on the tip of her mental tongue. But what was it?

"Mercy, are good at the helm for now?"

"Oh, yes sir!" the Marine shot back. "I'm on top of it, Skipper!"

"Excellent. Keep us going."

Coeur turned and went back to her quarters and synched up the data display with the ship's database, comparing the system's geography against what Sixer had postulated.

Her initial searches came up empty, but the tickling remained. Whatever it was she could feel that her instincts were satisfied with what they were finding. Her fingers drummed on the surface of her desk, until she palmed the intercom.

"Raven, here," the voice said on the other end.

"Question - do you have any records of Kruytercorp's holdings in this system?"

"Why yes I do, Captain. It's not every system in the Coalition that's owned lock, stock and barrel by a megacorporation. That makes its operations somewhat...um, special."

"That's what I thought. Bring them down as soon as you can."

There was silence for a moment, and Coeur could imagine an intrigued look on the Lieutenant's face. "Do you have something?"

"Not much right now, just a feeling."

* * *

The data points closed together aligning in perfect synchronicity, overlaying on top of each other in indisputable harmony. The first set of points came from Sixer's analysis and the

other was the detailed, one might say *eerily* detailed, accounting of Kruytercorp's assets throughout the entire star system.

Raven, sat back in her chair and whistled.

"Well, you called that one right." She said with another look at the display, eyes wide.

"I thought I heard something about this place a few years ago in the news," Coeur said in response, "but it's not in *Hornet's* official registry for the system."

"That doesn't surprise me. It was an embarrassment to them at the time, and one they would probably rather forget about." The intelligence officer said. "It was the Lamda-3 installation that started Kruytercorp down the rocky road it's on now. I can see why they might quietly delete it off the normal list of tourist attractions."

The Lamda-3 asteroid, so named because it was the third largest rock that inhabited that particular Lagrange point, represented the first pebbles in an ever-growing avalanche of bad luck for the struggling megacorporation.

Eager to expand their holdings, the company had opened its operations into more remote parts of the belt in their attempt to find the richest veins of readily accessible resources. The Lamda-3 asteroid was found to be a particular succulent morsel for excavations. In time, not only was the facility itself turning out a healthy share of goods, but plans were laid to turn it into a headquarters to further expand operations in that sector. Large living quarters were carved out of the rock, and even a small strip of stores, restaurants and bars was installed to mirror the ones that had once operated at Krezueng. Great expense in equipment and labor went into its construction so that it would eventually operate with a large degree of autonomy. That way it could lead operations on that other side of the belt while freeing up Kreuzueng to concentrate on the area around it. Large amounts of public relations and media attention had accompanied the opening of the base.

Unfortunately, the asteroids within easy striking distance of Lamda-3 turned out to be largely barren, despite positive initial tests and drilling. If that weren't bad enough, the mines in the asteroid itself began to run dry. Gradually, the cost of operating it began to climb as profitable veins of ore became increasingly rare. Once it reached a certain break over point, the base actually started *costing* the company more money than it was producing. That coupled with increasingly predatory business strategies from rival corporations like Novastar, had cut deep into Kruytercorp's margins.

Caught between a rock and a hard place, management decided to pull the plug on their much vaunted 'foundation of the future.' This painted their leadership out to be a bunch of bungling incompetents. Word also leaked out of the rather draconian staff reductions that occurred because of this move, which only served to fan the flames.

From then on, Kruytercorp had hobbled along, barely making ends meet. Worse yet, they had been forced time and again, to further scale back their operations to keep from going under. Only now, was there a growing upswing in their profitability that could eventually allow them to ride out the storm.

"Well then, let's go have a look, shall we?" Coeur said as she queried Drop Kick's personal comm.

"Red?" the Marine's voice came through with a slight distortion, indicating that he was currently wearing his suit of battle dress.

"I'm sending some tactical information for you to distribute amongst your troopers," as she said it, the full schematics of the asteroid base that was appeared in his queue, accurate down to the last access panel and juncture.

"Get your people ready," she said with authority, "We're going in."

Chapter 7

"You heard the lady," Drop Kick's voice boomed over the link. "Move, move, *move!*" Suddenly Marine Country looked like an upturned anthill.

They had known that sooner or later it would come down to them. Each already had a mental queue of pre-appointed tasks they would have to check off the overall readiness list. Each went about these duties with the precise efficiency that would have made any drill Sergeant in the RCMC proud.

"We're tactical in ten and ready to move inside fifteen!" Drop Kick doubted it would take them less than twelve to get their act together considering that they were already wearing their battle dress. Moving heavy equipment about was much easier when you had advanced servomotors working instead of mere muscle and sinew.

A few moments later, Mercy and Whiz Bang joined them in the hold, where the Brigade Sergeant Major was mustering his forces. Having been relieved from bridge watch by Red Sun and Rave, they immediately dove into the organized chaos.

On his helmet's tactical display, Drop Kick pulled up the catalogue of weapons in the ship's arsenal. If they were going into a more open environment, he would have included plasma rifles, perhaps even a grenade launcher, but what where they were going was enclosed. If *Hokona* was actually there, they would need to take it completely intact. He passed over those weapons and tagged the anti-personnel flechette rifles and gauss pistols. That would at least allow them a staggering amount of firepower, but such that there would be a smaller amount of collateral damage if things got hot. He also threw in a few lower-yield fragmentation and flash grenades to the mix before sending it off to Whiz Bang and Striker, who were in charge of loading the munitions.

Coeur would be angling the ship to make a slow pass at the asteroid base. In order to drop them off and assume a covering position. Not that there was a lot of covering a starship could do once they got into the station, but *Hornet* could at least cover their entry and exit. By the plan, the human Marines would travel to Lamda-3 by way of the *Valiant*, while the three Ithklur would take the air-raft.

The three Ithklur were extremely effective in the role of ground pounders, but lacked the kind of crossing training that those of the RCMC possessed. As for the human Marines, their arrangement would be the same as if they were being deployed for planetary operations. Mercy would pilot the *Valiant*, Whiz Bang would man the main fusion canon, Drop Kick would call the shots and Bonzo would operate the long-range missile racks. While the tank itself was not specifically made to operate in space, the designers that dreamed up the armored behemoth had apparently not discounted the idea either. Thus, there was a thruster sled that could be fitted on to it to allow it to move short distances through space. Similarly, the air raft was not designed to tackle the rigors of space as its primary purpose, but was spaceworthy none-the-less. Coeur

herself had thought that the ship's lack of escape pods was at least offset by an air raft that could, in a pinch, serve as such. That it might be used as a landing craft for Ithklur warriors was never something she'd imagined.

In a few minutes, all was in place. The Marines presented themselves in sharp formation to their CO for inspection. Each had their helmets off in the crook of their left arm with their rifles slung smartly over their shoulders. It was a quite a contrast between the two groups as they stood side-by-side. The Aubani Marines' scout battle dress was a shiny rust orange hue with white designator lines running across each of their armored shoulder pauldrons. On their right shoulder was the man-wheel of the Reformation Coalition which sat above the starfield and sword of the RCMC. On their left was the screaming eagle insignia of the Third Armored Marine Battalion above their first initial and last name. As a further affectation, each of the humans had put *Hornet's* crest on the left temple of their helmets.

In contrast, the three Ithklur wore heavy battle dress that was individually tailored to them. They were almost thirty centimeters taller than their human counterparts, and their armor was deep forest green and black. Their flechette rifles, while similar in function, were richly decorated and seemed made out of fluid, almost organic lines. Their adornments were far from standard, and looked to have been customized wholly at the wielder's fancy. Ultimate care had been taken by each Marine to personalize the equipment of their kit. The blood-red barrel of Raptor's weapon bore a string of hematite beads that had been tightly wound around it, while the tiger-striped length of Hunter's rifle had hash marks down the side for the number of confirmed kills he had with it. There were quite a few. Strikers weapon was carved from stock to magazine, and down the length of the barrel with war sigils. Similarly, the oversize bracelets and anklets he wore over his armor were polished to a mirror shine and decorated in much the same fashion. Each of them also carried wicked bladed weapons that obviously seen use.

The only real consistent element in their armor was the six-pointed Hiver star emblem on their left shoulder with a set of Ithklur numerical pictograms to denote their place within the order of battle.

Drop Kick began to pace in front of the presented line, checking the time counter since they got the call.

It read: 9:47.

This would be about the time that others might rattle off a few crass and possibly crude sayings about how 'we do things in the Corps' and get a *hoo-ra* or two from the troops. It was a classic to be sure, but Drop Kick rejected it out of hand here.

He had been through too much with Detachment A for that kind of... tomfoolery, and he somehow doubted that the Ithklur would be affected by it at all. Instead, he stopped and glanced at each of his charges, inviting them to return it. After a purposeful pause of silence, he finally spoke.

"You all know the score," he said, "The Captain has brought us this far, so now it's up to us."

He swept his gaze over them one last time.

"We've got a job to do, so let's get to it."

"Yes, sir!" the humans said in unison as the Ithklur clasped their hands together over their heart and nodded sharply in his direction.

Within two more minutes both the air raft and the Valiant were prepped and ready to move out. Drop Kick settled into his command nook and sealed his helmet in place with a characteristic hiss of atmosphere. Around him the others followed suit.

He spared a moment to look at each of his people. They had no idea what they were about to find inside Lamda-3, but the chances of finding themselves in combat seemed pretty likely, at least that's what Drop Kick's gut told him. A wave of dark thoughts threatened to well up, as they normally did on the eve of action. He pushed them down and held them there. He couldn't afford to let himself be distracted by hoping that they would all make it back safely, even if that was what he wished for every time he led troops into the field.

His thoughts leaped from the Marines to Snapshot, who at this moment would be manning the portside missile turret. Even as he began to clear his mind of everything but the mission before him, he let the thought of her love wash over him one last time before locking it in the strongbox of his heart.

"Skipper says we'll be in position in 15, sir." Mercy said from the pilot station.

"Roger," he said flipping on his tactical display and bringing it to the ready. "Launch on her mark."

* * *

Hornet had actually been in relatively close proximity to Lamda-3 when Coeur had decided to check it out, making the transit time to the Marine's drop off point sooner rather than later.

The hatch to *Hornet's* main hold yawned open, spilling light into the endless night. With thrusters flaring to brilliant azure life, the Valiant and the air raft departed from the confines of the ship, making their way towards the asteroid's landing bay. *Hornet* veered off, still rigged for silent running, and took up a covering position to await their return. Given the size of the landing bay in front of them, *Hornet* could have easily landed and deployed the vehicles rocksides, but Coeur had decided to keep the ship at readiness outside Lamda-3.

In Drop Kick's viewfinder, the enormous metallic doors that sealed the entrance to the trailward docking bay grew steadily larger from the size of his hand to gargantuan as the distance fell away. At nearly eighty kilometers long, the rock before them was not even a third the size of Kreuzeng, but it was still extremely massive. From the schematics downloaded to their suits, they could plainly see that there was an expansive labyrinth of tunnels and caverns that had been hollowed out of the rock. There were, however, only a few places that a starship the size of *Hokona* could fit - three to be exact.

The first was the very docking bay where they hoped to land their vehicles. There was also an identical bay on the pullward side of the base at approximately the same relative elevation. The third and final location was located midway between those points with an entry point that was on the underside "belly" of the asteroid.

Of course, if the ship's broken up, it could be just about anywhere on that berg, Drop Kick thought.

"We're coming up on position." Drop Kick said over to Bonzo at the sensor station. "Beam our authcode."

Apparently included among Raven's accurate notes about the station were the access codes to gain entry to it, even though the asteroid was on a permanent low power/standby mode.

"Right, sir," The Marine said, sending the signal. "Open sesame."

At first nothing happened, and the distance kept falling away. A stab of adrenaline ran through Drop Kick's system, but then the warning lights around the edge of the doors lit up in flashing red. The enormous doors then began to retract back like the giant metal jaws of some hideous beast.

The Valiant and the air raft passed through a secondary armored partition that formed the inner side of the massive airlock and settled down on the floor of the bay as they gates closed behind them. It came as no surprise, but the expansive docking bay was completely empty to both the naked eye and their sensors.

"Anything?" Drop Kick asked.

Light from Bonzo's sensor station washed over the shiny curvature of his helmet visor. "Negative, sir. There's not so much as a forklift or contra-grav pallet in here." He said looking up from his panel. "Looks like Kruyter stripped it pretty bare when they pulled out."

If *Hokona* wasn't here then they would have to check out the other two docking bays, and the best way to get to the ventral bay was to go *through* the asteroid rather than negotiating over its bulbous, kilometers-long surface in vehicles meant for limited space application.

"Do we have a secure uplink with *Hornet*?"

Mercy keyed in a few commands on her comm panel. "We do now, sir."

"Signal the Captain and tell her that Site 1 is no joy. Recommend that *Hornet* check out Site 3 while we investigate Site 2."

"Roger, relaying now."

Drop Kick drummed his armored fingers on the arm of his chair. He knew that Coeur would rather play the role of watch dog while the Marines were here, but something was gnawing

at his gut. Something was definitely out of place here and the sooner his people were off this rock the better.

"*Hornet* acknowledges," Mercy said after a moment.

Drop Kick activated his suit's com channel to address both humans and Ithklur.

"All right, this is how we're going to play it. Whiz Bang, Bonzo, you slave your stations into Mercy's panel. Mercy, you're going to stay here and keep an eye on the vehicles, relaying any messages from *Hornet* to us through the Valiant's comm system and vice-versa. Striker, you to stay here and cover her. The rest of you are with me. We're going down through the Habitation Level, through Main Industrial and then insert ourselves into Site 2 from there. Let's move out."

He killed the channel and slung his flechette rifle before taking his gauss pistol out, examining it with a critical eye. Satisfied he thrust it back into the magnetic holster on his armored thigh and stood up.

"I should've known," Mercy's voice came through in a burst. "The first real action we've seen this time out and you leave me tending the horses."

"Relax, trooper," Drop Kick shot back. "That just means that you have this fine piece of machinery all to yourself."

"Yeah," Bonzo chimed in, "and the Sarge wouldn't leave his true love to just anyone." His following laugh sounded tinny and hollow coming through their helmet speakers

"Stow it." Drop Kick returned, turning to Mercy. "Crack the seal."

The pressurized hatch on the top of the Valiant's turret cycled open and the three armored Marines emerged into the open confines of the bay. While Lamda-3 generated a miniscule amount of gravity, it wasn't anywhere close to a standard-G. The light airiness was somewhat offset by the weight of their armor. The RCMC, were rigorously trained into zero and near zero-G maneuvers so that it took only a moment for the three to adjust to the environment.

Beside the air raft, the three Ithklur stood like imposing metal sculptures, holding their weapons aloft. Raptor took a bounding step forward and came to attention in front of the humans.

"Striker wishes to guard the perimeter if he is to be left behind."

Drop Kick's eyes narrowed behind his face bowl at the last part. He could imagine that being left on guard duty while the others went off had not gone over well in their camp..

To hell with that, even with the tank, I don't want Mercy to cover the bases by herself. True, it did reduce his deployable assets by leaving one of the Ithklur here, but five Marines in battle dress was still a very effective fighting force.

"Very well. Have him place some sensor and communication relays while he's at it."

Raptor turned back toward the other two and made a few sharp hand motions towards Striker.

"It is done." Raptor's sibilant baritone stated.

"Fine." Drop Kick said. This would be the first true joint operation between the two groups, and Drop Kick was bound and determined not to let their warrior attitude get the better of him.

He reached up switched his headlamp. "Let's move out."

The five Marines used the low-gravity to their advantage and bounded along with great leaps that were further augmented by the servomotor-enhanced power of their battle dress.

Drop Kick swept the barrel of his weapon around the room as he connected with the metal plate of the floor and leapt again. So far, their sensors read zero on any life signs or IR readings. As they moved into the bay, its age became apparent. Even *Kreuzung* was far from the shiny metal panels and polish that you might find elsewhere on a space station, and Lamda-3 was in even worse shape.

Not only had all the heavy equipment been stripped out, leaving the bay feeling much larger and hollow than it probably would have, but the machinery mounts and deck plates had large rashes of rust all over them. The feeling of decay and neglect was palpable even through Drop Kick's armor.

On his HUD, he brought up the map of the base and locked in his relative position, as well as the positions of his Marines, which lit up in bright gold icons. The ghostly green-lit map occupied a small corner of his display, but he could manipulate it. With the capabilities built-in to

his armor, he could bring it to the forefront and zoom in to a specific area without hindering his forward sightlines.

He brought up the schematic of this level, tagged the locus and tight beamed it to Whiz Bang, who was currently on point. Drop Kick was in the middle flanked by the two Ithklur and Bonzo brought up the rear.

The band pressed on past the large lift that Drop Kick's map told him went down to the administrative offices that had once facilitated the docking bay, and through another large armored partition into another expansive, empty chamber. There was no mistaking its purpose from the heavy machinery mounts, catwalks, fold out separator panels and recessed access bays. This room had once been a sophisticated machine shop and repair station. From the number of berths that it boasted, it could've serviced about five ships the size of *Hornet* all at once. But now, much like the rest that they'd seen so far, it was a mummified version of its former self.

The personnel lift, located adjacent to the heavy machinery lift, sat at the far side of the chamber. The rusty, cage-like doors came finally into view the squad fanned out in front of it. Bonzo unstrapped a hand held mini-comp from his belt and plugged it into the socket next to the lift controls.

"What've you got, Bonzo?"

"I'm feeding it the upper management codes that Raven gave us. It seems to be taking them okay."

Drop Kick read the unspoken, *but...*

"She's pretty sluggish, Sarge. It may take a few minutes to muster up enough juice to get us inside."

"Keep on it."

Drop Kick turned and gazed back out at the large room, his rifle at the ready. On either side of him, the two Ithklur moved fluidly into positions where they could cover each other, as well as their human companions by flattening their backs against the opposite walls. They would all need to stay sharp while Bonzo worked.

While he had a moment, Drop Kick noted the position of each team member to keep himself in a state of mental readiness. Whiz Bang, he found, was not in the normal flanking position that they had drilled for such boarding operations. The Sergeant Major switched over to a personal channel to contact his wayward charge, but Whiz Bang was already on the line, putting a call through to *him*.

"Hey Sarge, you might want to take a look at this."

Drop Kick found the Marine kneeling in front of a ventilation cover a few meters away. Whiz Bang's glaring white headlamp was trained on the metallic slats even as he had held his mobile sensor pad out in front of him.

"Report." Drop Kick said as he settled into position beside him.

"We've got airflow going on here, Sarge." He held up his sensor pad for the Sergeant to see for himself. "It's faint, but the air coming from this vent isn't just stirring, it's *cycling*."

"You're sure?"

"Sure as sure can be, Sarge."

Drop Kick hefted his rifle across his chest.

"Can you think of any reason why it would be active?"

Whiz Bang tilted his helmeted head. "No, sir."

"Neither can I," he pulled the breech lever on his rifle and primed it with satisfying *snick*. "Let's get back to the others."

* * *

"Okay, Sixer," Coeur said from her pilot's couch "send our authcode."

"Sending now, sir." The Schalli said at her side.

Hornet was hovering in front of the pullward bay doors, on the opposite side of the asteroid from where the Marines had deployed. Even though she had wanted to stay trailward of the base in case the troops needed a sudden evacuation, the ship would cover the distance to

the other side much faster than the Marines could from the inside. Besides, once the Marines penetrated far enough into the base, any hopes of a quick evac went out the window. *Hornet* might as well put her time to good use and speed the process along.

The warning lights around the bay doors flashed for a moment in red, and then promptly blinked out. The Schalli clicked to himself in the human equivalent of an eye-brow being raised in silent question.

"What is it?" Coeur said, recognizing that sound for what it meant.

"The door is not opening, sir." He said, stating the obvious.

"Yes, Sixer, I can see that."

"The door may not be *opening*, but that is not to say that it is not *responding*. We are receiving the 'all clear' signal, but the doors are still not opening."

Coeur weighed what he just said, running the different scenarios in her head. It was entirely possible that the doors could have malfunctioned during their retirement. Without proper care and maintenance, any system would go down hill. But this...this seemed like something else entirely.

"Keep piping the signal through," she said to Deep Six. "I'm going to back us off and get clear."

A stray thought came rampaging to the fore in her mind. She bit her lip in thought trying to shrug it off, but to no avail.

"Let's give the area another look," she said. "Keep sensors at passive, but make a thorough sweep of the area and tell me if you find anything."

"Aye, sir."

Coeur sat back in her pilot's couch. A chill was running up and down her spine that she couldn't shake loose. Something just wasn't right about this situation, and she was damned if she knew what it was.

* * *

"We're hot," Bonzo said over his shoulder, just as the controls to the lift lit up dimly. "It's not much, but I was able to activate a bank of emergency power and route it up here."

In a few moments, the lift began to vibrate and squeal like metal on metal. It was awful cacophony, but soon quieted as the lift shook off the dust after its long stint of disuse.

The cage-like doors folded open and a faint blue-white light lit the interior of the lift, casting gloomy shadows.

"Move out," Drop Kick said and the Marines piled in. The tension ratcheted up among the troops. The lift lumbered down to the large habitation level, a thought occurred to him.

"Bonzo," he laid a hand on the armored pauldron beside him.

"Yeah, Sarge?"

"Could someone shut down this lift remotely?"

"Remotely? No, I don't think so. The codes Raven gave us are apparently straight from Kruytercorp's upper management. It looks like they're hard-coded into the system as overrides."

Drop Kick nodded, "I'm sure the higher-ups didn't want the possibility of being locked out of their own station by picketing miners."

"Something like that." Bonzo half-smiled behind the face bowl. "Nothing says that someone couldn't jack the control mechanism itself. Smashing the gears just about always works."

"Got it."

He took a deep breath and held it. According to his HUD they thirty seconds to the entrance of the habitation level. They needed to be ready.

"All right, people," he said over the squad comm, "look alive. We're going in standard formation."

He panned his visor around, casting his gaze around to all of them.

"Lock and load."

* * *

In the space “above” Lamda-3, *Hornet* distanced itself from the rock and re-orienting itself where the tuning-fork prow faced into the orbital path of the looming shape ‘beneath’ them.

Coeur’s eyes narrowed as that cold feeling fluttered around in her stomach like a swarm of humming birds. She could sense the tingling creep into her neck and extremities too.

“Focus your attention in that area, but keep it passive,” she said to the serenely calm Deep Six at her side. “Let me know what you find.”

The barbels went to work in a graceful flutter of precise movement. Coeur turned to her intercom panel and called her two gunners. A holo-image of Gyro and Snapshot appeared, already dressed in vac suits within the dark confines of their turrets.

“Status report.” It was a statement, not a question.

Gyro, as the senior of the two, reported first. “Our 125 is on low standby, to keep our levels dark, but I can bring it up at any time, sir.” Then she smiled wolfishly. “The Stinger is ready to go *now*.” It was not the first time that the XO had been thrilled that their most powerful weapon system had its own external power supply, however low its firing capacity happened to be.

Coeur nodded her understanding and turned towards Snapshot.

“We’ve got one in the pipe, sir.” She said, her hands toying at the controls in obvious anticipation. “The autoloader is also on standby. Our MFD links are in place, and I’ve got a tethered set ready to go.”

Activating the tether itself would not be enough to ruin their silent run, but the mechanism that powered it just might. Coeur would keep that inside the ship until...

Until what?

What was it she expected to find out here? There wasn’t enough to go on yet, but playing that particular card close to her vest wasn’t a bad idea either.

Never reveal your full strength until it’s time to use it, her instructors had always said.

“Very good,” she said to them both, “keep us at stand-by, but be ready.”

“Yes, sir!” the two women chorused.

She switched over to the Engine Room and the gunners were replaced with Crowbar’s rugged and dirty face.

“Cap?”

“I’ll be asking for as much power as you can give me in a little while, I’m quite sure of it.”

“Things about to get hot?” The engineer’s disheveled appearance was at odds with laser-beam focus that shown through in his eyes.

“Probably.”

“Just give the word,” he said seriously, “and I’ll bring us up.” Behind the determination, Coeur could sense a trace of self-recrimination. Gyro had not been the only one that had been bitterly disappointed that Bulls-Eye had not been fully in effect before *Hornet* once again found herself in harm’s way.

She held his gaze for a moment, searching his face. Perhaps, a part of him realized the touch of frustration she had just witnessed. He tilted his head slightly and crooked half-smile lightened his features.

“She’ll hold together, cap – I’ll see to that.”

Coeur cut the link and brought her attention back to the bridge. During this exchange, Deep Six had been studiously examining the sensor readouts that were being piped in by the improved sensor suite. Somehow, as he studied the readouts, his large eyes flicked back in forth almost imperceptibly. Coeur knew how fast the Schalli could take in and process new information, and secretly wondered if any human brain *could* actually match it, or if it was the result of an evolutionary process that had specialized in instant calculations.

“I just picked up something on the lower EMS bands, possibly a burst signal of some kind.”

“Bearing?” Coeur’s eyes fixed on the wrap-around view screen ahead of her, as Deep Six brought up a map of their relative positions.

“Bearing three-one-five, mark zero-four-zero, sir.”

Whatever it was, that put it almost directly astern of their position, which a few minutes ago would’ve been directly *aft* of them.

“Can you make anything out of it?”

“Negative,” he said almost immediately. “I’m not familiar with this particular code, sir.”

"Feed it down to Raven and Newt. See what they can do with it."

"Aye, sir."

For all the code-cracking talent that *Hornet* possessed right now, somehow Coeur felt that it wouldn't matter. Her instincts told her that the burst was a signal, and nothing more. If that were the case then whatever was about to happen was going to happen soon. Not everyone was in their vac suits yet, and if they went into battle without them...

Her hands clenched into fists. Whatever duties the remaining crew among *Hornet* were doing, they would need to stop what they were doing to get into their protective equipment.

It was a risk she was going to have to take. Luckily, vac suit drills were second nature to her crew, even for one that had such diverse and exotic shapes as a Hiver and a Schalli.

Activating the general comm an all-hands signal bleeped at all stations throughout the ship.

"It's time. We're silent for now, but that's about to change soon." She inhaled and gave the order they now all expected.

"Battlestations."

* * *

Amid the ominous, yet somehow satisfying sounds, of the Marines priming their weapons for action, Drop Kick had pulled back into himself. It wasn't a full withdrawal of self, but a selective cleansing of all those facets of his personality that made a decent human being outside of combat.

His sense of humor, his over-grown boyish sensibilities, even his friendship and camaraderie with those that shared the lift with him were all locked away. What remained was discipline, determination and the tenacity that had seen him through more than a decade of service.

He was cold steel now. Those that had served with him before knew his disposition going into combat. The Ithklur sensed the transformation and silently acknowledged that Drop Kick no longer stood among them.

He was now Brigade Sergeant Major Vin Escher of the Aubani Marine Corp, the shield and sword of his people.

Just as the din of sound from the Marines reached its crescendo, a sudden jarring had them all scrambling for hand holds. They each recognized it immediately for what it was.

Gravity.

The lift came to a halt and opened slowly into the habitation level whose grav-plates were charged up to one standard-G.

Escher remembered Ben-Abdul saying that even *Kreuzung* itself didn't operate its lower levels because it was too expensive for prolonged use, and that was on the command station for the entire star system. If there had been any lingering doubt that Lambda-3 was now inhabited, it was erased.

The Marines quickly recovered from the sudden shock and fanned out of the lift in a text-book star pattern. The large chamber that extended out in front of them was a long hallway of shops faces that reached down several city blocks. This would have been the place that visiting spacers would've come for rest and relaxation. Restaurants, clothiers, clubs, arcades and even a souvenir shop were now darkened, a shadow of their once sparkling selves.

"Anything?" Escher said to Bonzo over the com, but broadcasting out to the entire squad. Bonzo's armor had a slightly improved sensor package to the other suits of battle dress, just as the Sergeant Major's armor had the improved command module.

"Negative, sir. Nothing on the motion tracker or IR scope."

The entire level amounted to one very large corridor bored out of the rock. While it was quite wide for such an installation, the Major thoroughfare ran the length of the level more or less uninterrupted until it terminated at the industrial lift that went down to the much larger Main Industrial Sector.

All of which meant that the Marines would need to move all the way down the level to gain access to Site 2, the ventral docking bay. That presented a long gauntlet they would have to traverse, and an unpleasant bottleneck where an ambush could be waiting.

From his half-crouch behind a ferrocrete divider wall, Escher signaled his troops forward.
Into the jaws...

The Marines crept forward keeping to as much to cover as their surrounding permitted, keeping each other covered as they moved up in pairs - all except for Whiz Bang, who maintained point alone.

Slowly but surely, they crept past the darkened skeletal remains of store. In time, their steps took them to a central plaza where the street widened out into a circular walkway, flanked on all sides by empty façade.

As soon as it came into sight, the Sergeant Major's eyebrows knitted up in contemplation.
If I were going to ambush us, it would be...

The entire plaza lit up with the harsh glare of dozens of floodlights, and might have been truly blinding had their visors not polarized instantly to a dark gold to counteract it.

A repetitive metallic clinking was heard from the far side of the plaza, just when the first burst of bullets reached Whiz Bang's position, splintering the store front around him and sparking off the ferrocrete floor at his feet.

"Contact! Contact!" Whiz Bang yelled over the com channel as he stepped back in to cover holding his rifle upright. Before the last piece of debris had hit the deck the Marines had already flattened themselves against their cover.

From across the way, another weapon started firing, then another, then another, until there was a discordant chorus of discharging weapons. The bullets fell like rain with sparks flying as each drop touched the street.

Escher turned on his external speakers and cranked the volume up to carry his voice even over the rattle of gunfire. When he spoke it was booming, carrying with it an unmistakable menace.

"Hostile parties, this is the Reformation Coalition Marines. You are ordered to cease fire and surrender at once, or you will be fired upon."

An answering volley automatic fire stitched across his position with one round glancing off his right shoulder pauldron. *All right, we do this the hard way.*

The Sergeant Major gritted his teeth, clenching his jaw muscles tightly. The moment was finally here.

It was time.

"Engage! Engage!" he said forcefully, but with absolute control coloring his voice over the comm. "Weapons free!"

Escher swung around into the street and swept his weapon across the vista. The lights would have normally provided a visual deterrent, but aside from the protective facebowl, each suit or armor was also equipped with an imager that could see through smoke or fog, which rendered the blinding lights next to useless.

Escher could see men on the street level, as well some that had taken up position on the second floor of some of the shops. A few more had even chosen a metal catwalk above shop level, standing behind the floodlights that could have lit up an entire boloball stadium. There they had set up overlapping fields of fire on his position. Each of them wore unpowered body armor with IR shrouds draped over the top them. All of this the Marine commander took in with a darting glance.

He raised his flechette rifle and fired two bursts. The metallic darts it fired were meant for anti-personnel, and they were fiendishly good at their job. The darts shredded metal, flesh and bone with lethal brutality.

The thrum of return fire rose in harmony with Escher's. His people were maneuvering into position, and clearing their fields of fire. In a matter of seconds, the plaza had gone from ghostly quiet, to a shootout that would have been at home on a holo-drama about the Old West.

While these newcomers were not as well protected, there were many more of them. Judging from the star-shaped muzzle flashes that strobed in the shadows, Escher estimated that there were at least two dozen of them, and they were executing with bold intent. They set up their positions to be able to pour the maximum amount of fire into their target area while taking advantage of cover as much as possible.

Across the street, Whiz Bang pulled a grenade from his metallic belt holder, pulled the pin and let fly in one smooth motion, before crouching behind cover. The black sphere bounced down the street like a child's toy with a metallic *tink, tink*.

Men dove for cover, but Whiz Bang had timed his throw. A magnesium flare, many times brighter than the sun, went off in their midst. Several of the men dropped their weapons or put their hands to their eyes in pain.

"A little taste of your own medicine," The Marine grunted over the comm. channel.

That opening was all the Ithklur needed. With alarming speed, the two heavily armored aliens covered the distance towards the distracted men on the street. It was commonly thought that Ithklur Marines were the best operating in known space. Now that they had been unleashed, the enemy found out why. There weren't just effective. They weren't just dangerous.

They were magnificent.

They both charged, not quite shoulder to shoulder, but acting almost as a single entity. Where Raptor made a feint, Hunter was there to exploit the enemy's surprised and weakened state. Where Hunter stutter stepped to attract their attention, Raptor was there to land the killing blow.

It was if Castor and Polydeuces had descended from the stars to join the battlefield, leaving nothing but ruin in their wake. In less than seven seconds, they had brought down as many opponents and were still going strong. Escher came up along side Bonzo, and the both of them gave the Ithklur covering fire as they advanced into the plaza. Whiz Bang similarly brought up the rear, taking shots of opportunity as they came.

Despite the opposition's greater numbers, the situation was a turkey shoot. Even a grazing shot with one of the Marines' rifles was enough to bring one of their number down, and their small arms weren't effective against the battle dress. That rather sobering fact had also occurred to the enemy commander.

"Incoming!" Whiz Bang had time to yell as a RPG came sizzling in, carrying an explosive charge that could crack the armor on even a TL-7 tank.

An earth-shattering *THOOM* split the air.

* * *

"New contact!" Deep Six said excitedly. "Bearing zero-one-seven, mark zero-two-zero." He followed the last with several clicks and whistles that might have equated to swear words in the Schalli's native tongue. "Sir, it's coming from Lamda-1."

Coeur had just sealed the helmet on her vac suit, after helping the Schalli into his own tailored EVA suit. Now everyone was at their stations and ready to go.

"Drain the atmosphere," she said to Deep Six, who bobbed in reply. "Range to contact?"

"2,250,000 kilometers, sir." He said in response, but glanced again at his sensor display. "I believe they are powering up weapons."

From the look of it, the new contact had been lying still and silent, waiting for its moment to strike as it hid on the far side of the shepherd moon. The burst transmission they detected earlier had probably been some sort of satellite perched on a lesser rock mass serving as a bounce platform for the signal, or perhaps it was a sensor drone signaling back to its mother ship.

In either case, the likelihood that they had been spotted remotely was very high, despite their ECM. That left her with the difficult dilemma of whether to go to full power or not. If she did, the *Hornet's* full capabilities could be brought to bear on the situation, but at the cost of definitively revealing their presence and removing all doubt of their location. She could try to stay hidden and maneuver into a better position, but that limited her options if the contact *did* actually know they were there.

Coeur punched up the sensor log that Deep Six had recorded of the strange EMS burst and checked the range. The burst had been recorded almost 325,000 kilometers off *Hornet's* port bow. Given an advanced sensor suite, and a tech that knew what they were doing, it was very possible that someone had managed to detect their presence. It was somewhat doubtful, however, that they would have gotten a full read on her ship without *Hornet* having

detected *them*.

It was a classic problem. It was the plight and burden of commanders everywhere to be forced to make decisions based on poor or missing information.

What she did know, however, was that a ship with hostile, or at the very least, aggressive intent was powering up and headed their way. That fact alone made her decision that much easier to make.

She activated the ship-wide intercom.

"Crowbar, bring us up to full power. Sixer, bring sensors to active and train them on the hostile. Gyro, Snapper, bring our weapon systems up and standby to fire on my mark," she said. "And Snapper, roll the tether. The rest of you, buckle in and secure your stations." She heard her own voice say those words, calmly and clearly, even though that cold feeling had sought to leap up into her throat.

Hornet underwent a transformation. Where it had been trying its best to make like an empty hole in space, it now surged sure and strong, almost defiant. Whether they wanted it or not, the unknown ship could not help but notice the far-trader now.

"Talk to me, Sixer." Coeur said, her eyes riveted on the forward display.

Sixer was definitely excited now. If *Hornet's* improved sensor capacity was impressive while passive, they were state-of-the-art while fully active. It was almost like watching a kid who had just put new batteries in his favorite toy.

"Contact is definitely accelerating hard towards us on least-time intercept course. It doesn't look as though they are trying to disguise their emissions." He paused as more information washed through the computer. Our sensors make it as a *Star Strider*-class patrol cruiser." He said. "I'm bringing the schematics up now, Captain."

A wire-frame image of a typical version of the vessel's class came up on the main view screen, and Coeur took in the information she found there. The *Star Strider* class was in many ways similar to Vega Zorn's old *Sagittarius*-class ship, the *Vi Et Armis*. Coeur had spent enough time on that ship during their stay at Mexit that she became intimately familiar with how just deadly a ship like that could be in the hands of an experienced crew and commander. Zorn had built up her rather notorious reputation with a ship like that.

The *Star Strider* was the same basic hull frame – a long needle-shaped craft that tapered back into a tight delta shape on the back. From each of its "wings" sprang vertical stabilizers almost as long as the wing itself, which looked more at home on an aircraft than on a starship. These protrusions were useful, however, as the class was perfectly capable of landing dirtside and taking off again unassisted.

From there the differences between the two ships became more apparent. The one quickly squaring off to face *Hornet* displaced a hundred more tons than Zorn's ship, and from the readings streaming in, they had spent that all that extra space on bonded superdense armor and more weapons to the tune of two *additional* missile tubes with an improved magazine, and three more powerful laser emplacements. Considering how completely they had avoided *Hornet's* passive sensors, it wasn't out of the realm of possibility that they had a capable ECM capability as well. Although, hiding on the far side of an asteroid that consisted mainly of iron ore more than a million kilometers away might have had something to do with it as well.

It was like a shark abandoning his hiding place in a coral reef, and swooping in for a nice juicy kill. More than likely, the ship thought it was bearing down on a gold fish, when the reality was more like a barracuda.

"Incoming message on a maser stream, Captain," Deep Six said. "No video, audio only."

"Let's hear it."

"Unidentified vessel," a crackling voice came on the line that was obviously being modified, "You are ordered to heave to and prepare to be boarded. Be advised that any attempt to escape will result in hostile action." Despite the filters, the voice cracked like a whip.

Coeur's eyes narrowed as she looked at the tactical plot. According to the schematics on the *Star Strider*, *Hornet* would be within their missile engagement envelope within the next nine minutes, given their relative acceleration. That would also put them within laser range within thirty two minutes, *if* the ship's weapons were standard for the class. The hostile ship's missiles were probably comparable in range and yield to *Hornet's* own effectively canceling out any advantage

there, but The Stinger carried a greater range, particularly when its firing solution was further enhanced by *Hornet's* superior sensors.

What it amounted to was that the *Star Strider* would also be in *Hornet's* missile range in nine minutes, but within range of their largest cannon within *21 minutes*. If they could hold out for twelve minutes in the hostile ship's missile range...

Coeur's jaw muscles cinched down. There was no way they could outrun the ship bearing down on them – she could pull four times their own acceleration – and surrender wasn't an option either. The stakes were too high considering the prize that lay on Lamda-3. The battles where *Hornet* had been most effective were the ones where she had been completely invisible until time to strike. Even with her many combat enhancements, the *Jayhawk*-class far trader was still egg-shell thin by the standards of actual warships. Taking her into straight-up fight against an opponent that already *knew* she was there bordered on insanity.

Using *Hornet's* existing momentum, Coeur fired her maneuvering thrusters on a vector that would at least get them moving on an evasive pattern.

If we're going to be a target, let's at least be a moving one.

It had the advantage of moving them more in the direction they were already going, and might not be noticed if the sensor-tech over there wasn't looking too terribly hard.

Fat chance of that, she thought feeling a stab of pessimism that she promptly buried down. If a ship's CO didn't believe a plan would work, that was the surest way that it wouldn't.

She flagged Gyro and Snapshot on the intercom, their vac-suited forms filling her holographics.

"Gyro, I want you to power down the 125," she turned her attention to Snapshot in the com window. "Snapper I want you do to the same with the plasma canon."

The 12-mj plasma cannon was next to useless in space combat given the immense distances involved. Only during landing operations where *Hornet* was in close proximity to any potential targets did it even come into play, but during combat condition it was powered up anyway.

"Bring the missile launcher back to standby, but be ready to bring it back up again." She turned back to her XO. "Stand by with The Stinger."

She killed the comm channel and turned her attention back to the plot. Depending on the look the *Star Strider* had gotten on their ship, it might seem as though they had just deactivated a weapon system one might reasonably expect the little ship to have.

"Sixer, put me on with them. Audio only."

"Roger, Captain." He returned, activating *Hornet's* own maser communications array. "We are broadcasting, sir."

Coeur swallowed and put on her best game face, letting it bleed over into her voice as she addressed the predator.

"This is Yvette François of the far trader, *Wasp*," she said frantically using her old alias. "Do not fire! Repeat, do not fire! We've powered down our weapons, so please – *for the love God* – don't fire!" There was just the right touch of panic and desperation in her tone.

There were several seconds of delay as the message spanned the void of space at the speed of light and returned with their response.

"That was a very wise move, Captain." The voice said with an arrogance that even its electronic disguise could not erase. "Now, kill your engines and heave to immediately."

"Please!" she cried, "We were only looking around this rock for salvage! Please! We're helpless!" With any hope she could help reinforce in the other commander's mind that they were merely a wasp that could be easily swatted, and feeding the other's ego was a good place to start.

As the pleading message sped toward the other ship, she pumped another burst from the maneuvering jets and called down to the engine room.

"Crowbar," she said as he answered, "can you bring our power levels down by enough of a percentage that would make a standard *Jayhawk* look powered down?"

An ugly smile crept across his face. "Yes, sir."

Like the sensor suite and the flight computers, *Hornet's* power plant had been much improved over others typical of her class. Now even that capability was going to be used to mask their intentions.

"Okay, it's done." She said back over the comm channel with a hint of bitter resignation. "We're powered down and drifting."

She waited for the seven second delay, but no verbal message followed even thirty seconds after the message would have been received by the other ship. That nauseous feeling returned in her stomach as the time ticked away.

"Missile launch!" Sixer said, as electronic fireflies lit up their screen.

* * *

In less than a second, a smoking, four meter crater appeared in the street where a solid plane of ferrocrete had been before. The Marines had thrown themselves away from the area at Whiz Bang's sudden warning, but the concussion alone had been enough to toss them around like rag dolls.

Of the three that had been directly in the line of fire, Bonzo had been the most unscathed having deftly ducked into the desiccated remains of a holo-arcade. The Sergeant had thrown himself clear, but the concussion had caught him and thrown him forward into the shooting gallery of the circular plaza. Whiz Bang, however, would be the one to carry the brunt of the attack even though he had detected it before any of the others. The Marine had been standing on the very ground that now lay pitted and scorched in the rocket's wake. As a last ditch effort, he had activated the contra-grav unit built into his battle dress. While not sophisticated enough to allow true flight as in the case of some of the earlier Imperial battle dress, it was enough to soften falls or make great leaps. He was in middle of such a leap as the explosion went off around him. The force had struck him in flight, sending the Marine careening through the air and punching him through a solid ferrocrete wall.

Bonzo stepped out from the arcade, guns blazing. Off to his right, the Marine Sergeant had recovered and was back on his feet, fighting with a cold intensity Bonzo knew all too well. If anything, though, the sudden change of position had allowed him to cover the Ithklur who stood defiant in the face of the enemy.

The RPG had been fired from one of the catwalks, Bonzo was sure of it. He had caught just the barest flash of angry red and the billowing of an exhaust trail, but it had come down amongst them at a perfect forty five degree angle. If they fired another one down into the Ithklur...

Before he was even conscious of doing it, Bonzo was making for the far side of the plaza, pumping his legs up in down like pistons.

I've got to get to them...got to find them...

His sudden flight carried past the last few doors into the open area of the plaza...and right into two men that had been drawing a bead on the Sergeant across the street. The flechette rifle roared in his hands as he passed them, never breaking stride. At that close of range the results were...gruesome.

In a heartbeat he had passed them and made it to the far wall. Looking up, he scanned the ceiling of the chamber with his magnified HUD vision.

There. I've got you.

Upon the catwalk were four men perched like black birds. Two were busily pouring fire into the clearing. One had a large grey-green tube resting on his shoulder, while the other busied himself reloading the heavy weapon.

Oh no you don't.

Bonzo fired his contra-gravs, choosing a second floor veranda as his landing spot, but also placing the catwalk almost directly above him. The ferrocrete cracked under the weight of his armored feet with a loud crunch. Two of the men, both armed with assault rifles, took notice of this and sprayed bullets down at the determined Marine below.

Bullets fell like rain around him, but Bonzo had been ready for that possibility, throwing himself into another contra-grav-powered leap almost as soon as he landed. Twisting in the air, his oblique approach angle threw off their aim. A few managed to connect, but not before one of his gauntlets reached up and closed around a support beam. Locking the finger joints in place to keep himself from falling, Bonzo swung the barrel of his rifle up and around the floor of the catwalk while thumbing the fire indicator to full auto.

It was harder to aim, of course, with the rifle barrel resting on the floor of the catwalk while he remained under it, but it was more than counterbalanced by the withering fire that he unleashed. The ammunition indicator on the rifle, which was mirrored in the HUD display, fell quickly from the blue to amber and then to red as the weapon spent itself.

Bonzo shouldered his rifle in one smooth motioned, which was not an easy feat one-handed, and pulled himself up onto the catwalk proper. As with so many other times that he'd been in the thick of things, he blessed the inventors of his scout battle dress. It was tough enough to shrug off some weapon's fire, but light and agile enough to be maneuverable, though, it seemed, the heavy battle dress hadn't appreciably slowed down the Ithklur down below.

The Marine scissored his legs over the railing and planted only to find that not everyone on the catwalk had been swept away by the emptying of his magazine. In point of fact, it seemed that the two men with rifles had absorbed the incoming fire, leaving the two RPG operators shaken but ambulatory.

Behind his facebowl, Bonzo's eyes registered the long green launching tube start to rise, tracking upward to point at him. Firing an RPG at this close of range was the next best thing to suicide, but in the heat of moment the two men were willing to risk such a fate when presented with a Marine in full battle dress only a few meters away.

The Marine quick drew his gauss pistol from the magnetic holster on his right thigh like some ancient gunfighter. Once, twice, he fired sending hypervelocity bullets speeding towards his opponents. The large rocket launcher clattered to the catwalk.

Now that the upper area had been cleared out, Bonzo now commanded a balcony view of the arena below. He could see the Sergeant hosing the second-story windows at those that had taken cover there. The two Ithklur were now out of his sight line, but judging from the screams they were still up and fighting. That's when something occurred to him like a mental light bulb flashing to life. With great effort he tore his eyes from the battle unfolding on the ground to the catwalk above the shops on the *other* side of the street.

Sure enough, he could just make out the forms of three men, who gathered around an imposing metal shape. Zooming in, the shape resolved itself into a portable grenade launcher. Bonzo recognized the make of the weapon, which was most definitely military in nature. While each round that monstrosity could pump out might not be as individually destructive as one of the RPG's, they could fire a lot of them. From the looks of it, they would be firing into their own people to get at the Marines, that didn't seem to be a hindrance.

Again, Bonzo was on the move. He covered the distance in only a few seconds, snatching the rocket launcher from the ground and smoothly flipping it up on to his shoulder. It was a fairly archaic design, but carried the addition of a relatively modern targeting system. As soon as his gauntlet made contact with the contact plate on the grip, the weapon's crosshairs flashed into existence across his HUD. His oversized hands found the firing stud as he trained the massive barrel on the target.

Even with his battle dress, the launcher kicked like a mule as it discharged, sending its deadly bolt lancing out. There was perhaps a half-second transit time between when the weapon fired and when the rocket arrived at the target, but that time seemed to drag into infinity for the Marine. His aim was perfect, just like he knew it would be before he had even fired. He just knew.

He saw the three men clustered around the mounted weapon with leering faces. He saw the rocket sickle through the air like a Jovian lightning bolt. None of the men knew or were aware of the destruction bearing down on them. The explosion blew a large chunk out of the far wall and slagged the middle part of the catwalk, blowing out the supports on both sides for several meters. What hadn't been destroyed outright collapsed in a fiery heap of twisted metal a moment later.

As it fell, Bonzo felt elated and sick to his stomach at the terrible carnage he had just unleashed, and he wondered what that said about him as a person.

* * *

Mercy sat bolt upright in her seat aboard the Valiant as her comm crackled to life with Drop Kick's voice.

"We're under fire," the voice said simply. "Get down here."

The Sergeant was on and off the line before she could even send an acknowledgment. The message had been so quick and calmly delivered that for an instant she wondered if she had dreamed it.

She shook it off and brought the tank to life, feeling the sheer lethality of the vehicle coursing around her. She brought up the layout of the base interior on her helmet display and panned around until she found what she was looking for. Adjacent to the personnel lift the Marine's had used was a vehicle and freight lift that she suspected was just big enough for the Valiant to squeeze into.

"Striker," she said over the proximity comm, "We're moving. Get inside ASAP!"

The big Ithklur had been dutifully patrolling the perimeter, but had steadfastly refrained from talking to her. She wasn't sure how much it was the Ithklur aloofness that she'd seen during their voyage or if it was just a disciplined approach to his guard duty that he wished to exercise without distraction. In either case their time here was at an end. The Sergeant was holding the field and, by Gaia, she wasn't going to be the one to let him down.

"We were ordered to remain here," Striker's smooth voice said a moment later.

"Yeah, well, we just got orders to the contrary, so mount up."

"I received no such orders," the Ithklur said firmly.

"Look," Mercy said her patience wearing dangerously thin, "my people, not mentioned *yours*, are under fire. Stay here if you want to, but I'm going." She grinned wickedly as she added, "I'll be sure to tell the others that you bravely wished to remain behind while I went to fight."

There was an angry silence from the end until a steely voice broke it. "Very well. I will comply."

The magnetic hatch popped on the Valiant open with just enough clearance to allow the Striker, dressed in his battle dress, to shimmy down into the crew compartment. Unlike the Majority of tanks Mercy had piloted, the Valiant had been designed with enough room to operate it while wearing scout battle dress, yet the Ithklur's broad form, made larger by his heavy battle dress, pushed even those limits. The gunner's seat looked comically small as he settled into it and flipped up the scope without so much as a word.

The grav tank lifted off on its contra grav and launched itself towards the back of the docking bay. There had been simulators built-into the tank to allow a pilot to get the feel of piloting it without actually doing so. Even with those, Mercy felt a wave of satisfaction at the raw power that now lay at her command.

The tank shot through the partition into the remains of the machine shop within seconds, and made it to the loading lift only a few seconds after. When Bonzo had powered up the personnel lift, it had the secondary effect of activating all the lifts on the level, including the one they sought. As they approached the proximity sensors sensed their presence and opened to allow them access.

The Valiant spun on its lateral axis and slowly backed into the lift, settling down onto the pad so that the barrel of the plasma cannon would face outward when they emerged at their destination.

"Hold on, Sarge." She said, not sure if it had been out loud or to herself. "We're on our way."

* * *

"I'm picking up four launches, Captain! They're staggered, two-by-two." Deep Six exclaimed as he studied his sensors. It was amazing how the Schalli could gravitate between extremely excitable and serenely calm. "I don't believe they believed your ruse, sir." He added almost bashfully.

"On the contrary," she replied. "I'm pretty sure they *did* believe us. It looks like the commander over there wanted us as helpless as possible before he launched," she pointed meaningfully at the main screen which depicted the four angry red icons screaming down their throats. "Which means, that they neither intend to honor a surrender," *Not that I was going to offer one anyway*, she thought, "nor do they intend to take us alive."

She hoped that the prospect of a taking the far trader intact as a prize ship would be a tempting enough morsel to lure them in, but this ship was out for blood.

Which means that the gloves can come off, she thought suppressing a predatory smile that would have distinctly at odds with her normal calm projection.

She ordered the ship brought back up to full power and readiness. *Hornet* surged proudly with power as it stared death square in the face.

First off, however, she would have to contend with the immediate threat of the four incoming birds. The *Star Strider* had launched outside of their normal effective range, hoping that “*Wasps*” powered down state would offset any their strained range. The launch had been staggered with two missiles leading the charge while two of their brothers brought up the rear. It was a common tactic to send in an initial ‘probing’ salvo to soak up any defense the target could throw out, while the second wave, hot on the heels of the first, could then take advantage of the momentary holes their predecessors created.

That they launched so early was itself an advantage as the *Star Strider* couldn’t continually update their firing solutions as accurately after their birds left their tubes. Unless...

Something had been bugging her like itch she couldn’t scratch since the first of this encounter. The hostile ship had demonstrated that they had a clear view of their actions. If that were the case, then the other ship would have to sensor capabilities as good, if not slightly better than *Hornet’s* own.

Of course.

“Sixer,” she said quickly, the thought translating from thought to speech. “get me a read on where we first picked up the burst transmission.” Now that they had their active sensors up and running, they could afford to look at the source of that burst with greater clarity.

“I’ve found something. It’s coming through now, sir.” He said as a new window appeared on the plot depicting the object they had picked up. From its general shape it looked almost like a jellyfish with various asymmetrical protrusions radiating out from a cylindrical core, but the outline itself was blurred and indistinct around the edges

I knew it...she roared at herself, a fikken stealthed sensor platform right under our nose. That’s how’s they’ve been reading us, because they’ve been streaming telemetry.

“Snapper,” she ordered, “paint this new target and take it out with the bird in the pipe.” Her eyes raised towards the burning red indicator on the forward screen, “and then launch the tether at the primary.”

“Yes, sir!” There was a hungry fire in Snapshot’s voice.

Even without the refinements that Bulls-Eye would have brought to the table, the upgraded Master Fire Director worked brilliantly. At Snapshot’s command, a lone missile fired off from the turret towards the stationary and ultimately fragile sensor platform. At the same time, the five missiles tethered beneath the ship streaked across the boundless night of space towards their target.

Coeur could imagine the shock and surprise on the bridge of the other ship as the helpless far trader had answered their four missiles with *six* of their own. It was her hope that instead of letting their missiles pass each other in space, that the enemy commander might feel the need to relegate their own incoming missiles to a defensive role and take the heat off *Hornet*, particularly if they lost their eye in the sky that was keeping watch on the far trader. Granted, trying to have the bomb-pumped X-Ray laser spend themselves in an attempt to strike such a small target was Herculean feat in and of itself, but Coeur had personally seen it executed and work before. For it too be viable at all required the range to be hideously close. And that meant that they wouldn’t know the outcome of that part of the equation for several minutes.

However, the one missile that headed toward the sensor platform resolved itself much sooner. The sensor platform itself had been playing dead a little more than a light-second away. The missile bore down on it at its maximum acceleration, eating up the distance between them dramatically. As soon as it was time to deliver its devastating payload, it would reach the target almost instantaneously. Snapshot kept the missile on course as it traveled in, constantly refining her firing solution courtesy of *Hornet’s* now active sensors. X-Ray laser bolts themselves might have a far shorter range than gravitationally focused lasers, which necessitated their being carried via missiles, but there were few things short of nuclear dampeners that could stop them once they discharged. She waited for that magic moment when she could feel the shot and know that it would succeed before she ever pushed the commit button. She felt it rising in her like the tide. The moment was almost here...

Now!

In space a brilliant nuclear reaction focused itself into a scalpel that cut across space. With a beam that powerful, a direct hit was necessary – the sensor platform would have been torn apart by even a near graze. Thus it was consumed utterly as the X-Ray laser took it directly at center mass and bore the unrelenting fury that could have boiled back centimeters of bonded superdense armor.

“Direct hit!” she whooped over the com to the bridge. “Target had been completely destroyed, sir!”

“Good work,” Red Sun’s voice answered, but there was no warmth in her voice. They were still under fire, and the Captain didn’t have time for handing out acknowledgements right now.

“Here’s what I want you to do,” she continued. “I want you to load and fire a round of those decoy missiles. Make at least one of them look like we’re trying to reengage our ECM, but send all of them on divergent courses away from the ship. Then, start working on your next salvo.”

“Yes, sir.”

On the bridge, Coeur threw *Hornet* into full evasive with all the power that Crowbar could coax from her engines. Before she had been trying to maneuver without looking like that’s what she was doing. Now that that ploy had been abandoned, she was free to use everything at her disposal.

The four missiles that the *Star Strider* had fired, each without enough killing power to rip *Hornet* apart from stem to stern, were still barreling in towards them. The decoys would help in the eventuality that the hostile missiles weren’t used to counteract *Hornet*’s own salvo of five.

“All right, Sixer, find us some cover.” Coeur said. “It looks like they want to play hardball after all.”

* * *

Escher felt the explosion go off behind and caught the tortured remains of the catwalk give way and come crashing down to street level. A rain of dust and debris caked him as the miniature earthquake subsided. The initial shock had threatened to unbalance him, but he had kept his footing and was still firing shot after deadly shot at the tattered remains of their assailants. And yet, he viewed it all with a detachment that surprised even himself.

The two Ithklur, having cut a bloody swathe on the street level, had disappeared into the shops and continued their lethal work from room to room. From the widow panes the Marine Sergeant could make out the brief flashes of muzzle flare in the recesses of the building, along with a sharp metallic clang told him the hand-to-hand weapons the two Ithklur carried were being put to effective use.

With the two of them gone, Escher was the only Marine visible at street level. Bonzo was nowhere to be seen, and Whiz Bang had not moved from the spot where he had landed after the initial rocket attack. The Sergeant could tell by the medical indicator that the Marine was still alive, but unconscious and wounded. Even if they could get to him, it was doubtful that he would be able to contribute anything for the rest of this engagement. In cold numbers that meant that it was more important to secure the present situation than attempt to render aid to him. Even with the strange distance he felt for the situation, the thought of leaving one of his people behind while hurt and bleeding was repugnant to him.

A quick look at Bonzo’s position on the tactical scope showed that he had also quit the street level and was no up on the other catwalk.

“Bonzo,” he said slamming another magazine in and seeing the indicator go from a warning red to an eager blue. “Report. Where you responsible for the fireworks a moment ago?”

“Uh, yeah Sarge,” he said, an odd note to his voice. “That was me.”

“Get down here and give me a hand.”

“Right, Sarge. On my way.”

One of the attackers on the Sergeant’s side of the street had taken the temporary lull in the fight to reposition himself down the street and set up his field of fire from one of the second story windows. The sleek barrel of his ACR sang as Escher found himself under direct fire. His armor absorbed most of the incoming fire, bouncing uselessly off the thick plates, but one round

caught him directly on the left elbow joint where the armor was thinnest. The bullet didn't penetrate the armor, but the kinetic force transfer was enough that sharp stab of pain blossomed out and ran both up and down his arm. He shook his arm reflexively as he ducked into one of the micro-alleys between the shops. His arm went numb a few seconds later, and even though he could spasmodically flex his fingers, they felt leaden and unwieldy. The medical read on his suit informed him that, in all likelihood, he had just fractured his elbow. Just how bad was yet to be determined.

A burst of flechette rounds from Bonzo across the street, gave him the breathing room he needed. Immediately, he switched grips on the rifle and held it in place under his left arm pit. This freed up his functional right hand without forcing him to abandon the rifle. He burst from cover and turned, orienting to face the shooter's position as he made crossover steps as fast as he could. This kind of sideways running was commonly used by the Marines to strafe their targets while keeping them hot on the move.

The shooter misinterpreted that stance and swung around to take cover from the volley that never came. It only took a second for the shooter to realize he had been fooled, but a second was all the Marine Sergeant needed.

With his free hand, he reached down to his magnetic belt harness and pulled free a grenade. Unlike the one Whiz Bang had thrown, however, this one was explosive. He palmed the small spherical mass in his armored fist, and primed with a deft flick of his thumb, the equivalent of pulling the pin on some of the older models.

Then he wound back like a spring and sent the shiny black sphere hurdling through the air with the forceful grace of a professional boloball player. In his youth, Escher had had an opportunity to pursue an athletic career in the sport, but had chosen life in the RCMC instead. Even all these years later, he still had a wicked opening serve – and the boloball was just about the right size for that skill to translate to the field.

As the shooter wheeled around in the window, the grenade sailed over his right shoulder and into the room behind. The man had enough time to pivot halfway for the explosive reagents gutted the whole room with plume of flying glass and debris.

"You okay, Sarge?" Bonzo said as he came running up.

"Yeah," he said. "They just winged me."

"Looks the rest of them are bugging out." The Marine pointed down the street where several more figures were pouring out onto the streets and running quickly away from them. Even with the number they had brought down, there had apparently been more of their number than had been apparent.

This many people on an abandoned station...did we just stumble across a whole colony of squatters?

The thought played across his mind, but then the image of the RPG banished those thoughts. *A colony all right, a colony of arms dealers. What the hell is going here?*

The two Ithklur emerged from the opposite of the street, each making an effort to remove the grime and gore from their weapons and armor. Their rifles were slung and their hand weapons were out like a predator whose claws were fully extended.

"All right, people," Escher said over the team channel, "we need to regroup before those idiots change their mind and come at us again. Bonzo find Whiz Bang and do what you can. Raptor, Striker take up position on either side of the street and keep a watch out for any other hostiles. If you see anything –"

The Sergeant's words were cut off in mid-sentence by the loud unmistakable screeching of rubber tires on ferrocrete pavement. They looked up to see a bulbous, heavily armored ATV round the far corner so quickly that it fish-tailed out almost raking the front of the buildings as the driver put the hammer down.

One of the last things that Escher thought to face here was ground vehicles, which was why the Valiant had stayed behind as they continued on foot. Escher was very familiar with vehicles like the one speeding towards him, enough to know that flechette rifles posed little threat to it. The prominently display chain gun mounted on the topline of the ATV, however, was more than enough to be a threat to *them*.

"Take cover!" he had time to say as the chain gun growled to life.

* * *

"Registering more launches, Captain." Deep Six reported, his barbels twitching in anticipation. "They don't look like XR signatures, my guess is that they're traditional nuclear warheads."

Well, that's that, Coeur thought. Her counterpart over there apparently decided to keep their birds on course towards *Hornet*, and launched a second salvo of nukes to contend with the incoming missiles. Unlike traditional XR missiles, nukes were much better at a counter missile role. In many ways they were the spacebourne equivalent of hand grenades, even if their resulting radiation tended to be dirty. The nukes didn't have to strike dead on the incoming missiles, they just had to get close enough to catch the missiles in their explosive radius before they had a chance to fire off.

This act told Coeur something about the mindset of the other commander. They were willing to forego part of their own defense, opening a small window of attack to get at the far trader. Whoever was over there was *serious*. Although, given the situation, Coeur probably would've done the same. After all, trying to nail XR missile to XR missile required superior gunnery skill, and completely abandoning the offensive for an unreliable increase in defense was not a good way to keep the pressure up.

"Snapper, do you have your next salvo ready?"

"Yes, sir," she answered. "I'm going to alternate between a strike missile and a counter. That'll give us some fangs, but also allow us to take the steam out of incoming birds."

"Fire when ready."

The first missile she fired was a counter missile. Unlike the heavy-handed nukes fired by the other ship, these missiles were specifically designed for anti-missile role. It didn't actually take much to destroy a missile, and so the counter missile was designed for maximum speed and accuracy with a warhead that was miniscule compared to anti-ship missile. *Hornet* didn't have enough of them for an extended engagement, but had far more at her disposal than a ship that small had business carrying. By all rights a ship like *Hornet* shouldn't be carrying *any* of them.

Hmmm...let them chew on that when they recognize them for what they are. And I'm sure their jaw is going to drop when they saw how fast we can put birds into space.

The *Star Strider* had kept on its least time intercept course, despite that the ship had demonstrated abilities that should have been far outside their scope. But *Hornet* was on the move, and the other ship had made minute course corrections to adjust to their maneuvering.

Deep Six had indeed found a nearby place where they could take refuge. The most effective cover closest was the Lamda-3 itself, but there was no way she would use the station as cover since her people were still aboard. The next best thing in the area was the asteroid Lamda-24 which lay a few hundred thousand kilometers from their present position. Best of all, L-24 cut the angle on the other ship's approach vector, which would shave off more time towards *Hornet* being able to bring her mightiest weapon to bear.

Coeur nosed the craft towards the smaller asteroid she sought for cover, pushing for all she's worth. Her piloting skill combined with Crowbar's uncanny ability to coax power from the engines meant that they were going make that run in record time.

"New contacts, sir!" the astrogator said. "Two small craft have just detached and are splitting off on convergent intercepts."

They just don't want to let us get behind that rock. Either that, or they want to put more targets in the sky to take pressure off of them.

"Incoming missiles on final approach," the Schalli said softly.

"And so are ours." Coeur said with naked steel in her voice.

* * *

The ATV rumbled down the street, engine howling like a banshee, which almost concealed the high-pitched droning of the chain gun. Its sudden appearance on the scene had all but changed the tactical momentum from distinctly in the Marines' favor to quite the opposite.

The Sergeant once again found himself ducking into a narrow alley and flattening himself against in a crouch. The others of his team had gone for the closest cover they could find, but that chain gun was a serious problem. And whoever had their finger on the trigger didn't seem concerned about conserving ammo.

By this time the once gloomy, ghostly remains of the habitation levels entertainment district had now had multiple explosion go off within it, setting one more parts of ablaze, as well as be subjected to the violence of an intense fire fight. Now it looked more like the burned out remains of a war torn city block. The incoming fire from the chain gun was just the icing on the cake. Despite being made of ferrocrete, none of the building had been fortified to be able to withstand such force being thrust upon it. It was like a buzz saw through soft wood. Fragments of walls literally exploded outward as the guns ripped into them. It made finding effective cover difficult.

"Bonzo," he said over the link, "I don't suppose you have any more rockets?"

"Negative, Sarge."

"Thought so."

Escher flattened himself on his stomach and lobster crawled to the mouth of the alley. The barrel of his rifle cleared the wall and he immediately trained it on ATV's tires. The tires would be armored as well as the rest of it, he knew, but it was possible he could slow it down if he shredded at least a few of its eight tires, and flechette rifles were meant for shredding. It wasn't much, but it was the only card he had to play.

He zoomed in on the ATV and locked onto the tires on its left side. His first burst was brushed aside by the thick armor shields that prevented someone from doing what he was attempting. He was at least pleased to see that the flechette darts had dented it somewhat. He squeezed off a second burst to the about the same effect.

Come on, third time's the charm.

As if in answer to his invocation, the third burst struck home and a pair of the heavy-duty tires exploded outward. It was beautifully placed shot, but the ATV continued to thunder down the road. The chain gun, which had been content to fire seemingly at random swiveled slightly in answer to his attack. In his mind's eye, Escher could see the bullets come roaring in tearing up the pavement and ripping through his meager cover and armor as though it weren't even there. There was nowhere to hide, no walls left that could hold its blazing fury at bay.

But those bullets never found the Sergeant - not one found its mark or came anywhere close to him as a gleaming silver shape came quickly into view and interposed itself between him and the marauding vehicle.

The Valiant cut into the scene from a side alley perpendicular to street where the lift had deposited them. The chain gun flung round after round at it, but the armor was damaged not at all. The bullets might as well have been gentle raindrop on the hull as they drummed against it, producing a strange metallic keening. The grav-tank blocked the whole street creating a monstrous roadblock.

The sleek turret swiveled to face the onrushing vehicle, but it was not the main plasma cannon that fired, but instead a missile from each side-mounted rack hissed out toward the vehicle. Both flew as straight and true as arrows, converging on the ATV mercilessly.

The Sergeant could tell immediately, that the tank had fired two of its lowest yield LRMs that each carried at least as much power as the RPG's that had been flying around previously, if not more so.

The black armor plating of the ATV buckled and warped as a halo of hellish fire enveloped it. The front end lifted a solid three meters off the ground before it crash back down to the pavement. Despite its fiery demise, for surely whatever crew had been in there had been slaughtered, the big vehicles momentum carried it forward even though the wheels were slag and grinding metal was all that was left touching the road.

The ATV collided bodily with the Valiant, the sleek angled sides of the tank acting as a ramp that carried the shattered corpse that had once been a vehicle up into the air. It came crashing down on its side, puncturing half-way into one of the shops before coming to a final stop.

Escher got to his feet, peering at sleek lines of the grav-tank through the rippling heat distortion of the fires in front of him. The top hatch sprang open and Striker popped up sweeping his rifle across the wreckage.

"Everyone okay out there?" At that moment, Mercy's smoky contralto seemed like the most welcome sound in the universe as it flowed through the team com.

"Whiz Bang's hurt," The Sergeant replied. "Striker, get down here and help us find him ASAP."

The Ithklur slid from the turret easily and leapt down to the scorched and pitted pavement below. Bonzo had already shouldered his rifle and was heading back, flanked by Hunter and Raptor.

The numbness in his left arm started to give way to sharp, thrumming pain. He gritted his teeth against the pain as he flexed his fingers.

At least now I can move my hand, even though it hurts like hell.

"Mercy, get the Valiant turned around and pointed down the way. If anything moves toward us, take it out."

"Done and done, sir!" Mercy said crisply.

"Be prepared to move out as soon as we have Whiz Bang. If the opposition is clearing completely out of this level, then we may have an even larger problems."

* * *

Nine missiles made their final run at their targets, each using up the last remainder of their endurance to unleash their deadly cargo. XR missiles were, in effect, one-shot derringers whose drives maneuvered them into position to vent their nuclear-born fury. But until that happened the missiles were vulnerable to the smoke and mirrors of EW as well as any counter measures the target could put forth to protect itself.

The four missiles were homing in *Hornet's* position were in a staggered formation with the first two clearing the way for the two bringing up the rear. The five missiles that *Hornet* had fired, however, were flying in a spread out formation that was more akin to a flock of migrating birds.

The fundamental difference in tactical thinking that structured each launch was becoming increasingly apparent in their effectiveness. The four that had been hurtled toward *Hornet*, had fired at the far side of the missile's effective area, complicated by the obvious misconception of the target's strength and capabilities. These basic flaws were magnified as the missiles spent themselves. Contrary to popular holovids, X-Ray lasers were invisible to the naked eye. And even if an observer had the visual acuity to see them, they detonated at considerably less than a light second, so the focused beam arrived in literally a split second. The only visual element was the nuclear explosion that gave them birth. Globes of white fire lit up the night, sending javelins of X-Ray striking out.

The first two missiles had lost their targeting locks and went after Snapshot's decoys full bore. But even though they were suckered into firing at the wrong target, both struck with precision. On Deep Six's scope two of the decoys blinked out of existence, and while they spared *Hornet* their deadly fate, it also decreased the number of possible targets for the second two that came afterward. The third missile was neatly blasted out of existence by one of the counter-missiles. The fourth missile, had made its way towards the far trader with uncanny accuracy, contemptuously avoiding the counter-missiles, and hounding the little ship mercilessly before the it could take up refuge behind L-24. Had it been in salvo of similarly-minded missiles, it could have unleashed hell. As it was, it exploded a full ten seconds before it could detonate, courtesy of a defensive shot from Gyro's 125-mj laser.

Of course, The Stinger had several times the range of the smaller laser, but Coeur had intentionally concealed its presence, opting to use armament the other ship already knew they had. All the while they had been on a sharply cut course bring them behind L-24 until the other ship came into range of the powerful weapon. If their timing was right, they might just be able to stave off the worst of the incoming fire while maneuvering for an around-the-corner shot.

While the wave of missile fired at *Hornet* had fortunately been dealt with without incident, the five bearing down on the *Star Strider* were also coming into effect.

The ship had initially answered with four contact nuclear warheads as their first line of defense. The incoming missiles also had contend with the other ships higher acceleration rate which made for a much faster moving target than *Hornet* had been. Snapshot had accounted for this before she had fired a single shot. Her birds were flying spread out to avoid a single counter committing nuclear fratricide on the others. Nukes were not meant to act primarily for this purpose.

That they hadn't launched counters and had decided to use an offensive weapon in a somewhat clumsy defensive role gave Coeur and insight as to her purpose. If the magazine the *Star Strider* was toting didn't have much in the way of defensive missiles, then she wasn't equipped for an extended fight. She was bearing copious amounts of offensive weapons and that meant she was armed for the kind of fight that would allow them to get in kill as quickly as possible and get out. It was something Red Sun did not find particularly encouraging.

Clumsy or not, the proximity nukes found two of *Hornet's* five, leaving three remaining brothers to take up the fight. These missiles had also been fired at the edge of their effective range, and one of the drives faltered and sputtered from the exertion. The laserhead it carried fired ineffectually into space. Another flashed out of existence as the hostile ship's own point defense scored a hit. The final one, however, dodged the other lasers and kept coming. The bomb detonated giving birth to a lethal lance of X-Ray radiation.

Coeur's eyes lit up as *Star Strider's* starboard stabilizer was reduced to slag. It wasn't a lethal hit by any means, but the sensors registered a modest drop in their acceleration.

We've at least scored first blood.

This had only been an initial exchange, like two fencers probing their opponent's guard. As the range between them dropped, however, the missile accuracy would dramatically improve, and in that kind of slugging match, *Hornet* would be pounded to scrap a lot faster than their mysterious enemy – which was why Coeur had been making for L-24 as fast the ship's legs would carry her.

And then there was the matter of the gunboats that had detached themselves from the larger ship. From the constantly updated information that streamed from the sensors to bridge, they could get a read on what was coming their way. Both of the gunboats carried lasers that were probably in the 40 to 60-mj range, and judging from their power signatures, at least three anti-ship missiles, and one of which could spell doom for *Hornet*.

The two had split off from each with approach vectors that would take them on either side of L-24. Presumably were going to try to attack from both ends of *Hornet's* hiding place, catching them in a crossfire of missiles that were specifically designed to kill ships many times her size.

But while each of the gunboats registered a high-acceleration rate, Coeur doubted that a ship that size carried enough room for a sophisticated maneuvering drive. If that were the case, the two would fire as they sped past L-24 and have to decelerate enough to turn around before they could come at them again. They would only get one pass, and that would be made at high speed as they cleared the edge of the asteroid. It gave *Hornet* a marginal advantage.

And it was an advantage that Coeur planned on making the most of. The details and angles were constantly running through her mind as she mentally updated the tactical equation.

One of the variables accounted for *Hornet* passing behind L-24, and at last the tuning-fork prow of the ship passed behind the shadowy rocket in space. It granted them cover, but did have the secondary effect of providing a large blind spot in their sensors. But Coeur had factored that in as well, and had already thought a few steps ahead.

She opened the intercom to let the ship hear her rock-steady voice.

"Listen up, people," she said. "Here's what we're going to do."

* * *

It was abundantly clear to Sergeant Major Vin Escher what the enemy would most likely try to do. It was, after all, it was what *he* would do, if their situations were reversed. In fact, had he been in command on the other side, he might have opened with this particular play instead of trying to match arms with Marines in battle dress.

Having the quit the field, the enemy seemed to be withdrawing all their personnel from the habitation level altogether. If that were the case, then there was no reason in the world why they wouldn't begin flickering the artificial gravity, seeing as how it as already up in running. And depending on how tightly they turned the gravity on and off would determine how fine a paste it would make of the intruders. If the opposition did it fast enough, they would be literally be ripped apart from the inside and no amount of battle dress could protect against it.

If they could keep the pressure on them, and stay within general proximity of their people, then perhaps they could avoid that fate. The problem with that line of thinking was that they knew nothing of the people they were fighting. No *reasonable* commander would order such a thing if their own people might get caught in it. But that was just it - who knew if they commander here was reasonable. If the commander in question was fanatical enough, he might do it anyway if things got hot.

All of which meant, that Escher would have to remove their ability to pull off such a stunt, while simultaneously keeping pressure on whoever had attacked them. If they could keep them reeling and off balance enough, perhaps they wouldn't see that that particular tactic was denied them. That meant splitting up his command with enough operational resources to do the job on both fronts.

The schematics of the station grew from the little corner of his HUD and filled his vision. With eye movement alone he navigated through the illuminated pathways he found there, seeking a particular answer. A few more seconds passed and then...

There.

Main Engineering was a chamber that was far removed from everything else on the station. The main reactor that powered the station had been consciously placed in a remote part of the "underside" of the asteroid in case of radiation leak. Main Engineering connected with the habitation level via a long shaft whose entrance was not terribly far away from where they stood in the plaza.

If they could take the reactor, then not only could they prevent the gravity agitation, but they could also play merry hell with any powered systems the opposition had as well. These thoughts swirled in the Marine Sergeant's head, coalescing quickly into a plan of action.

Whiz Bang was out of action for now. The tank would be needed for the charge forward, and it wouldn't fit down the lift to Engineering anyway. That meant that Mercy would need to go that way as well. Realistically, Escher himself would need to be there to appraise the tactical situation firsthand, even if the RCMC didn't have the tradition of leading from the front. That left the Ithklur free, but their heavy battle dress would be better served on the front. At least one of them should go, his instincts told him, and he was loathe to split up Raptor and Hunter considering the surgical grace with which the two of them worked together.

"Bonzo, Striker, I'm marking a point on your map," he said clearly, "The two of you will take Main Engineering and hold it. Whatever you do, make sure they can't use it against us."

In their helmets, a blue chevron outlined their destination, and a similarly colored line showed them the shortest way to it from where they stood. They returned their acknowledgement, and ran off to the lift as fast their powered armor would allow.

"The rest of us are going to the Industrial section. It looks like that's where they're all headed. We're going to keep pushing so they don't regroup."

The turret hatch was still open from when they had placed the unconscious Whiz Bang in it. He was still very much alive, but he was going to have one supernova of a headache when he finally did come around. Currently, he was strapped into the Sergeant's command seat to keep him neatly tucked away.

Escher slid through the hatch and settled easily into the gunner's seat, and the two Ithklur planted themselves on either side of the Valiant's forward section.

"Transfer the LRM's to my station." The Sergeant said to Mercy.

"Yes, sir."

On the gunnery control panel, a portion of the screen filled up with a stripped down version of the missile controls. If they were to use them, they wouldn't be as efficient as when they were fully manned, but it wouldn't rely on them being fully automated either.

As the Valiant rose off the ground and began to move down the street, Escher brought the main plasma cannon online. An ominous hum filled the crew compartment as the mighty weapon readied itself, but to the Marine's inside it was truly music to their ears.

Mercy punched it to a speed that would avoid throwing the Ithklur off, but one which would take them from them from the habitation level quickly. The façade of store fronts whizzed by in their visual display, giving way to personal domiciles that would have been used by the asteroid workers and visitors during the station's heyday. Escher had to wonder whether or not the hostile inhabitants where here now had similarly used them for that very purpose. That, at least, might explain the prodigious amount of them.

The team com crackled to life over the Valiant's internal speakers. It was Bonzo.

"Striker and I are on our way down, sir." He said. If there was any trace of disappointment in his voice for being handed at less than glorious assignment, it didn't register in his voice. "Good hunting."

"Honor in Adversity, Marine," Escher said, quoting the time-honored motto of the RCMC. "Give 'em hell."

* * *

Raven sat hunched over her notebook in Newton's workshop, monitoring the situation via a data stream that fed her the same tactical and sensor information that was going to the bridge. Thus far, there hadn't been a lot she could do to contribute to the battle itself, except keep her attention trained on what was going on around them and keep an eye out for anomalies that might be important.

Perched on its hovered stool, Razor also sat in silent vigilance at the events transpiring around them not more than two meters away, his specially designed vac suit giving him the silvery appearance of a Hiver robot. When combat conditions had been declared, she had moved herself along with the comp and the information cells to the Hiver's quarters. Since both of them would were in observation mode, it was possible that they might need to have physical access to each other to compare notes without dependence of the shipboard comm system.

She could feel a trickle of sweat run down the small of her back as she kept her gaze riveted on the flat screen panel in front of her. She was no stranger to being aboard starships, and even been under fire once or twice. But it had always been from position of power – a warship facing off against pirates, or something similar. This was the first time that she'd been in a ship that, however specially modified to handle herself, was still a 200-ton hull with vastly inferior armor to the death bearing down on it. So far Red Sun had managed to avoid damage, but there were still three hostile contacts on the scope any of which had the ability to pulverize the ship out from under her. It was getting harder and harder to banish that from her mind as the battle went on.

Concentrate girl, you're no good to them if you fall apart. Focus on the work, she silently remanded herself.

Across from her the Hiver went about its work as quietly as if they were charting a nebula on hum drum day. Raven silently wondered if Razor felt the growing fear that she did. True, Hivers, didn't have emotions as they understood them, if they had them at all. But what was fear except an extension of the instinct of self-preservation? And self-preservation was most *definitely* a Hiver trait as much as their irrepressible curiosity. It went a long way to explain the Hivers' legendary dislike for hostilities which some earmarked as cowardice.

Considering how efficiently Razor went about his work without a hint of distraction at the deadly fate that could befall them at any minute, Raven thought that classifying the desire, the *need*, to live as cowardice as an unfair estimation of the alien race, particularly in light of how she felt at the moment. If anything it was a forced perception that people had placed on the species that had no real context, or so the thought occurred to her.

She breathed in deeply and held it for a three count before slowly exhaling. *Just keep working... everyone's pulling their weight in this one, and can do no different.*

She scanned the screen for the hundredth time, but it was almost as if she were seeing it for the first time. She had already run a profile of the enemy ship and added her estimates of possible performance and actions to the file which she constantly refined as the ship itself

revealed more of its capabilities. She had even given some thought to the armament the *Star Strider* boasted and how it was using them, thoughts which ran parallel to many that Coeur had, to discern its intent for being here. Obviously, its current intent was to reduce *Hornet* to irradiated atoms, but why had a ship that potent been hiding out here in the first place? Who did it belong to?

These were all questions she was left to ponder as the situation unfolded around her. Deep down, her instincts told her that she already knew who was behind it – the same organization that had crossed swords with them on Aubaine and Phoebus. In that case, the chances of it being a mere pirate went well against the curve. But, she couldn't afford to assume anything at this point, that was, after all, a central tenet of her work. An error in a base assumption could lead you far off the mark in a hurry, and vastly distort the interpretation of the hard information that was available.

The forces present here had displayed the same kind of organization, coordination and ruthlessness that had characterized the operations on Aubaine and Phoebus. Even if she couldn't immediately decide it was them, neither could she completely discount the idea in an attempt to sandbag herself from contaminating what she was seeing.

From her conversation earlier with Coeur, she had taken the initiative to read up on the Solee Empire materials she had brought with her. If it was possible that they were the ones working against them behind the scenes, then it was distinctly possible that this ship could be one of theirs. There was a lot of variables in that idea, and whether it could hold water would remain to be seen. She would have to test it as a hypothesis, just like any scientist.

She switched out the purple disk she been working on and quickly inserted one that was space black, then one that contained estimates of Solee fleet strength, as well as profiles of ship's that were known to be in their service. A portion of her screen split off and then lit up with a reading on the *Star Strider's* engine emissions were in many ways like a fingerprint. On the remaining part of her screen she brought up the Solee ship readouts and queried the logs for ships of the class.

It was possible that a normal patrol cruiser could be modified to read as a *Star Strider*, but the emissions and weapons potential it had already showed seemed constant with one that had been built from the keel as a dedicated combat vessel. If that were the case, she could at least start with that, if it proved to be a dead end, she could widen the search to other patrol cruisers.

The class itself was not that all that old, and this specific iteration of the patrol cruiser hull had only been around since about 1195, which meant it was probably not a relic vessel which comprised a large part of the Imperial Soleean Navy. So, if that were the case, then her keel hull would've been laid down in the last eight standard years. If her internal systems were standard for the class, as so far they had been textbook examples, then it greatly narrowed down the number of shipyards that could have produced her.

The Solee Empire was definitely on that relatively short list. The requested information appeared on her screen, and she frowned. Intelligence had gathered that the Solee had at least three ships of the class in the SSN. She compared the two and their emissions were far off from the margin for the one that they faced now. Considering that their opponent had been initially confident, perhaps overly confident, that they could swat *Hornet* from space in short order, she somehow doubted that they would've gone to the trouble of disguising their emissions first.

Given that, then they had probably got a good glimpse into their actual drive signature. It was likely that this ship was not one of the three listed in the Solee databank. That wasn't terribly surprising – the ISN was enormous compared to the RCES, and it was more than possible that there could be such a ship that Intelligence hadn't discovered.

So, if it was a Solee ship, Raven didn't have a record of it. That meant she should keep looking and see if it did register somewhere else. She slid the black disk out of the notebook and began thumbing through the others she carried, mentally trying to visualize what other databanks might yield tangible results.

Coeur's voice came over the comm, "Everyone hang on – this is going to be tight," *Hornet* braced for what was to come. "Snapshot, Fire grapnels...now!"

A few heartbeats passed and then *Hornet* bucked like a wild stallion, whipping everyone around. She saw Razor, reach down and grip the stool with all of its limbs, including the prime as

the flight restraints reeled from the stress. Raven's own restraints felt as though they were crushing her ribcage, even through the vac suit that was meant to keep blood in her brain to prevent black out. She tensed her muscles as the shock hit. The tray with her disks flew from her hand and into a corner of the workshop. The notebook threatened to follow, but Raven somehow managed to catch it in mid-flight before it smashed against the bulkhead.

Even though Newton had secured the larger pieces of equipment in the workshop, some of the smaller tools and circuit boards became flying debris. Raven felt something heavy and solid thud against her right shoulder blade hard enough that she felt it through the vac suit. Pain shot up her back and neck that promised at the very least a deep tissue bruise.

As much as it hurt, Raven knew that it was nothing compared to what could happen when an explosion happened aboard ship, when pieces of instrument panel could go from an everyday piece of equipment to serrated pieces of shrapnel buzz-sawing their way through the air. What that could do to a human body was...indescribable.

The convulsions came to an abrupt end, followed by a surreal stillness that Raven wondered if she were imagining.

"We're down," Coeur said over the comm a second later. "All stations report."

The workshop represented the port prong of the prow, just as the bridge occupied the starboard prong. The advanced wrap around view screen that was the pride of the bridge was actually projected upon a canopy of tinted armored transparency. Similarly, the workshop had such a portal on inward facing side of the "pickle fork", a remnant of *Hornet's* former life when the workshop had been the Captain's quarters. Consequently, Raven could see across into the bridge from where she sat, and could see that the workshop hadn't been the only one to feel as though they were trying to ride a rabid razorclaw.

Newton unfolded from the cautious stance and flipped on the comm with a tentacled finger, while tapping out the response on the speaker comp strapped to its underside.

"Bridge, Workshop. Status secure." The artificial voice said, and Raven couldn't help but wonder how true that actually was.

* * *

It had only taken a few moments to activate the lift this time around as the power to this grid was already on. Bonzo had been ready with his mini-comp, but had reattached to his belt with a mental shrug as Striker had casually walked over and pushed the button as though nothing were amiss.

The Valiant cut through the air behind them on its way into the fire. A pang of regret shot through Bonzo at the sight of it whizzing through the air. He should be going with them. While he knew that the mission the Sarge had sent them on was important, not being able to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with his mates left him feeling empty somehow. Out of the corner of his eye he glanced at the towering lthklur and wondered if he felt the same way. There had been many times aboard the ship that he'd seen the alien laugh – there had been many such instances where mirth peeped through his aura of stern professionalism – but there was no trace of that now. The heavily armored lthklur was all business, dwarfing the human Marine in comparison.

Though he had no doubts as to lthklur's abilities, as many times of being laid out on the practice mat had proved, Bonzo had never been in the thick of it with him. He couldn't anticipate his movements or reactions like he could the others from Detachment A. If taking an unfamiliar weapon into live fire was dangerous, taking an unfamiliar *partner* into similar conditions could be infinitely more disastrous.

The lift chimed a soft note as the rusty doors admitted them to the small chamber. As soon as they were both in, Bonzo slammed the close key and pushed the button that despite grime and decay still read: MAIN ENGINEERING.

Silence rang as the lift dutifully took them down, down, down. Great pains had been made to build the section below away from the other levels, right in a part of the asteroid that was particularly dense with deposits of granite and iron for extra reactor shielding. Not that a reactor meltdown on an asteroid station would be anything less than catastrophic, but it had been a thoughtful gesture on the part of the designers none-the-less.

In his HUD, Bonzo called up their position on the station schematic, tracking their long descent. When they were about a third of the way down, he noted on his scope that their descent began to slow considerably. After a few seconds, the lift slid cleanly to stop with only a slight jostling of the two armored inhabitants.

"They must know we're coming for them," Striker said with the predator's menace that Bonzo had come to know.

"No joke." He said, his hand going for the mini-comp, "I'll see if I can override it from here."

Bonzo had been half-afraid that the lift didn't have a terminal to jack into, but a steel plate next to the emergency com, gave way to reveal its precious cargo. He punched in the high-level access codes and sent them into the heart of Lamda-3's lift system. Tense seconds passed, and the Bonzo's screen lit up in red with an error message.

"Wonderful," he said with a pronounced frown. "They've apparently disabled the lift mechanism itself. That means our access codes don't mean squat."

He took as much information in from the comp before shutting it down.

"The fighting upstairs must've given them the time they need." Bonzo said sourly, as he retracted the contacts with disgust. "We're stuck."

The large Ithklur turned to regard him in the dim light, and the other Marine's hackles went up.

"Perhaps not."

Why do I have a feeling, I'm not going to like what I'm going to hear?

"What did you have in mind?"

"We could make a contra-grav drop down the shaft."

Bonzo shook his head to make sure he'd heard the other one correctly, a gesture that looked distinctly comical in battle dress.

"We could *what?*"

"Our suits are both equipped with a jump harness, yes?" the Ithklur's voice came out in hiss.

"Well, yeah, but our suits were..."

"Our only obstacle would be the flooring," Striker said cutting him off, "which I believe I can circumvent."

He shouldered his custom decorated flechette gun, and genuflected a knee, his armored hands stretching out to probe the floor.

"Striker, that's crazy. The shaft drops more than four kilometers, *ki..lom..eters*," he sounded out his words slowly. "We'd burn our harness out and make a nice armored pâté at the bottom."

Finding no apparent weld or joint to exploit, the Ithklur raised a hand and balled it into a fist, which descended to floor with the force of jackhammer. The lift car shook as his mechanically enhanced strength made a huge pock mark in the floor, smashing a small enough hole in the metal to work his fingers into.

"It is unlikely that our enemies maintain artificial gravity in the shaft itself, which means that our descent will be considerably slowed," he said as sparks flew from the wound he had opened up in the floor. He twisted off a piece of the plating with remarkable ease and handed it over to Bonzo.

"If we use our harnesses to slow that even further," more sparks flew as he breached a live conduit, "we can reduce our descent." The fist raised again and hammered down on the floor, disappearing to the elbow.

A strange warm sensation washed over Bonzo. He had felt that before in the past, particularly when he was about to do something particular wild and Marine-like. Even though the idea was crazy, the devil-may-care side of him was starting to like it. And in lieu of another idea, they would go with that. Wasn't there a saying about the Marines, that they don't plan, they improvise?

He knelt and helped widen the hole in the floor with another shower of sparks and wisps of black smoke.

"Perhaps most of all," Striker turned to face Bonzo, so close that the other man could see his burning yellow eyes through the black, diamond-shaped visor, "they won't be expecting it. "

In those slitted eyes the odd mirth that the Ithklur sometimes displayed fused in perfect union with the fire-breathing monster waiting to be set loose on the enemy. Despite himself Bonzo was grinning ear-to-ear.

"Man, you are my kind of crazy."

With a final effort, they peeled back the floor until Striker was certain his armored girth could fit through the hole. Without preamble, he unslung his rifle and dropped through the hole.

Bonzo waited perhaps a half-second before following him, a thought racing through his mind as the adrenaline of freefall took him.

Never a dull moment in the Corps.

* * *

In space the two gunboats sliced through the stars well ahead of their larger sister on courses that would take them on either side of the oblong, rough-shaped rock ahead of them.

For the prey they stalked, they were more than sufficient to bring this troublesome engagement to close, however cute and clever the far trader's commander had been so far. If anything, the commander's panic had led them to take shelter behind the rock. It was perhaps the worst thing they could have done. It was to be expected given the hand that been dealt to the small ship, and desperation was the inevitable result of a situation of a trapped animal seeking to delay the slaughter that was sure to come.

Not only was the asteroid inadequate to provide indefinite cover, but their acceleration given the time that they had disappeared behind the rock was enough that they might have difficulty braking before they shot out of the other side, which rendered the notion of 'cover' useless if you couldn't make full use of it. If they had managed to stop completely, with no escape acceleration, they would be sitting ducks for whatever death the two gunboats choose to throw her way - if not by the claws of their missiles, then the fangs of their lasers.

If, by some astronomical impossibility, *Wasp* did survive their onslaught, their master would certainly close the deal with utter finality. Really all they needed to do was flush the fox from the hole, and it would be theirs for the taking. Having the larger ship dispense with such a threat almost seemed...empty, like pitting a lion against a rabbit. If the gunboats should destroy here, however, that was much so much more gratifying a scenario, and each of them licked their chops hungrily at the destruction they were about cause.

The rounded edges of the asteroid shot by, and they made their final course corrections to swoop in once they cleared the lip of the far edge. The blasted, pocked marked surface blurred by until at last the dusky stone gave way to the cold, uncaring stars.

As one, the two gunboats cut their forward acceleration and fired their attitude thrusters, orienting themselves towards the center of the asteroid and the ship they would surely find there, crushing it in the pincher. The moment had arrived and waiting hands hovered in anticipation over the weapon controls.

The shadowed underside of L-24 fell away from them, and weapons were freed from their governors. The excitement of the kill overcame one of the gunboats as it fired all three of its ship killer missiles without having a clear bead on the target. Those missiles might not have the endurance of the long range engagement missiles, but what they lacked in drive capacity, they made up for in destructive yield. The three missiles zoomed away, like talons seeking the soft throat of their target.

The only problem was their target was nowhere to be found. There was just empty space. Where was she? She couldn't have gone anywhere else - she just didn't have the capacity, so just where the *hell* had she gone?

It was impossible. Utterly impossible.

The momentary disbelief in what they found distracted them from the fact that, without a target to stand between them, one of the gunboats had fired on its mate at an *uncomfortably* short range.

* * *

“Open fire!”

Coeur almost stood from her chair, as she roared her command over the comm to Gyro. They had done exactly what she had hoped, and the one that had jumped the gun had only made it so much easier – that was why she had designated it as the primary target.

From her starboard turret, Gyro’s face was a mask of concentration, shadowed from the cold light of her tactical display. Thanks to a quickly deployed sensor pod that had floated above L-24, which allowed *Hornet* to see over the rock like an old-fashioned periscope, they had been able to track the gunboats’ inbound approach, terminating in a target lock a few seconds after it cleared the edge of the asteroid. The gunboat had enough time to fire her missiles, but *Hornet’s* 125-mj was poised and ready to fire before the light from the flaring missiles drives had faded from the gunboat’s shiny hull.

She took a moderate breath and held it as she opened up. From their hiding place in a large crater on the shadow zone, Gyro sent a cyan lance of energy lashing out, delivered with deftness of a surgeon.

These gunboats had none of the style or grace of actual space fighters like the Imperium had once used. Back in their day, one of those famed spacecraft might have been able to survive an attack like this, perhaps with enough vigor to turn and keep fighting.

But these weren’t fighters.

The pitifully thin ‘armor’ that had been continually scaled back on the gunboat to accommodate a higher acceleration was pushed aside without consideration. The energy transfer, made all the more potent by the gravitic lensing, was powerful enough that the hull plating practically incandesced before it evaporated completely. Where a moment before there had been a coiling viper, ready to strike, there was now nothing.

“Direct hit!” Gyro said triumphantly over the mike, “target destroyed.”

The icon marking the hostile craft winked out of existence on her tactical plot, and she fought against adding her own exultation to her XO’s own.

While *Hornet* might not have the speed of her adversary, neither did it take her as long to slow down, and Coeur had banked on it. Even though she had hustled to get behind the asteroid, she had carefully timed the burn to allow her to slow down enough for her to survive what came next.

It was a gutsy and very dangerous move, and broke any number of safety regs, but unorthodox techniques were something of Coeur D’Esprit’s strong suite. Allowing for the fact that she might pull *Hornet* apart, she had fired grapnels deep into L-24 skin to bring them to an abrupt halt. Of course, that put *Hornet* at end of cracking whip, but her compensators had held along with her structural integrity.

It had paid off, as now the ship was cradled inside a large a crater that was shrouded in darkness. Even without her impressive ECM, the EMS dampening coating was more than enough to disguise her from the limited sensor capabilities of the gunboats long enough to spring their trap .

Coeur’s eyes swept from the empty spot on her display to the angry red diamond that represented the other gunboat.

One down, two to go.

* * *

With astonishing suddenness had the surviving gunboat witnessed the death of its brother. The loss stung, complicated by the fact that the three missiles that its companion had carried to kill the enemy were now racing towards *it*.

The controls that would have been able to divert or recall the deadly intentions of the missiles were now vaporized in a millisecond flare of light and fire. What’s more, the missiles tracking in on them, without guidance, began to home in on the nearest drive emission, and there was no mistaking who *that* was.

They were dead, there was really no two ways about it. As much speed as they could muster from their craft, it distinctly lacked maneuverability. Perhaps their nose laser could fend off one, but not all three. For all intents and purposes the game was over.

But the Reaper wasn't quite at their door yet. There were still precious seconds yet in which to act. Their adversary might be canny and hard to see, but the bolt that had annihilated their brother was most definitely visible. It would be a small matter to trace the origin of that murderous blast back to its source.

There.

Seconds before a nuclear inferno engulfed the second gunboat, sending it straight down to the afterrealm on the coattails of its brother, it adjusted itself once last time and fired everything it had at its opponent – a final act of spite to ensure The Boatman would collect his due.

* * *

The white runner lights lining the inside of the elevator shaft strobed as the lift carried the Valiant and her armored crew down into the bowels of the station. Escher sat ramrod straight at the gunner's station, ready to unleash superheated hell on whatever poor souls that decided they wanted to go head-to-head with a grav tank.

Like Bonzo, he had been afraid that the opposition would simply kill the power to the lift, rendering the destructive capabilities of his tank and Marines inert. They hadn't, and that small thing tugged at the back of his brain.

No ground commander in his right mind would risk exposing his people to such a threat in what equated to close-quarters urban fighting when they could be trapped by sapping the lift itself.

That could mean either of two things. Either the commander *wasn't* in his right mind, or they had a contingency plan for dealing the Valiant, and by extension, the rest of them. The Marine Sergeant would have to think through both scenarios, with possible counters, very quickly.

An elevation indicator on his HUD continued to fall, sliding towards a zero point where they would emerge in Main Industrial. Considering relative spatial sizes, Main Industrial was by far the largest, spreading out for more than twenty kilometers, almost half of the asteroid's entire length. The cavern representing a hollowed out core at the center of Lamda-3's mass, the sheer concentration of ore and precious metals that had been found there had been more than enough to pay for the lavish installation, and had kept it afloat until the workers had been ordered to put down their tools.

Similar to the rest of the station, Main Industrial was merely a large, lateral tunnel that connected to the ventral docking bay, or Site 2 and then branched out on the far side of its length to docking bay that *Hornet* had gone to explore. That the Marines had not been able to raise their home ship since descending to the habitation level was decidedly less than ideal.

Escher pushed back the rising tide of fear that *Hornet* might be a holed, burning wreck...along with all of her crew. All he could do now is concentrate on the here and now. He surprised himself with a mental chuckle, *After all the last thing you want a Marine doing is thinking too much.*

And, if you were going to knock down the door of an enemy's stronghold, to contend with an unknown number of unfriendlies, it didn't hurt to have a TL-15 tank on your side to level the playing field.

The lift came to a sudden stop at their destination. With the sighing of aging hydraulics, the doors retracted back. Mercy moved them forward that she came a hair's breadth from scraping the two Ithklur off on the doors to get clear.

The sparsely lit cavern yawned out in front of them. Even seeing it on the schematic, the scale of its dimensions was enough to overload the brain in that abstract, out-of-place way of man-made structures. This place had been *created*, carved out if not by human hands, then human tools.

It was an assault on the senses, which is why the enemy held their fire for a few heartbeats to allow their subtle psychological weapon to work its magic before the hammer fell.

Escher noted calmly that the enemy still insisted on firing hand held conventional weapons at them, which to the Valiant's superdense skin might as well been a light breeze. The two Ithklur riding topside, however, were another matter. While they boasted heavy battle dress,

no Marine with combat experience would expose themselves to open fields of fire, armor or no. Raptor and Hunter vaulted from the hovering tank at opposite angles, coming up behind cover.

Again, the Sergeant Major had to marvel at how well those two complimented each other in a firefight. When they rose up and returned fire, they now had the attackers in a ninety degree crossfire with the Valiant bisecting the angle straight down the middle.

"I count four groups!" Mercy said as she jockeyed for position.

Escher nodded as he confirmed it on his scope. The opposition had thrown up a barricade of twisted metal and dilapidated machinery in their path to box them in. One group had taken up positions atop that metal and ferrocrete hill, while two other groups fired down at them from thick industrial catwalks. The fourth group, Escher noted, had been waiting on either side of the entrance. It was this group that drew his attention more than the rest.

In a move that only a suicidal maniac would attempt, a mixed group of infantry had burst on the scene, intent on closing bodily with tank to get inside its firing arc. As they charged at the silver juggernaut, they were doing so while it was under fire *by their own allies*.

What they hadn't counted on, however, was an Ithklur in heavy armor on either side that occupied the very space they would have to charge past. The serrated weapons they carried materialized in their hands once more and began their deadly work. Escher saw the two-handed weapon Raptor wielded take a man right across the chest, in a perfect clothesline maneuver that all but cut him in half. On the other side, two smaller blades Hunter wielded in each hand flipped around in lethal arcs, leaving broken and ruined men in his flashing wake.

Fast as they were, the fanatical charge was only slowed. Several men evaded the Ithklur, making a b-line for the tank. The incoming fire from the other groups slackened as they approached, perfectly in synch with a move no sane commander would ever try.

Escher still had a card to play, however. It was true that the men had gotten inside their two main weapons systems. A point-blank blast from the main canon or from the missiles could be disastrous that close. This was a scenario that had occurred to the Imperial designers that had birthed her, which was why she was equipped also with a 12-mj anti-personnel laser mounted just above the main turret. The mirror plating shifted as the barrel of the laser folded out of the Valiant's silver hide, and trained itself on the multiple targets moving towards it.

Escher thumbed the release, cleared his fields of fire, and opened up. The laser was not set for pulse firing as much as it made point-to-point like a cutting laser, which was exactly what it was. The pencil-thin beam of azure blue energy capable of slicing through solid granite like a scalpel swept through their soft ranks

And they still they came.

The turret swiveled to the starboard side and cut down man after man.

And they just kept coming – running straight into their own extinction.

The Sergeant's mind reeled at the raw *insanity* that these men displayed. The human part of him that his comrades called Drop Kick recoiled in horror at what he saw from deep within the depths of Vin Escher.

Of the perhaps twenty men that had made the initial charge, only two had braved the gauntlet alive to reach the Valiant. Each of them pressed themselves up against the hull to avoid the infernal laser that had claimed so many of their companions.

Mercy slammed the HOTAS down and shook one of the men off, leaving him to the tender mercies of the Ithklur, but the other clung on with supreme tenacity. On the external pick-up, Escher saw the man draw something flat and black from his belt, seeking to attach it to the surface of the Valiant.

Before he was conscious of ordering his limbs to move, the Sergeant slid from the gunner, snatched up his flechette rifle from the rack and scrambled up the access port. The magnetic hatch blew open, Escher's head and shoulders filling the empty air.

The man had time to look up at the rusty orange patch amongst all the silver, enough to see the matte finish of the barrel, before the weapon snarled at less than three meters. The darts passed through their target, skittering off the seemingly impenetrable armor of the tank.

A hail of fire rained down on him as the last group of suicidal invaders met his end.

Mercy was yelling something at him but it was drowned out the *crack, crack* and *rata-tat-tat* of the weapons fire. Those tempered instincts that had seen him through engagement after engagement held true as he threw himself back down the hatch. A part of him screamed to seal

the hatch rather than leaving in an open position. He palmed the switch as he dropped back into the crew compartment.

It was then he saw, too late, what the Marine pilot had been yelling about. There was no time. The Valiant found itself at the heart of an explosion caused by three separate anti-tank rockets, each with five times the firepower of the ones that cratered a solid plane of ferrocrete.

* * *

There was a strange sense of disorientation as Bonzo fell feet-first down the near absolute darkness of the lift shaft. The runner lights had gone dark at the same time the lift had been sabotaged. All of which made the darkness truly feel as if it were closing in with a black hand, crushing the wind from his lungs. Only the small wedge of Striker's headlamp cutting into the darkness gave him a point to focus on besides his growing discomfort.

The Ithklur had been right about the gravity – it was only a fraction of the standard G found the upper levels. That made their descent slower, and their time to reach terminal velocity that much longer. The sense of falling, almost floating, and smothering darkness was working on him.

His mouth felt dry, and his stomach squirmed. Aside from that however, Bonzo was having the time of his life. The RCMC had shown him many things during his tenure, one of them being that just because an activity makes you want to throw up doesn't mean that you can't enjoy it at the same time.

He would have to check to be sure, but Bonzo was reasonably sure that aside from orbitally-deployed droop troops, this was the longest contra-grav drop of its kind on the books, certainly with the jump rig he carried. He was setting a record. Now all he had to do was live long enough to brag about it.

On his HUD, his tactical display tracked their movements without the hindrance of excitement of fear. Looking past Striker's floating form in front of him, Bonzo magnified his gaze downward and switched to infrared.

Far below them he could just make out the flickering of light at the bottom of the shaft. For long seconds he gazed at the ghostly apparition in front of him until it clicked in his mind what it was. The heat was the smoking remains of the lift mechanism intended to trap the Marines like birds in cage.

He re-checked his dropping altitude on his HUD, and nodded.

"Time to brake," he said over proximity channel.

"I am ready."

"All right, let's do it!"

Both Marines lit up their contra-gravs seeking to defy gravity before it claimed them. Bonzo rocked to the side of the shaft as the Ithklur materialized beside him in the darkness rather than below him.

Several seconds of hard burn followed. On his suit indicator, the contra-grav status turned from a friendly green to a warning shade of amber. He cut in his maneuvering jets as well, and saw their temperature start to rise as he pushed them to the limit.

The bottom of the shaft, which had for an eternity seemed an infinite distance away, was suddenly only about two hundred meters down. Both Marines hit their safety overrides, risking a burnout to coax that last little bit of life from their tortured equipment.

Sparks flew from the shattered lift mechanism that was rising quickly to meet them, and Bonzo was close enough he could make out the blasted cams and housing.

Warning alarms shrieked as his battle dress told him of his dying contra-gravs. At the same time it warned him of the imminent collision of the ground that was now only 80 meters away.

Closer – He banished the warning sirens from his mind.

Closer – He made peace with the God of his understanding.

Closer – He primed his rifle in one easy motion.

The contra-gravs spent themselves and gave up the ghost, landing the two Marines roughly at the bottom of the shaft. Ferrocrete cracked, leaving two sets of footprints driven into

the bedrock. The shock absorbers on their suits strained themselves to capacity. Pain shot up both his legs.

They were down.

They had done it, despite having equipment meant for short bursts, they had done it. They were alive and in fighting shape, even if Bonzo was marginally sure that he had just fractured his right ankle and sprained his left knee.

Striker was first to recover. His square bulk rose and righted itself, his headlamp still edging out the darkness. A huge four-fingered gauntlet reached down and helped bring Bonzo to rights.

"I gotta hand it you, Striker, that's the most fun I've had in ages."

"We must be quick," the Ithklur answered, "they will have heard that."

The larger Marine turned towards the closed lift door. With the same kind of casual ease he'd seen before, Striker reached up and ripped open the door as though it were made of paper.

"Good deal," Bonzo said, realizing he'd spoken aloud. "Now let's proceed to the kicking of butt."

Bonzo couldn't be sure with the Ithklur's visor, but he was *sure* that the big alien was smiling.

* * *

The last vestiges of the gunboat's final retribution screamed down the nestled starship. The three missiles were all contact nukes, similar to the ones their larger sister carried, but with far less drive capacity. The gunboat itself was meant to carry the missile into close delivery range.

Had the three screaming demons been X-ray's *Hornet* would have been well and truly consumed, but Coeur had thought several steps ahead like a chess player. She had already foreseen the counter and planned contingency.

Their immediate threat however, was not the missiles at all, but the laser that flashed ahead of its cousins at the speed of light. It was unfortunately, the one thing that Coeur, had not fully accounted for – that one of the gunboats could find, acquire, and lock on to them with their laser before *Hornet* took them down. With missiles, particularly contacts, you only had to get close. Lasers required infinitely more precision to be effective. It was a million-to-one shot, but that was cold comfort as *Hornet* shuddered under its focused fury.

The laser had been on the upper end of Coeur's estimates, having been specially tuned to fire fewer times with more impact. The initial point of impact was not the ship at all, but the rim of the crater. The beam traced across *Hornet's* aft section, dispersing somewhat on the strange refractive coating just past the port side airlock. The sizzling path it traced ruined the airfoil stabilizer as it bit deeply through the layers of protective foam and armor underneath.

It was not a lethal shot, as the laser terminated in the aft port thrusters, reducing one of them to slag, but it had come close. *Hornet's* magazine, containing Snapshot's precious missile cargo, had been only eight meters away from where the blast connected like a thunderbolt.

The ship trembled from the blow, but weathered the storm as her crew were again tossed around in their shock restraints. Comfort, if there was such to be had, stemmed from the fact that there would be no second shot from the same source.

That only left three missiles coming their way, each with enough destructive power to end what the laser had started. This threat, however, could be contested unlike the fast-as-light laser attack.

As the ship killers angled in, drive flares lit up in the dark space between them and their target. Snapshot's counter missiles, which had not been needed in their exchange with the *Star Strider* had diverted their course and followed their mother to her hiding place behind L-24, courtesy of the improved MFD.

These counters, five in all, had then cut their drives and lain in wait to place themselves in harm's way against any incoming missiles threats. They approached this duty with faithful dedication. True to the name of the ship that bore them, they swarmed upon the incoming fire like a pack of angry hornets. Even with the contact missiles' evasion built-in evasion programs, and

the counters near-zero starting acceleration, not one of the three survived more than twenty seconds after the counters revealed themselves.

Caught before they could fully detonate, the nukes came to a rather inglorious and less-than-spectacular end.

"Damage report!" Coeur said over the comm. Crowbar answered breathing hard within the confines of his vac suit.

"Port thrusters are wrecked, our fuel tanks have been ruptured – which were empty – and the relays to our Jump Drive are fused solid." He shook his head. "Main Power's still up for now, along with our weapons, but we're bleeding energy out."

"Can you slow it down?" Coeur said more calmly than she felt. It could have been *much* worse, and the many scenarios of what could have happened were playing in the back of her mind.

"I'll try."

"Do what you can. I'll be needing everything you can give me in a moment."

"Understood."

Coeur turned back to her tactical plot, mindful of her heart thundering in her ears. Despite the cool touch of her vac suit, her skin felt feverishly warm. She forced her breathing into a regular pattern, hoping the rest of her body would follow suit.

As a limping *Hornet* took off from her hiding place into open space, Coeur let her mind consider the situation at hand. Their maneuverability had just been reduced drastically, and their combat effectiveness could fall apart any moment if Main Power went down. She would just have to pray that Crowbar could hold their wounded ship together.

If they could maintain what they had, however, they were not in as bad a shape. Most of the systems that had been impacted were not immediately crippling, and they still had enough teeth to rip into that other ship. She would just have to make the best use of what they had.

They couldn't stay behind L-24 forever. Even if the gunboats hadn't been around to report their damage, the other ship would've seen their ploy as it streamed back to them.

If the other ship had been able to out maneuver the little far trader before, then that deficiency was more apparent now. Outrunning the other ship, had never really been an option with their disparity. If you couldn't negotiate, and you couldn't run, the only thing left to do was fight.

And that was exactly what she planned to do.

The *Star Strider* was accelerating towards them, but had dog-legged their course off of their original intercept course so that they could sweep past L-24 just out of energy range, but deep within reach of their missiles. This left *Hornet* with a grim choice – either stay rooted behind their rock and be subject to a close up bombardment they couldn't run away from as the ship sailed by, or expose themselves and go for direct conflict where they were clearly outmatched.

Coeur had to hand it to the enemy commander, whoever she was, she was nobody's fool. At every point during the battle so far, that ship had matched her point-for-point even with the myriad of surprises the free trader had pulled. Their reactions and tactics removed all doubt that she faced a mere pirate or raider. No, the commander on the other side had a solid core of military training.

As she good as she was, however, Coeur could detect the subtle flaws in the enemy CO's thinking that she might possibly exploit. First, her counterpart must suspect that *Hornet's* magazine must be running dry. With the amount of fire they'd put into space, the far trader should be out of birds. That would've been true of the *Hornet* that Coeur had taken to Sauler, but not the sword she wielded now. They had yet to expend half of their total magazine, a fact that her enemy would probably not reconcile with reality. No ship carried that many missiles unless they were a dedicated warship, certainly not if the ship in question were built on the fragile frame of far trader.

It was an assumption Coeur would've made herself, had their positions been reversed. That was why the 500-ton ship was courting a missile duel, she was sure, because they could not believe the little ship had anything left to throw at them. They were obviously hedging their bets that *Hornet* wasn't totally defenseless by staying well out of energy range...or at least their *apparent* energy range.

Another point against her adversary – just as they believed that *Hornet* couldn't have many more missiles, they apparently didn't think that she could mount a more powerful energy weapon than what they themselves possessed. Coeur had hoped that Gyro's use of the 125 would strengthen that misconception enough for *Hornet* to slip inside The Stinger's field of fire.

The last volley Snapper had got off before they went dark behind L-24 had been cast aside by the enemy gunnery crew. Even though there had been five birds fired at them, they had answered with authority, with not even the slightest damage to show for it. That meant that the defense crews were finally awake over there. Coeur had been afraid that might happen. She had caught them off guard with her opening moves, but now they had their full attention trained on her ship.

Once again, that lent credence to her idea that she faced a military ship, and one whose learning curve was far sharper than she'd like.

Hornet arced away from L-24, but was still keeping it between her and the *Star Strider*. There was no sense in abandoning it until it proved worth the exposure.

"More missile launches, Captain." Deep Six said consulting his sensors. "I read two missiles inbound."

Coeur's eyes hardened as they registered on her plot. From the looks of it, they were targeting the front facing side of L-24 itself. Two missiles weren't enough to destroy the asteroid, but had *Hornet* been still attached like a limpet on the far side they would've found themselves in middle of a warhead induced earthquake.

"They're just trying to shake us off," Coeur said after a moment. "Well, I guess they would prefer we come out to play." She straightened in her seat, a course of action forming in her mind.

Her goal was to somehow affect the thoughts of the enemy commander so that they rethink the notion of holding them at range and instead get closer to finish them off with their lasers.

"I think it's time we did exactly that."

"Sir?"

"Are we receiving telemetry from the sensor platform?"

"Yes, sir. Five-by-five."

"Snapper," she said into her comm to her missileer, "use the sensor platform's data to form a firing solution on that cruiser. Fire off another four birds, but no more than that."

"Aye, sir."

Coeur was sorely tempted to hold their missile capacity in reserve as a surprise, but she was sure that the other ship would be less inclined to go for a missile exchange if she showed them she really wasn't out of bullets. Given the comparable missile performance levels between the two ships, their current path would be throwing their ship into a pitch battle.

While the other ship could survive such a scenario much easier, no starship Captain wanted the odds that close to even when they attacked another ship.

In the final analysis, there was no such thing as taking unfair advantage of an opponent in starship combat.

* * *

Denise Valencia did not hesitate once the order to fire missiles was given. She'd worked out the mix for her next salvo even as call for her *Hornet's* call for her deadly long range birds had been temporarily put on hold.

Now she was unleashed. She could almost feel the anger and frustration inside her funneling into her missiles, charging them with hungry intent. Whoever these...these *bastards* were, they were about to be on the receiving end of four X-Ray stilettos.

Unlike the ones she'd fired previously, these had advanced evasion and stealth capabilities. They were a precious commodity that she'd held in reserve, but now at the endgame it was high time to let the hounds slip their chains.

Her eyes flashed agate hard as her tactical display showed the first one launch away from *Hornet*. It would've been more dramatic had the missile sped away from the ship at full

speed toward its target, but instead it went out a short distance and powered down its drive a few kilometers away. There it waited patiently for its brothers to join it so that they could hunt collectively like a wolf pack.

The readiness light appeared for the second missile, and it too shot out and waited alongside its sibling. The third soon joined it, and now they only lacked the fourth to be underway.

Snapshot was extremely pleased at the performance their new MFD was demonstrating – so much so that a few precious seconds ticked by before she realized that the readiness light had not lit up for the fourth and final missile.

The lines of her face slanted downward as she glared at the display. Five more seconds and still nothing.

“Come on,” she said in a coaxing voice. “Don’t quit on me now.”

The readiness signal flashed on and off so quickly, she wondered if she’d imagined it, but whether or not that was true, the malfunction icon lit up in its place. The dam broke.

“Fikk! *No!*”

She felt the sudden need to strike her console out of the white hot rage that burned in her blood. She refrained. Barely.

The malfunction signal flickered for a moment, giving her a spike of hope, but then returned rock solid, mocking her.

“Captain, weapons malfunction! Bird Four is a breach!”

“Understood,” Coeur’s calm voice returned like cool, soothing salve. “Continue with what you have.”

“Aye, sir.” Snapshot said beaming the signal to send the other three on their way. They mournfully ignited their drives, speeding by the sensor platform as they went up and over the bulk of L-24. It was still 75% of the strength she intended, she told herself, trying to banish the thought that their missile tube might now be useless.

75%.

She would have to console herself with that.

* * *

Coeur could tell by the strain in Snapshot’s voice that she was beginning to come undone. She had only hoped that the modulated polish of her voice would buoy her missile gunner.

Now if she could only bring herself to actually feel what she projected.

A stab of fear had started to seize a hold of Coeur’s mind. So far she had managed to cage the lion in the back of her mind, but the beast was powerful, and more insistent by the minute.

Perhaps the Bulls-Eye project would have headed off this kind of malfunction, but there was no way to know. She could only hope that the impotent rage her missile gunner was radiating would not leak over to Gyro for not having completed that task before things got hot.

Get a hold of yourself girl, she silently reprimanded herself, fall apart when lives aren’t hanging in the fucking balance!

Like cold water or a slap to the face, she reacquired her focus long enough to bring *Hornet* around the inner side of the asteroid to get clear. It might be a bit out of their way, but she was sure their sudden emergence opposite side of the rock would throw off their opponent enough that they cut the angle to get into solid striking distance.

You shook me up, I’ll give you that. But I’ve got something here you haven’t...

“Aspect change!” Deep Six said interrupting her train of thought.

As she watched, the *Star Strider* wavered and disappeared from full view of *Hornet*’s state-of-the-art sensors. Coeur blinked hard, her brain temporarily unable to believe what her eyes were telling her.

How could they? It was impossible. It was one thing to fool passive sensors at long distances with ECM, but this...this was *active* sensors at a much *closer* range.

Snapshot’s three missiles lost their lock as the 500-ton ship became simply non-existent. Her mind reeled, dizzy, trying to make sense of it – until it struck her like a bolt from the blue.

Lord Ryan.

It was the same ghost camouflage that had been used to evade *Kukulcan* in orbit around Aubaine, the same shroud that could fool sensors as advanced as *Hornet's*.

They had waited for *Hornet* to expose herself, even sending missiles in as an incentive, before playing this card. She had given them exactly what they wanted.

In her mind, the lion strained at the bars of its cage.

Perhaps the enemy commander's grasp of the tactical situation hadn't been flawed after all.

Chapter 8

The triple explosion superheated the air around the Valiant, as the grav-tank found itself at the heart of fury. The concussion rippled out like a hurricane, hurling those bits of metal and bodies that weren't immediately vaporized. Even standing apart from the tank, the two Ithklur were thrown back like leaves in the wind.

Raptor fared the better of the two as he had taken up cover behind a stone partition after the last of the suicidal on-rushers had fallen. Hunter, however, was thrown clear of the blast only to plow head-long into a pile of metal scrap. The superdense skin of his heavy battle dress saved his life as the jagged points of metal were turned away. He lay there unmoving.

Raptor chanced a look around the corner after picking himself up from the rubble. In the wake of the rocket launchers there was an eerie quiet. The rapid-fire shots from the top the mound slackened as a lull fell over the battlefield.

The space the Valiant had occupied was now covered with lengthening tendrils of thick grey smoke. Raptor re-loaded this flechette rifle with practiced ease as he activated his HUD's thermo-imager. The air was still immensely hot in the area, but his sensors filtered that out in short order.

What he saw made his yellow eyes widen. It was the sight that the enemy would see a few seconds later when the wisps of smoke receded.

A wicked, predatory smile grew on his face behind the visor.

There sat the Valiant – whole and apparently undamaged – as if the rocket storm of just a seconds ago had been a passing rain shower. As the Ithklur watched the tank in profile, the oval barrel raised and the turret swiveled towards one of the groups on the catwalk, and fired.

An ear-splitting KA-THOOM resounded off the enclosed stone walls as a bolt of high-energy plasma enveloped the eight men and women upon the catwalk. The same bolt that could've opened up a gaping hole in the crystaliron armor of a warship reduced everything in the targeted area to molten ruin.

The barrel then tracked over towards the other group, its smooth motion taking on a terrifying aspect that Raptor whole-heartedly approved of. Having witnessed the annihilation of their comrades, those on the catwalk broke into a run fueled by pure survival instinct. In the cold mathematics of combat, their initial moment of shock had cost them.

Those that did not die instantly when the fusion bolt struck like the hammer of an angry god lost consciousness from the overwhelming heat as they fell down to the unforgiving stone floor some hundred meters below.

Raptor burst from his cover towards the reverse side of the mound. Only complete fools would stand their ground that close to a grav-tank, especially one that had just made such object lesson of their companions. More than likely those that had taken up positions on the mound would be in full retreat.

And they would have to get past him.

Those who knew the capabilities of battle dress new that it slowed the wearer down somewhat – they wouldn't have thought as much after seeing the big Ithklur bear down on his prey. Raptor barreled around to the backside of the mound like his heels were on fire, his metal boots literally tearing up the turf to bring him within striking distance of the enemy.

He rounded the corner, rifle at the ready. The scene was much as he expected. Figures in un-powered armor were in full retreat, trampling each other to get away from the death on the other side of the mound.

Raptor switched on his external speakers and let loose a truly blood-curdling war cry. The booming shriek held a challenge to any or all or would accept. Of the three Ithklur that had come to Lamda-3, he was the strongest, the most dangerous. It was a fact that was undisputed amongst their ranks – and now it was time that the enemy knew it as well. Let those that think themselves the greatest of among their ranks seek to spend themselves on his ruin. They were already broken in their retreat, but if he could seek out their most dangerous foe, and break him in full view of his peers, then...then perhaps he could break their will to fight and regroup so badly that it would not return.

Some of the humans he traveled with would have called that sentiment "hubris", but to the armored Ithklur exploding into their ranks, it was simply the way things were done.

Flechette darts accompanied his verbal act of throwing down the gauntlet. Those that did look in his direction paled visibly as a green demon descended on them. Some fell, others pressed on in the crush of mindless panic. As they scurried away like rats, two figures turned on the Marine and hosed the area with their advanced ACR's, answering his call.

Raptor could sense immediately that they fired AP rounds as the first hit round him dead center mass. It was shrugged off by the battle dress, but told him that the men before him did represent a threat. He never stopped moving as he crossed diagonally towards them to throw off their aim.

Both men ducked behind a thick metal protrusion as he answered back. The darts pimpled the surface the metal, but did not penetrate. Two faceted silver shapes arced over the makeshift barrier, sailing through the air towards the Marine. Raptor didn't even need to give them a second look to know they were high-explosive grenades.

How long had they waited after priming them before they launched them? The precision in which both had been thrown spoke volumes to the training these men must've received. Raptor knew what he had to do.

In mid-stride Raptor aborted his diagonal run and cut directly towards them. Leaping, he cut in his contra-gravs. A double fire blossom reached out to claim the Ithklur, but he was no longer there. Instead, he was now hurtling through the air *above* the barrier, spraying fire straight down at both men.

One crumpled in a bloody heap, as the other retreated under an overhang. Raptor turned in the air, keeping the area in his sights as he landed with a loud thud. The shock absorbers did their work as Raptor followed the motion downward into a crouch.

Armor piercing rounds slashed out at him, sending up a spray of dust as they impacted the rubble-strewn ground. The Ithklur headed towards the other man, his rifle singing. Another weapon opened fire, this time from behind where Raptor had touched down.

At first he believed that another of the mound's inhabitants had decided to engage him, but then he recognized the distinctive sound.

Hunter.

His brother-in-battle had rejoined the fray. The other Ithklur's covering fire bought him the time he needed to traverse the distance. The flechette rifle was stowed, and Raptor read the confusion on the man's bearded face. That is until he drew his hideous war blade.

The man tried his best to move out of the way, even abandoning his cover to get himself clear, but Raptor had covered the difference too fast, and there was nowhere left to run. The ACR blazed away in his hands as the sword whirled in a tight moulinet and slashed into him, assisted by the armor's strength-enhancing waldos. The strike carried through the man at an almost a perfect forty-five degree angle until the blade found open air again. The gory remains collapsed violently before him with a sickening wet thump.

For a moment, Raptor stood still like a statue, his blade still extended out in front of him. Then he tilted his visor up toward where the survivors had fled. A secondary barrier, at ground level this time, had been thrown up about eighty meters ahead of him, complete with sand bags and emplacements for heavy weapons.

Not a soul moved behind that barrier, and in a triumphant flash he knew that his ploy had worked. Even from a distance he could tell their fighting spirit had been shattered into a million little pieces.

It was their misfortune that the Valiant didn't know that when it appeared at the top of the first mound, righting itself on its contra-gravs, and blasted the secondary rampart out of existence along with everyone behind it.

* * *

Striker pressed forward through the metal-banded corridors like a man possessed, with Bonzo hard on his heels. While there was a growing respect for his somewhat diminutive companion after seeing him in actual combat, Striker could sense that the other Marine was injured. At first it hadn't been as apparent, but as they pressed forward quickly, Bonzo's steps had become strangely lopsided as he favored his left side. Striker's own armor, while considerably heavier, had borne the brunt of the fall better than the scout armor had.

While this condition had not slowed their pace, thanks ironically to the same lightened armor that brought on the situation in the first place, Striker doubted that his companion could keep it up for long. The more they pressed on, the less combat effective he would become. Ultimately, Striker might face the possibility of having to leave his companion behind if his injured state became a hindrance. It was not a thought he relished, but neither was it one he would shy away from in the least should it become a necessity.

For now at least, the human was with him and despite his condition he more than demonstrated his *girikeah*, or roughly translated "warmind." For the Ithklur, he never felt quite as alive as when the fires of combat burned around him. It gave him focus, drove him on when he had nothing left, lending him a kind clarity of vision that put him in full command of his faculties. Only the very few non-Ithklur could ever hope to understand this, and yet Striker knew that the man two steps behind him just might be one of those rare few. He had certainly seen that killer instinct, that will to fight, glitter in Bonzo's eyes when they trained together. Outclassed, outflanked, he still fought on until it was physically impossible to continue.

Striker could sense the bonds of friendship weaving them both together in its strands, even though they had only been together a short time. It was a brotherhood forged the way it should be, in adversity. No stronger bond existed between two sophonts of any race than those that carried them straight into the fire.

He felt his pulse increase in the anticipation of the coming combat. It would be glorious. His only wish was that his brothers-in-battle were here to share it with him. Even through the coursing of his blood, he felt a stab of loneliness at their absence.

Hold fast, my brothers, soon there will be a dread rejoining the enemy will not soon forget.

Their pounding steps carried them past the storage rooms and technical stations deeper and deeper towards the main reactor. The main power source to the station should've been long cold before *Hornet* had arrived, but the hostile inhabitants that had taken up residence here had apparently decided to avail themselves of Lambda-3's creature comforts. The power that supplied gravity, environmental controls, even life support all stemmed from Main Engineering.

That was what the two Marines were here to shut down.

"Up ahead," Striker said. "Another thirty meters to the entrance of the main reactor chamber."

They rounded an L-shape in the corridor...and right into a waiting ambush. The corridor widened considerably as it approached the reactor housing, and crates and various other items had been thrown up as obstructions. At the far end of the corridor, were several figures brandishing submachine guns and small arms.

At the sight of two figures in full battle dress storming into their midst, they opened fire. Several rounds hammered across the side of Bonzo's helmet making him feel like his head was inside a tightly-contained drum. Instinct kicked in and juked right making for cover, squeezing off a few short bursts in the direction of the doorway.

Something inside him expected the Ithklur to break left and do the same to catch their attackers at the sharp end of V-shaped crossfire. That was *not* what the Ithklur Marine had decided to do. There in the close-quarters, the enemy found out just why the Ithklur were known throughout space as peerless shock troopers in known space.

Instead of setting up fire in concert with Bonzo, the Ithklur lowered his head and drove straight toward the opposite doorway like a force of nature. The obstructions they had set up to check their progress were either batted aside or avoided all together. With a strange grace, Bonzo saw Striker hurdle effortlessly over crates in his heavy armor, which seemingly wasn't as clumsy club-footed as he would've thought.

As he closed, the Ithklur's leg lashed out, booting a heavy crate off the ground and sending it crashing into their formation. Taking advantage of the distraction, he tucked his flechette rifle close to his body and went into a forward shoulder roll. Uncoiling like a serpent, he came up into a crouch almost at point blank range. All this time he had saved his fire.

Until now.

They never had a chance. Striker leveled his weapon on the shaken combatants facing him and methodically took down their biggest concentration in the room.

Bonzo sighted down his rifle, conscious of the twisting pain in the knee where he supported his weight, and fired three controlled bursts at the few figures that remained standing.

From across the room two gleaming blades materialized in Striker's hands as though summoned from the ethers. Resembling a bladed night-stick, the edges faced out from the curvature of his arm from the wrist to the elbow. They flashed silver and red in the dim lightning.

Then it was mercifully over. In less than twenty seconds, they had swept clean the entire room. Bonzo felt that peculiar numbness return. The carnage had been total and complete. It shocked the senses.

He blinked it back, stowing it in the recesses of his mind. Assuming he lived through the next few minutes, there would be time to reflect on the battle, the *slaughter* that had unfolded here.

The heavy door to the next room slammed, bringing Bonzo out of his momentary daze. At the sound, Striker whirled around like a dancer, blades at the ready. But it was too late, someone on the other side had closed and barred the heavy shield door.

Bonzo limped across the room, careful to avoid the staring eyes of the fallen, to stand beside his ferocious companion. The large oval door was thick and meant to be sealed in case of reactor leakage. It was probably a good meter-and-a-half thick, made of durasteel and interlaced with radiation mesh to contain free neutrons. It was an obstacle, but a surmountable one. He reached into his belt, passing over his grenades, and found the bell-shaped object.

"Boarding charge," Bonzo said tossing the object over to the other Ithklur. Metal hands caught the miniature petard easily and affixed it to the hinge mounts that were at least on the outside of the door.

Both Marines stood clear of the door, and Bonzo hit the detonator switch. A loud crash echoed out, accompanied by a shower of sparks and smoke. As one they came around the corner...only to find the door still in place.

"Assist me," Striker said as his gauntlets grabbed the edge of the door. Bonzo worked his hands into the edges and pulled. At first it didn't budge one centimeter, but as Striker added his own strength, the effect became apparent. The charge had dislodged the door from the hinges enough for them to have a chance of ripping it out. Servomotors strained and whined at their abuse until the door finally came away with a satisfying rip.

Striker hefted the door up and let it fall to the side, smashing crates as it landed. Beyond the mangled doorway the chamber opened to a platform overhanging an immense reactor room. The massive machinery and reactor core occupied the space below the expansive landing. Striker stepped through onto the landing, followed by Bonzo.

Out on the platform stood a pallid and somewhat crazed-looking man in worker's coveralls holding a body pistol. The weapon was no real threat to the Marine's armor, but the snub-nosed barrel was not pointed at them. Pressed against his front side was a gagged young woman in what appeared to be a service uniform, though it was ripped and torn in places. Blood trickled out of her nose and mouth with her right cheekbone bruised and swelled. One of the man's hands clenched the woman's yellow hair roughly, the other pressed the pistol hard into her right temple.

Bonzo's eyes widened as he recognized the distinctive six-pointed Hiver symbol of *Hokona* emblazoned on her flight patch. They narrowed at the man behind her. The crazed smile widened as the Marines took in the situation in front of them.

"Not one more step or she's meat," the man said in a voice that matched his disjointed face.

"Drop it," Bonzo heard himself say dangerously. "Surrender or you're a dead man."

"Oh, I don't think so," the man spat back. "You came all this way. I'm *sure* she's what you're after." His hand tightened in her hair and she winced slightly. "Now you're going to let me walk out of here or I swear I will put a bullet through her pretty little head."

He dug the barrel into her temple a little harder, and the woman's jaw muscles clenched tightly. For all the obvious abuse she'd had to endure, coupled with the gun to her head, she was remarkably composed.

Just where does this idiot think he's going to go?

"Okay," Bonzo said lowering the barrel slightly, and motioning towards Striker to do the same. "Don't do anything stupid."

"That's better," the man said then his leering face moved closer to the woman's ear. "You see, sweetheart. You might just live through this after all."

Something caught the captor's eye behind Bonzo. The woman in his harsh embrace struggled and tried to say something despite her gag. Bonzo started to spin around, but he was a fraction of a second too late. There was a loud crack, and then the force of a sledgehammer struck him in the back of the left thigh. Pain blossomed up his leg.

He turned to see one of the men they had thought dead, crawling on the floor among a trail of his own blood and holding a long-barreled hand cannon. The initial shot had glanced off his back thigh plate, but had been fired at less than sixty centimeters away. As Bonzo turned in surprise, the man thrust the barrel in between his armored leg plates into the joint, and fired.

The armor-piercing round tore through joint armor, passing through the knee itself and exited through the other side. His support leg shot up, Bonzo lost his balance and collapsed.

Through the explosion of sudden pain, Bonzo angled his fall, driving his elbow into the man's spine as he collapsed. He heard bones crack and splinter from the blow, felt the rigidity of the man's frame shatter beneath him.

Across the room the captive woman took advantage of the momentary distraction to drive the back of her head into her captive's nose. The man, sure of his captive's helplessness, reeled from the blow. The gun at her temple came away slightly. She dropped her weight and drove her

elbow into the man's solar plexus. The air rushed out of his lungs and struggled in vain to return. Sensing his stunned state, she broke away.

Bonzo wrenched the gun from the still figure beneath him. Whether he was dead or not, he couldn't tell. He rolled over, a wave of nauseating pain greeting him as he did, and wheeled the hog leg around.

The crazed man's face contorted hideously at his hostage's flight. The body pistol raised and came to bear on her exposed back.

"Bitch!" he fired twice. At that range there was no way he could miss. Both shots entered her back and exited her abdomen. She fell down with the face first fall of someone who was out before they hit the ground.

Only the rapid fire capability of the body pistol had allowed him to get off those shots before Striker's flechette rifle and Bonzo's stolen pistol roared in unison, concentrating fire on him alone. The man wore no armor.

For a moment he jerked spasmodically as though in the throes of some insane dance before the force blew him back over the railing and into the reactor chamber far below.

Bonzo let a breath of relief out between clenched teeth. He could feel warm blood running down his leg on the inside of his armor. His head felt like it might explode.

To his left the woman took in a breath amongst her own red, growing pool.

Thank Gaia for that at least. Yaaaah...this hurts.

They didn't have much in the way of medical supplies with them, but they had enough emergency skin sealant and pain killer's to do something at least. As for the woman, she was doubtless bleeding out internally. What they had wouldn't do her any good in the long run. All they could do was sit tight and hope the others could finish this battle so that Physic could get in here.

Of course, we wrecked the lift. One of them anyway. That'll make things difficult.

He was starting to go into shock, he could feel it. In a few minutes he might not be all that useful if they didn't move fast. He wasn't even sure if he could stand up anymore. Turning towards the Ithklur, Bonzo saw that the alien stood in the same place he had during the brief exchange of fire. He made no move to help Bonzo or the woman. His visor was trained in Bonzo's direction, but something about the way he stood made him seem as though he were deliberating, considering something among his own counsel. A strange feeling crept over him that he was sure was not just the onset of trauma.

"Help me with her!" he said loudly over the comm.

It seemed to break the spell. Striker walked over to Bonzo and knelt before him. The light on his visor, the downward cast of his head seemed almost...sad.

The Ithklur reached into his belt and unlatched his own medical bundle. Instead of breaking it out on the two survivors, Striker dropped it into Bonzo's hands and stood up.

"What are you doing?" Bonzo demanded.

"I must go."

"Go...where?"

"To join the others."

"*What?*" Bonzo couldn't believe what he was hearing. "We were *ordered* to take Engineering, Striker."

"And so we have."

Bonzo shook his head. What kind of weird nightmare reality was this anyway?

"You can't leave. The Sarge told us to hold. Do you hear me? We've got to hold *here*."

"I cannot."

"I don't understand...."

"Yes you do."

Bonzo's face hardened behind his visor at his words, grinding his teeth. He *did* understand.

"What about us?" He gestured to the woman and to his bleeding knee. "We need you."

The helmeted head lowered. What was it he was seeing? Shame?

No.

It was regret. The Ithklur turned to go.

"No! Please! Don't leave us!" Bonzo reached out towards him almost child-like in his armor.

Striker stopped three strides away and half-turned.
"I'm sorry."
Then he walked away, swallowed up by the shadows.

* * *

When the enemy ship disappeared, the knowledge had hit Raven in the chest like a piledriver. She had known what she was seeing immediately, even before Coeur had flagged it for her evaluation. This new threat had necessitated her giving up her task of identifying the attacking ship in favor of finding out what had just happened. She was sure that whatever system or capability that had allowed the *Lord Ryan* to casually evade a 75,000-ton monitor with sensors as acute as their own was now being employed directly against *them*.

Under live fire conditions.

What's, more it wasn't a hi-tech pleasure yacht that they faced, but a lean-killing machine out for blood. They had made that clear enough. Unless something changed radically in the next few minutes, *Hornet* was doomed. She couldn't fight what she couldn't see.

She felt the wet, sticky underarms of her body sleeve beneath her vac suit, clinging to her skin. Beads of sweat appeared on her upper lip and forehead. Her mind spun in light-speed circles.

She'd had time to go over *Kukulcan's* logs numerous times trying to crack this very problem, but the answer had eluded her. Now the ship was under the gun and the possibility of accomplishing on the fly what she couldn't under leisurely circumstances seemed a remote horizon at best.

By the Gods, why is this happening? She felt her breath come in uneven staccato bursts. *Nothing just disappears from space! Nothing!*

Hot anger welled up inside her. It was too much. The task was too great, and their survival required, *demanding* success. It was an unfair universe whose weight seemed to settle on the back her neck and shoulders. It was all closing in around her.

It's futile. What they did was impossible.

Impossible.

Mentally she stopped short as she thought of the word. It was almost as though the concept itself was a brick wall that completely halted the momentum of that train of thought.

Then a wave of calm came over her as somehow she shook off the growing edge of despair.

What the other ship did was impossible, given the situational limitations that she knew. Which meant that what was going on here was completely new. *Something* made the ship disappear, so what was it?

The danger seemed to fade the background as she launched to a flurry of queries for data from her comp. Data streamed across her screen, and workspaces sprang into being, cross-referencing information.

She was sure that indeed *Lord Ryan* and the *Star Strider* shared this common capability, and that, in both cases, it was the same cause yielding the same effect. That would be her datum point until something blew it out of the water.

So, if both ships shared a common x-factor, then that meant that *Kukulcan* had witnessed first-hand the same phenomenon they found here. While that had occurred to her at the onset, it was a point she wished to firmly establish. She pulled the monitor's sensor logs and kept them at the ready.

First, she ruled out the possibility of a black globe generator. While someone might have been crazy enough to risk one to break August Delpero out of prison, it was very doubtful that the same parties would have the resources to equip another ship on some far out picket duty with one as well. If they did, then the game was all over anyway. Both of the ships in question had been fired upon, but hadn't flickered the force field it would create to shrug off the ill effects of incoming fire. Surely they would have done that if they had actually had one.

Ruling that out, Raven took into account the ships' sizes. *Lord Ryan* was 400-tons displacement to the *Star Strider's* 500-tons. Whatever system the generated this effect had to be

small enough to fit on a hull in that size range. From the armament that the *Star Strider* had shown them, it didn't look as though this system was big enough to cut into their magazine or heavy weapon emplacements, or her armor for that matter. If that were the case, then it must be a very compact system indeed.

Of course, traditional ECM suites didn't eat all that much space, but whatever this was anything but *traditional*. At last mark, the *Star Strider* had been some 550,000K from their present position near L-24. At that range, *Hornet's* improved sensors should be burning through even the best EW equipment.

That meant that the normal ECM need for great distance to be effective was not an issue for this system. At the same time, it probably wasn't like *Hornet's* own EMS dampening paint job either, since both of the ships had demonstrated that they could turn flip the system "on" whenever they wanted.

But what did that leave? If it wasn't like normal counter measures of that kind, and wasn't a fixed and static effect, what then could completely fool sensors that were the best you could get? Considering the huge disparity between *Hornet's* displacement and *Kukulcan's*, this ability would seem to render the size of the ship observing the phenomenon moot.

Having discounted some of the external factors, it occurred to her that there was one advantage that she had now that she had never had before – now she had not one, but *two* sensor recordings of this system in action. If she could compare the two logs, and perhaps find a commonality between the two encounters, it might just be possible to find something that would help them.

She only hoped that it didn't come too late.

"Newt, I think I may have something here." The Hiver's head turned to regard her with its six-eyed stare as she spoke. "I'll patch it through to you."

The key was here, she knew. All they had to do was brush away the extraneous information and discover the answer lying beneath. She had fought off the depths of hopelessness, and perhaps sewn the seeds of victory right here at the controls of her notebook.

Now they had to live long enough for those seeds to bear fruit.

* * *

On the bridge AkakEE Silriver, better known to his friends as Deep Six, registered the *Star Strider's* disappearance with marked interest. Aside from being the ship's astrogator, he also kept a constant vigil on *Hornet's* sensors, which made the enemy vessel's vanishing act all the more fascinating. It was something truly stimulating to see, the likes of which he had never witnessed before.

That the maneuver might shortly result in *Hornet* becoming a smoldering debris field didn't seem to really impact him the way it might his human companions.

Even invisible, the other ship might reveal itself if it decided to send more missiles their way. He was sure their drive signatures would reveal themselves to his beloved sensors as soon as they launched. That is, unless the same stealth technology could also be applied to their missiles.

He somehow doubted that, though. With the amount of missiles that had been exchanged so far, they probably would have used them already. What was also interesting was that the two missiles the other ship had fired to dislodge them from L-24's protective shield had not changed course to intercept them. While they could be holding their approach vectors for a last minute course correction, again that didn't feel right to the Schalli.

He couldn't say why he thought that, of course. Astrogation was part mathematics and part instinct. Those that had one or the other could make an adequate navigator, but especially blessed was the individual that had both, that could feel their way forward as well run the numbers. Deep Six had both in spades.

That was why he felt the missiles would continue on their original course to impact L-24 – his ability to read objects in motion told him so. While it was glad tidings that they weren't pointed at *Hornet*, it would definitely be advisable for them to get clear of the area before the nukes went

off. *Hornet's* systems were hardened against radiation damage, before it was generally best not test those limitations if you didn't have to.

He waited for the prompt order from Coeur to change course. It didn't come. The luminous eye at the end of his left eyestalk tracked over to look at his commanding officer in the pilot's couch.

She sat staring at the main plot not moving a muscle. Her eyes seemed fixed and glassy behind her facebowl, as though she were staring at a point far beyond the plot. Her cheeks seemed noticeably paler than her normal apricot complexion. It was almost as though she were frozen in time.

"The missiles are still on target to L-24," the Schalli said neutrally, "shall I plot a course to a safe distance?"

She didn't respond.

"Captain?" he prompted.

She said nothing.

"*Captain!*" he said sharply, his normally mild voice cracking like a whip.

She stirred a little, and her eyes came sharply into focus.

"Yes, do it." She said quickly, her mind finally catching up to his words.

Glad to have her responsive again, he fed his course over to her station and watched her coax the *Hornet* away from the asteroid they had used as shelter.

The problem was where to go. The reason they had sought L-24 in the first place was because they didn't wish to face their opponent in open space. Now that their enemy had concealed themselves, there was no way to be sure which way she would approach, which rendered any kind of cover useless. In fact, L-24's mass might now be employed against them. The distances of open space might actually give them enough reaction time to respond to threats more so than being stationary and even under stealth, and the other ship was still constrained by the effective range of her weaponry.

Hornet came about, leaving left the asteroid behind at her best speed, however reduced, in the gunboat's wake. If they were going to be shot at, Coeur intended for them to be a moving target.

More and more lights came on in her mind that had grown dim with the last few exchanges. Fear had come dangerously close to making her completely useless, and though the lion growled and pawed at her, she had managed to crack the whip of her own self-discipline and keep it at bay. While there was ascertain embarrassment at having Deep Six see her shocked state, she could live with that. At least she hadn't broken over the intercom and let the whole ship know she was cracking under pressure.

All she could do was the best she could do. She had always demanded the most from her crewmates, but that was because she also tried to do the same. Now, more than ever, they needed her. If any of them were going to make it out of this alive, she had to be needle sharp in her decisions. There was no margin for error.

Sooner or later, the other ship would come for them. She would have to be ready, assuming she had time to react at all. Hardening herself for that eventuality, she sat up squarely in her seat and inhaled a cool breath of air that felt refreshing in her lungs. When she let it out, she imagined her frustration and stress leaving her body. It seemed to work.

Her eyes lifted towards the plot again, the bright colors on black seemingly more vibrant than she'd ever noticed before.

All right now, show me what you've got!

* * *

He was never quite cognizant of opening his eyes. Rather the inside of the Valiant seemed to fade into view like the opening of a holovid. The clean, stark lines of the crew compartment refocused a time or two and sounds began to reach him. They were voices he was sure he should remember, but their constant droning drew him closer and things began to become clearer.

Then he remembered the pain. It felt like his skull was about to split open and the slightest movement sent a thousand pinpricks of agony coursing down the length of his body. A sickly nausea fluttered in his stomach, threatening to rise in his throat.

He must've groaned or yelled out, because one of those half-remembered voices grew louder in his ear and a seemingly alien faceplate devoid of expression filled his view.

"Whiz Bang," the voice said. "Are you with us?"

That name rang a few bells as the rust orange form laid a comforting hand on his shoulder.

"Yeah, Sarge," he heard himself say, "I'm back."

It was as though it were a programmed response. For the moment he had no idea who this "Sarge" was, or where he'd might have come back from. Everything in his sight was a blur of too-fast motion and vaguely familiar shapes.

Another voice, a higher pitched woman's voice spoke up. "Sarge, the transport tram from the far side is coming our way. If I were to guess, I'd say it's reinforcements."

The faceplate in front of him swiveled towards the voice.

"Just how many of them are there?"

The statement seemed remarkably funny for some reason, and through the pain was a strange wave of giddiness.

"Keep us moving forward."

The helmeted head looked back in his direction as he let a slight giggle slip out.

"Whiz Bang, are you sure you're okay?"

"Great, Sarge. Never better."

Again those words seem to come out of their own volition.

"Get to your station."

"Yes, sir."

A sudden realization came to him that he was also in a similar suit of armor as he looked down at his armored hands and forearms. They seemed overlarge for manipulating the straps on his chair. Somehow he managed to flip the catch and get up from the small nook.

For a reason he couldn't quite define, another adjacent chair seemed to call to him, it's brightly lit displays a warm and comforting sight. The inside of wherever he was seemed to ride smooth enough, but he was sure they were moving.

Settling into the inviting chair, his hands danced across the panel to his amusement. It was like he was a marionette on the end of the strings. Seeing his limbs act of their own accord struck him as being hilarious from the sheer novelty of it all.

* * *

Across the cabin, Mercy spoke through the mike on the personal channel to the Sergeant Major.

"Sir, are you sure he's okay? He's giggling like a madman."

"I know."

"Are we okay with letting him have a go with the *missiles*, sir?"

Escher looked over at the pilot's station and tilted his head.

"We need everyone right now. So he's punch drunk, that doesn't seem to be an impediment for him." He said flatly. "Besides, I've got him on lock out right now. If we need to open the Whistlers, then I'll free them up. I'll keep a handle on the main cannon for now."

"Yes, sir." There was still a hint of trepidation in her voice.

"Signal the Ithklur. Tell them to prepare for incoming hostiles."

"Yes, sir." She said more levelly.

"Sarge?" Whiz Bang said from his station.

Escher switched channels. "Yes?"

"The tram's still a long ways out, but I think I can derail them from here." There was an odd note of humor to his voice as though his words were in response to a particularly funny joke.

The Sergeant Major wasn't pleased by Whiz Bang's whimsical tone, but he couldn't deny that he had a point. For all he knew that tram could be filled with a battalion of troops in battle dress. So far they had run rough shod over everything that had been thrown at them, but there

were *far* more people operating here than they'd originally thought. From the amount of ordinance they seemed to possess, and their sheer numbers, they had stumbled across a Major covert base. Who knows how long they'd been operating here, or what traps they might have laid in the process.

It was also possible that the tram might contain non-combatants. If that were the case, he would very much regret what he was about to do them. So far, none of the inhabitants here had proven to be of the non-hostile variety. He could reasonably assume that the intra-station tram headed their way was no different. "All right, Whiz Bang, paint them and prepare to fire."

Escher unlocked the missile governor and hoped he was right in the course of action he was about to undertake.

"Roger sir, preparing to..."

He never finished the sentence.

* * *

Some deeply-rooted danger instinct told Hunter to move a fraction of second before the trap was sprung. One moment he had been on the Valiant's starboard side as they entered the narrows between the rusted remnants of a drilling rig and the solid stone wall

There had been a blur of sudden movement, followed by a thundering boom, as an excavator claw easily twice the size of the Valiant itself swung out of the wreckage and smote the grav tank on its port side like the hammer of an angry war god.

Even that powerful a blow failed to pierce the Valiant's indomitable armor hull, but the trap had not been made to crush the vehicle outright. Hovering on its contra-gravs, the tank was easier to move than its track-laying cousins that were in contact with the ground. The same property that made it able to maneuver so fluidly became its Achilles' Heel as the metal teeth caught the edge of the tank, flipping it over onto its side, pinning it against the stonework's with a deafening report.

Hunter had been *between* the tank and the stone wall only a second before, nearly becoming an armored pancake in the process.

Looking up, he scanned the wreckage for what had set the trap in motion. Heat readings lit up his HUD from a jagged blister atop the mountain of rusted scrap metal. The magnification intensified and the wasted remains of an operator's compartment came into view. The orange outline of two heat signatures occupied it.

The team channel opened with the Sergeant Major's voice, which sounded moderate considering the pounding that had just befallen him.

"The hatch is pinned against the wall, and the turret can't turn to fire. Persuade whatever has us to let go."

Hunter sent his acknowledge and saw that Raptor did the same. Relief filled Hunter that his brother was still alive. When the claw fell, Raptor had disappeared having been between the descending claw and the tank itself. With a deft roll, he had avoided the deadly collision and was even now making contra-grav assisted jumps up the slopes of the metallic mountain towards the operator booth.

Raptor would easily dispense with the men in the booth before he could even move to assist. Instead of joining in that objective, Hunter studied the claw itself. It hung suspended by three super-high tensile strength cables that mounted to an overhanging gantry. Steel rungs were driven into the hard stone, running up the wall towards the upper level.

A tremor of doubt ran through him as he knew what he had to do. He only hoped the rungs would hold up under his weight. Shimming up the ladder, a few rungs wriggled in his grasp as he ascended to the gantry. A moment later he gained its upper reaches.

The narrow pathway that greeted him was less an actual walkway and more of a support rail. He became immediately and immensely thankful for all the drill time he'd logged in his armor. It wasn't quite like a walking a tightrope, but there were a surprising amount of similarities given his armored bulk. Raptor's voice came on the line.

"Targets eliminated," he said shortly. "Controls are jammed, however."

Hunter cut in as he spread his arms to stabilize himself at the narrowest point of the walkway.

"I believe I have a solution. Stand clear."

A few measured steps and tense heartbeats later, he cleared the narrowest part of the railing and settled in close to the first cable. A panel on his forearm slid back, and a cutting laser neatly unfolded to ready position. It whined as it Hunter primed it, using juice from his own suit to power it. The tip lit up in emerald green as he set about cutting away at the cables.

Continued use of the laser would certainly drain the suit's power cells quickly, but was there was nothing to be done about it. If it should fall to him to abandon his armor and face the enemy without its protection, so be it.

The cutting beam sliced through the thick cable with relative ease and a few seconds later, the tautness in the line cracked like a whip as it was finally cut free. Like an enraged serpent, the cut cable writhed and coiled as it fell. The gantry shivered at the reverberation, making his already tenuous footing that much harder to hold.

Hunter had anticipated the backlash and dug his powered grip into the nearest rail, locking in his waldos until the worst passed. Without another thought he was on to the second cable, preparing to sever it.

Below him, the gigantic claw shifted ever so slightly giving the Valiant a slight amount of clearance. Apparently, those inside the grav-tank had been waiting for that.

The two missile racks mounted on either side of the turret, flipped open to reveal a mass of sharp points. There came a sound of rushing air as two missiles from each rack shot out, each followed by an ever-expanding con trail.

Hunter noted this, but continued his work with a steady hand. The second cable gave away beneath his laser, with similar, if not more violent results. The gantry groaned and shook, but somehow he kept a hold, his powerful hands leaving behind bent-in finger marks in the metal.

By some miracle he made his way to the third support which now bore the entire weight of the titanic excavator claw below. The pressure bowed the end of the gantry down with its weight, and the Ithklur could already foresee the results of his action. When the final cable was struck, the gantry would uncoil like a spring...with him out on the end of it.

It must be done.

The laser began its work, but Hunter knew half-way through the cut that the pressure would do the rest for him. Even now he could see the composite layers peeling one-by-one as they struggled under the claw's yoke.

With that, Hunter turned and leapt off the opposite side about a half-second before the final cable snapped, venting all its the pent up kinetic energy. It whipped away and lashed furiously into the scrap metal below. The gantry heaved from the reverberation and tore itself free of the wall, collapsing down on the battered, and now stained, remains of the operator's booth.

In mid-arc, the Ithklur had fired his contra-gravs, coasting down on a microsheat of anti-gravitons. The tortured remains of the gantry passed him on his way down, it's fractured metal appendage nearly claiming him on its way down. Thankfully, it missed. He would live to continue the fight, but he had been ready and willing – even *eager* – to lay down his life to accomplish his task. That was just part of who he was.

As Hunter touched down among the rubble, Raptor was waiting for him almost casually, his flechette rifle resting upside-down on the top of his shoulder.

"Artfully done, brother." Raptor said, laying a hand on the Marine's shoulder pauldron.

Hunter knew that his immediate superior never doled out compliments very often, thus he took it for the accolade it truly was. He returned the gesture and clasp the larger Ithklur's gauntlet warmly.

Off to their side, the Valiant worked its way loose from its snare and hovered into the air. This time it did not bother with floating a mere meter off the ground instead rising up from the ground above even where the gantry had stood moments before.

A muted explosion sounded some distance off. Hunter turned to see the fading fireball of the Valiant's missiles. Whatever had warranted the use of their heavy strike missiles was apparently no longer a concern. The heavy turret tracked back and forth a few times seeking targets. Finding none, the now –flying tank continued it's advance forward.

The Ithklur turned to follow, but as they did a familiar voice cut in over the team channel.
"Brothers!"

They turned to see the form of Striker's distinctive armor emerge from a causeway hewn in the rock. While his suit showed signs of combat, he was none-the-less moving without hindrance or obvious damage. This pleased his comrades greatly. The circle was now complete and his presence made them whole again.

"Engineering is secure. Let us make haste to the ventral docking bay," he said. "If *Hokona* is there I have reason to believe that some of the crew might still be alive."

Hunter and Raptor looked at each other in surprise. While the humans might have held hope that there might be survivors from *Hokona*, the Ithklur had not been as optimistic. The ship had been owned and operated by Hivers. If some of the ship's crew were still alive...

"You are correct, brother," Raptor said. "The Valiant has the situation under control here," he said with a sweep towards the silver shape moving away from them.

"We are needed elsewhere. Move out."

If two Ithklur fighting side-by-side were formidable, then the three of them together were a tsunami ready to crash upon the enemy.

It was almost enough to make Hunter pity those that might stand against them.

Almost.

* * *

The Valiant sailed lightly on its bed of contra-gravity, gaining altitude and speed. Originally, the Sergeant Major had wished to keep low to the ground to avoid making their vehicle a target from some distance away, but the enemy had proven that they could take advantage of them if they stayed low, so the alternative was to move upward.

Here their field of fire for all their weapon systems was unhindered by ground-based impediments, which made it where the entirety of Main Industrial was within their sights.

There was a strange lull that had fallen over the battlefield since their escape from the claw. It was possible that the tram that they had blasted had been the last force the enemy could field.

So why did all three Marine's have that sickly feeling in their stomachs that it wasn't?

"Talk to me Whiz Bang."

"Nothing, sir," the Marine said with little trace of the inner humor he'd shown before. "I think we may be..." His voice trailed off as he sat bolt-upright in his chair. "Oh, *fikk*. I had to go and jinx it didn't I?"

"Report!"

"We're being painted by a SAM launcher...correction *multiple* SAM launchers!" Whiz Bang nearly yelled over the comm. His sensor information flowed over to Escher's targeting repeater.

There was not one, but *seven* truck-mounted Falcon surface-to-air missile launchers spreading out before them. Camouflage netting was pulled back and the sleek, aerodynamic forms raised from prone on the backs of their transports.

These weren't the kind of shoulder-mounted rigs meant to take down civilian or transport aircraft. No, the angry warheads pointed at them were the kind used to destroy hardened military targets.

Like the Valiant.

Escher felt himself being pulled down the road of incredulity, but stopped himself short. In the last little while, he had been tempted to go there many times. How these unknown rogues had managed to get their hands on high-end military equipment ceased to matter...that they were employing it against his people was the truly important fact – although a quiet corner of his mind wondered why the enemy would have deployed anti-aircraft launchers *inside* an asteroid base.

"Take evasive!" he said forcefully, but with no trace of fear. "Fire!"

The missile racks once again shuttered open at Whiz Bang's behest and scattered fire among the three targets off their port side. The main cannon began to belch hellfire at the targets to starboard. Mercy killed their forward momentum and threw it into a reverse forty-five degree angle, to put more distance between them and the missiles without eclipsing their firing arcs.

"Raptor," Escher said over the comm, "move in and attack those launchers on the ground, ASAP!" Strictly speaking, he was shooting from the hip with the main cannon, without allowing the targeting sensors time to provide a solid lock. He had already nailed one, but from their dispersal, the trucks had been strategically placed to maximize their firepower.

"Negative." Raptor's voice said a moment later. "We are proceeding to Site 2 without delay."

The lines of Escher's face behind his visor hardened as he turned his eyes to the golden locator icons on his command display. Most of his HUD had been taken up with prosecuting the main cannon, and he had unforgivably neglected the positions of his people. Just what in blazes was Striker doing back on this level anyway? Anger at himself and the Ithklur fused together into something very terrible. The volcanic fury hidden behind his face approached demonic.

"Get to those launchers *now!* Do you hear me? That's an order!"

Fire flared in his voice, but the Ithklur returned with ice.

"Negative, sir," he said at least adding the honorific this time. "Site 2 is our objective and we cannot be deterred." Raptor switched off his comm, as did the other Ithklur.

"Damn it." Escher cursed as he continued firing. The Ithklur had just done the unthinkable – disobeyed a direct and lawfully given order from a superior. Had he known that something like this might happen, or had he allowed himself to believe it wouldn't? It was academic now. They weren't coming – they had to deal with what was in front of them, without ground support, or die trying.

The exact reverse of a starship, the missiles aboard a tank were the scalpel while the main energy weapon was the hammer. Whiz Bang's missiles raced out, claiming the mobile launchers, but not before two of them managed to shoot their bolt. Escher fared a little better as the fusion bolt slugged the missile and the vehicle supporting it. Two of the three were reduced to white-hot splinters of metal before they could launch, but the third shot when wide, allowing the missile to fire its drives and head towards them.

Whiz Bang was already processing the new threat and moving to counter it. In less than a second, he reconfigured his missiles for an intercept role and let fly. By now the Whistler racks were starting to run dry, but what was left was meant for piercing military-grade armor. The incoming missiles had none.

One of the Falcons flared out of existence as Whiz Bang's missiles found it. Another fell as Drop Kick somehow managed to catch it center mass with the main cannon. The third one, however, jinked and juked in the air avoiding all attempts to hinder it.

"Hang on," Mercy said to the others as she slammed down the HOTAS. As the Falcon screamed through the air, seeking its target, the grav-tank flipped over, pointing itself straight down, diving towards the ground.

The move caught the missile's electronic mind by surprise, but the target would not get away so easily.

Mercy saw the ground rising up to meet them and pulled back hard on the controls. Despite its mass, its contra-gravs made driving it almost graceful...which was why they were able to live through the maneuver.

Closer than she cared to think about, the Valiant pulled up from her plunge a few meters from the ground, then soared back into the air now flying away from the missile.

The Falcon hadn't lost its lock, merely an opportunity to strike. Hitting an agile target in flight was, after all, what it had been born to do, and it was far from finished yet. The guiding flaps along its stabilizers threw it into a spin. The drive cut out as the entire missile flipped like an acrobat in a forward roll. The drive re-ignited just as the nose came to bear once again on the fleeing tank. The missile had completely reversed its course and was once again surging belligerently through the air.

Despite the aerial gymnastics, there was now less distance between the two than previous. The missile's drives dumped the remainder of their fuel, seeking that final moment of glory that would erase both of them from existence.

Inside the Valiant, Whiz Bang said a short prayer as he depressed the firing stud. Each of the missile racks had only a single missile a piece, and they were now facing away from the target. It certainly wasn't an ideal firing scenario, but if that didn't work, then it could very well be curtains for all of them.

His two final missiles streaked out and away at ninety degree angles from the tank, curving around to face their foe, while crossing over each other in a figure-eight pattern to resolve their attack run.

Around Whiz Bang, it seemed like everyone was holding their breath, even as Escher spun the turret around and Mercy held her course.

The two Whistler missiles converged on the Falcon. A fantastically bright yellow-orange air burst filled the air behind them. Whiz Bang knew that Falcons were meant for contact detonation, not proximity. As the violent shockwave washed over the Valiant, and the lights began to flicker in the compartment, he knew that somehow the SAM had known what fate was about to befall it and let loose its warhead, adding its own destructive power to those Whistlers sent to assassinate it.

* * *

The die was cast. *Hornet* had abandoned the transient sanctuary of L-24 for the void of open space. One way or another, she would meet her fate out among the endless night. Aside from the sputtering of her maneuver drives, her flight out into the open might have looked peaceful, almost serene to an outside viewer.

Inside her was another matter entirely. Every one worked furiously at their respective stations to contribute to not only their victory, but their survival.

Inside *Hornet's* portside prong, a Hiver and a weary intelligence officer strained through the battle data looking for a way to prevent the final stroke from being delivered by a unseen foe.

At its computers station, Newton ran through the numbers as Raven sifted through two sets of computer logs trying to find a commonality that may or may not exist.

It was possible her conclusions were flawed somehow leading further and further from the truth of the matter. She didn't think so, though. Something about the track she was on felt right somehow. It wasn't something she could define, but sometimes, when your back is to the wall, instincts, hunches and gut feelings were all you had to go on. Perhaps it would be enough.

If it wasn't, no one would be around to complain.

An image filled her mind of Crowbar in the engine room, sweat pouring off of him, desperately fighting to hold the ship together and meet the Captain's every demand, no matter how unrealistic. She saw the strain in his face with no trace of the wry sense of humor she found inviting – the determination in the set of his jaw, the fire in his eyes. *Hornet* was his darling, and he was fighting to save her life the same way he might one of her crew.

She knew that he felt an attraction towards her, though he was circumspect about showing it. In truth, she felt more and more inclined to return it, though there were bitter realities that would eventually set in. She didn't want to think about it just then.

Of course, you're not supposed to be thinking of him at all right now, she chided herself. *Stay on course.*

Her momentary wool-gathering had lasted less than a second, but time was a precious commodity. Her eyes focused on her notebook screen even as she tested her theory like a scientist.

"I believe I have something," Newton's artificial voice said as she looked up. "If you will direct your attention to the indicated grids," it said with a sweep of its limb.

Raven called up the data and saw two sets of mathematical symbols and code scroll across her screen. "What is it?"

"An identical mathematical anomaly in both sets of sensor data," the Hiver answered. "In both cases, it is a sensor echo that is not as it should be."

Raven trained her gaze at her screen, the wheels turning in her at light speed at what she saw. Both *Hornet* and *Kukulcan's* sensors were top of the line, military grade equipment. At the higher-end of the spectrum, premium sensor packages were designed to weed out volumes of signal bouncebacks or "ghosts" that were generated every once in a while. Lower grade sensors occasionally mistook these echoes for actual contacts rather than the reflections they really were.

Her hands played across the keypad, moving her forward on her half-formed theory as it developed in her mind. Data flashed across her screen faster than she would have thought

possible for her process, but somehow in each instance she homed in on the relevant parts, absorbing them and moving on.

If bigger and better sensors swept sensor ghosts under the carpet, could it be possible that the fiendish camouflage system might try to insert itself as one of those echoes and let the sophisticated sensor processor of the targeted ship do the rest?

If that were the case then, ironically, it was *Hornet's* own clarity of vision that unintentionally blinded her to the danger at hand.

More information flitted across her display. Yes, this was possible, especially if the ship being fooled had no idea what was going on. If sensor sophistication was the root of the problem, then might lower-grade sensors be able to pick it up?

"Here's my working theory," she said over to the Hiver as she sent him her basic concepts and her course of action based on the information at hand. "How do we make this a reality?"

"Not easily," it said turning its alien "face" towards her. "But we must implement it quickly, if it is to have any effect on our situation."

"Amen to that."

Hornet's schematics replaced the lines of code and sensor data on both their computers. *Turning and turning the widening gyre...*

* * *

The three Ithklur barely fit in the lift as it lowered them from the Main Industrial section to the ventral docking bay, their heavy armor almost rubbing together shoulder-to-shoulder. There was no need for words. They each knew what they had to do and how best to go about it.

That was why they had originally been entrusted with the safety of such and august personage as M.Genghis, why that of all the Ithklur operating in known space, the three that occupied this lift were among the elite of the elite.

Final weapons checks were made and remaining grenades and ammunition were redistributed. Despite the varied appearance of their weapons, the internal workings were uniformly the same for just this reason.

At length they arrived at their destination, and the door folded back. The three Ithklur exploded onto the scene, guns at the ready. As one, they switched on their external speakers.

A wailing cacophony of sound issued forth as the first dread notes of the famous Ithklur opera, *K'arathanekeh*, blared from their speakers in three part harmony.

Men and women in worker coveralls looked up with pale faces. Out of instinct, some of them did the wrong thing – they reached for weapons.

That was enough. The Ithklur opened fire as the music swelled carrying with it the story of the epic Ithklur victory over the K'kree. It was more to the three than merely a distraction, although several people died with their hands trying to cover their ears, it was a battlehymn, a reminder of who they were and a rallying cry to spur them on to glory.

In concert, they even seemed to move to the sonorous voices rising and falling, like some kind of deadly dance, leaving a trail of dead in their wake.

The three burst through the initial control rooms and into the bay proper. Several figures were arming themselves, clustered around the burned and battered hulk of what had once been a *Gugnir*-class free trader.

Hokona.

Some of them never saw the flechette rifles raise and fire. Others had time to watch in horror as the weapons that finished off their companions swung around to find them. Unlike the troopers that the Ithklur had fought above, these personnel were neither armored, nor heavily armed. From the way they scattered without rhyme or reason, it was clear that none of the ones they faced were proper soldiers either.

All of which made their jobs that much easier.

They stormed the area with such force that to merely call it an attack lost something, detracted from its veracity. What those unfortunate souls faced in the ventral docking bay was an

onslaught, an unstoppable juggernaut that swept through their ranks as effortlessly as a force of nature.

A few of the figures sought refuge in the ship, but the Ithklur followed them into the vessel after the outside had been properly secured. As they ran in, it became apparent to the Ithklur that the inside of the ship had fared no better than the outside. Great fires must have scorched the inside turning its corridors black. Being inside the ship when it happened must have been unspeakable.

Methodically, the three Ithklur went room-to-room clearing out the hostile inhabitants. Perhaps some might have surrendered had they been given the chance.

When the battle reached a fever pitch, the Ithklur were seldom inclined to entertain the idea. The humans would have called it, “no quarter”, to the Ithklur it was simply the way things were done.

They had just dispatched a corridor full of the enemy when Hunter peeled off from the other two and came to stand by one of the doors.

“Here, brothers.” He said, motioning over to them. It was the first words any of them had spoken since they had come to this level. The door looked to be an access to a stateroom, no different from any of the others in the corridor.

Raptor’s stance must have communicated this as Hunter pointed to the lock mechanism. It looked jury-rigged and ziptech, but what it lacked in sophistication it made up for in effectiveness. Extra plates of steel and embrasures had been welded to the lock that made the door look more like a prison cell than a residence.

Raptor nodded to Hunter, and the two of them ripped the door free from its hinges as though tearing a crust from bread. They huddled around the door, weapons trained on the inside, headlamps illuminating the interior of the room. An oddly-shaped figure stirred there, and as the Ithklur recognized it, their hearts froze at the sight.

Inside the room was a Hiver who was chained to floor. Two of its secondary limbs had been cut off and deliberate wounds covered the central part of its body. Its battered prime limb turned weakly to regard them with only two eyes staring at them where six should have been. Then the prime limb settled back to floor, as if it had taken a titanic effort to move at all.

Cold fire burned in Raptor’s veins at the horror in front of him. Someone had purposefully tortured this Hiver to within an inch of its life. He felt his jaw quiver and his mouth draw back into snarl.

“Hunter,” he said finally. “Stay with it and do what you can.” He turned to Striker whose armored form could not disguise the glacial rage that mirrored his own.

“Striker, retrace our steps.” he said deliberately so that there could be no misunderstanding. “Make sure none live.”

* * *

“You want me to do what, exactly?”

Coeur raised an eyebrow at Raven’s holo-graphic image on the comm screen, wondering if she’d heard her correctly.

“I want Deep Six to downgrade our sensors three grades and see what shakes out.”

“Um, that’s a bit of a problem right now, Raven,” Coeur said. “We’re under the gun right now.”

Raven held her gaze. “Captain, our sensors may *be* the problem.”

Coeur bit her lip quite unaware that she was doing so and glanced over at Deep Six.

“Can it be done?”

“Oh yes, Captain. The sensors can be electronically retrograded for training and simulation purposes. It should be a small matter pull the live data stream through...”

“Do it,” she mentally winced at cutting the Schalli off. He didn’t deserve that, but all of their lives might very well be measured in seconds now. Coeur turned back to Raven.

“I hope you’re right.”

“Look at this way Captain,” she said with a winsome smile that didn’t seem the least bit forced. “We can’t see them *now*, so what do we have to lose?”

Coeur tilted her head at the remark and gave the intelligence officer a

hard look.

"Yeah, maybe it's best neither of us answer that," Raven added, looking down for a moment, "I'm sending Deep Six the anomaly Newt discovered. Once the sensors are dimmed down, have him look for that."

"Roger," Coeur said to the screen, but waved across the bridge portal to the port horn where Raven was seated with Newton.

Hell, I've been living on borrowed time since I thawed. Might as well...

"Captain!" Deep Six might have jumped from his roller chair. "Look!"

The astrogator switched the viewscreen from an outside look at the stars to a cruder, more rudimentary tactical display. While it was functional, it had none of the snap and polish of the regular set up, but it did possess one vital element that her regular plot decidedly lacked.

Namely, the *Star Strider*.

There were several sensor echoes that faded in and out in different quarters of the map before her, but only one of them was steadily descending on her position from a near vector the hostile ship had been running before it vanished.

"There seems to be diminishing returns in lowering the sensor sensitivity," Deep Six remarked. "Once it reaches a certain point, it once again becomes subject to their ECM."

"Find a sweet spot and keep us there." The lion still paced and shook the bars of its cage, but Coeur D'Esprit was soaring on wave of elation just then. She felt like dancing.

The enemy was revealed, but most importantly, they didn't *know* they had been revealed. That meant the pendulum had once again swung the other way, and the element of surprise was once again on her side.

And I've got just the surprise for you...

* * *

Raven beamed behind the facebowl of her vac suit. They had done it. Even now it was all blur as to how they had arrived there, but somehow they had done it.

There's nothing like impending death to spur a deadline, she thought.

Of course, they weren't out of the woods yet. The *Star Strider* was still out there, coming straight at them from their starboard quarter, but now they had a fighting chance. Perhaps, they might see another day after all.

Before she could savor the victory they hadn't yet achieved, she pulled herself back to the here and now. She couldn't rest on her laurels of having performed a miracle on demand. No, she could still contribute the overall effort by getting back to the tasks that she'd been forced to abandon to stave off their current danger.

Reaching over to her data cells, she withdrew a violet one and popped it into the reader. Profiles of ships regularly used by The Guild started to appear on her screen, some in sharp detail, others in generalities depending how they'd been encountered. The information confirmed her suspicion.

There was no record of any *Star Strider* in service to The Mercantile Guild. There was the odd patrol cruiser that they used for raiding or collections, but there wasn't one that fit the profile anywhere on record.

She mentally shrugged. The Guild had been a "no stone unturned" move, but it didn't surprise her that she found nothing. The Guild was well-equipped and armed, but everything so far indicated that the *Star Strider* was military, and most of The Guild just wasn't up to the level of proficiency and efficiency that had the enemy vessel had demonstrated.

All the evidence so far pointed to the Solee, but that particular lead hadn't panned out either. True, the RCNI didn't have a total peg on the Solee's entire fleet standing, particularly the relic ships they seemed to find with startling regularity, but the ship they faced was *new*. Whichever yard had built her had a clear understanding of what they were doing, and there were few in the modern times that could claim that.

If the Solee had built her in recent years, then surely there would be a note of her somewhere. Great pains had been taken by the Intelligence Branch to infiltrate all their Major naval yards that could conceivably deliver such a craft.

That didn't change the fact that searches in her Solee database had turned up zero. She ejected the purple disk and looked at what was left to search. Her choices were blue, orange and one that was transparent. Her hand passed over the orange to the transparent one. She hovered there a moment, considering her options, before reaching deliberately towards the blue one and shoved it home into her comp.

She didn't expect there to be a listing for this ship amongst the known pirate vessels that operated in The Wilds, but who could say? Thoroughness was expected of her from not only *Hornet's* CO, but from herself.

The information came up and she plunged into it eagerly.

* * *

Hornet maintained her current course and speed, seemingly unaware of the danger quickly bearing down on her. That was what Coeur wanted the enemy commander to think, anyway.

The *Star Strider's* long, needle-like prow was pointed directly on them, or at least it was pointed at where they were *going* to be on an intercept course. Coeur could recognize what they were doing as she studied the tactical plot. The ship was coming in "invisibly" on a ballistic course that would bring her to within range of all five of its lasers.

It seemed the other ship didn't want to risk giving away their position with a missile launch, instead choosing to close in for the sure kill. Once *Hornet* entered the range of those lasers, there would be no running away from them.

Which was why Coeur was going to make sure they never got that close.

Since *Hornet's* single missile tube was jammed, and the other ship was reticent to fire missiles, that could give away their position. That meant the final conflict would be resolved with the flashing brilliance of lasers. Missiles would take a backseat to the action.

Well, almost.

The *Star Strider* was already well within range of The Stinger, a fact which was frazzling the XO of the ship in her laser turret, but *Hornet* was still outside the enemy's energy range. Coeur stolidly held her fire. There was one last piece that needed to fall into place before she could finally spring her trap.

"Steady," she said over the comm in her best reassuring voice. "Steady now. Standby, Crowbar and Snapshot. Steady."

All the pieces were aligning themselves the way she envisioned. Just a few more seconds...

"Steady...steady...steady...*Now!* Execute Omega!"

In the deepness of space, the three heavy strike missiles that had previously lost their lock lit their drives and screamed in towards the *Star Strider*. They had not expended their full drive endurance and thus had gone dead in space until Snapshot's command filled them full of deadly purpose once more. If *Hornet* could no longer fire missiles directly from the ship, nothing precluded her from controlling those birds already in space. The ship's MFD was *not* damaged.

The ranges were very close now, and the three missiles extended their laser rods. Three nuclear explosions lit up on the tactical display. X-Rays lasers punched into the enemy ship's starboard side indifferent to the armor that tried to stop it or the fragile crew that lay behind it.

The main tactical plot updated itself in the missile's wake, and it became clear that the *Star Strider* had reeled under the blow. Almost her entire starboard side glowed orange like the coals of a dying fire. From the streamers coming off her flank, it looked as though some parts of her interior had still been under atmosphere when the X-Rays had struck, which only made things worse. The intercept course she had been on faltered as well, which only seemed to expose more of her shattered line to *Hornet*.

That was the final thing that Coeur was waiting for.

"Crowbar, now!"

The far trader wheeled around on thrusters, still keeping her forward momentum, but pointing her two-pronged prow towards her wounded foe.

Coeur brought her hand up in front of the tactical plot and closed it into a tight fist, her eyes flashing.

"Gyro, Fire!"

The Stinger fired for the first time, discharging a beam of such focused golden light, of such pure intensity, that all around *Hornet* the flawless night of space was lit bright as day.

Johanna Solomon had spent the past nerve-wracking minutes getting a bead on her target, and now her expertise paid off. The radiant beam lanced through the stars and caught the *Star Strider* dead amidships, then traced down her broken side like a scalpel.

What little armor that remained was disintegrated as the energy transfer rained down like the wrath of God. Somewhere through its deadly path, the beam found a hole where one of the missiles had already punched through.

What lay on the other side had either been a reactor or a magazine, Coeur couldn't tell. When the beam finally abated, the *Star Strider* drifted on for a few more seconds until a furious barrage of secondary explosions erased her from the stars in a funeral pyre of white light.

"You did it, Captain!" Deep Six said, jubilant.

"No, Sixer, we did it." She said unaware of how cliché she had sounded. "By Gaia, if we make it back to Aubaine, I'm going to put all of you up for as many commendations as I can think of!"

Across the comm channel, there were was a chorus of relieved voices, including Newton's flat voder. She even heard Crowbar indulge in a good old-fashioned *Yeeee-Haw!* And why not? They deserved it.

Coeur refused the urge to whoop and yell. The other ship was dead and they were still alive. Despite odds stacked against them, they had won the day.

It felt good to be alive. The taste of victory was honeyed ambrosia on their lips. They had all gone to the edge together and survived. In such fires were the crews of legend made.

Pride suffused Coeur's being almost to the bursting point. In that moment she loved each and every one with a burning affection that only a commander could know for their ship and their crew.

Breathing in deep she held it for a moment before slowly exhaling it out. Then she heard Raven's voice come over the comm.

"Captain?" the young woman's voiced trembled. It sounded like she was barely keeping control of herself. Something resonated with Coeur that they weren't tears of joy being held at bay.

Red Sun's adulation stopped short.

"Raven?"

"I...I found the identity of the *Star Strider*," she said, her voice catching.

"Oh God, Coeur, she was the *Orion*."

The name sent cold daggers straight into Coeur's heart. She clamped her eyes shut, seeing the name clearly emblazoned in her mind, and wondering if it would ever go away again.

RCS *Orion*.

"She was one of ours."

Chapter 9

On the outer rim of the Spencer system, *Lord Ryan* precipitated neatly out of Jump Space and immediately went dark. Engaging its various forms of stealth, the swept-back prow angled in-system and set a least-time course for the system's secondary gas giant, Zakuui.

Analogous to the Sol system's Saturn, the large blue-grey ball of gas contained less than thirty percent the mass of its larger brother, Onjerr, and only about twenty percent of its gravitational pull. A glittering ring of rock and ice crystals crowned its equator made up of not only of spumes of it's wispy mass, but also the remains of several terrestrial masses that had dared cross the Roche limit and were torn to pieces.

Given its position close to the system's outer edge, and its lower orbit-to-Jump time to clear its gravity well, it was perfect for *Lord Ryan's* purposes. Admittedly, it had was also an ideal place for other pirates, raiders or those wishing to pass quietly through the system, which was why a pair of powerful System Defense Boats prowled the space around it.

But SDB's were of no concern to *Lord Ryan*. One of the first shakedown cruises with its new retrofitted abilities had been to buzz the very sentinels that stood guard around Zakuii. The yacht had passed within a few hundred kilometers of the *Ancalagon*, and was never challenged to halt and identify. Their ruse was complete and perfect.

So the yacht flew in towards the jewel-like rings, completely unconcerned that any watchful eyes could possibly spot them. As arrogant as that sentiment might seem from an operational standpoint, it had the virtue of also being absolutely true.

* * *

"Ah, do come in Mr. Delpero."

Mr. Halafast made a sweeping gesture of welcome to his guest and motioned towards a luxurious seat at the conference table. Zorn flowed into the room behind him, having traded her flowing gown for demure business attire.

"Please, call me August." Delpero said, returning his host's welcome with a slight nod of his head. The prison convict was long gone. The man that settled purposefully into the chair was clean-shaven, sleek and looked every bit the confident corporate tycoon. The bandages had long disappeared and color had returned to his sallow cheeks. Even the prison coveralls had been replaced by an immaculate, if not slightly ostentatious, power suit.

It had been Mr. Kim's idea to seat Delpero at the head of the table, where he most likely would have presided when he was *Lord Ryan's* master and commander.

"We have a variety of refreshments available," Mr. Kim said nodding towards the crystal decanters and color carafes at the center of the table. "The Apollonian whiskey is excellent."

"I'll get it," Zorn said, standing and letting her hand run up his arm and rest for second on his shoulder. Delpero allowed himself a slight trailing glance, but did not fully take his attention from the two polished men that requested his company.

Once drinks had been filled and minor pleasantries exchanged it was Mr. Halafast that started the business at hand.

"It cannot be overstated enough, how much we appreciate your patience during this time, August," he said, trying on for size the informal address. "I can imagine that these past few weeks have been frustrating to say the least."

August was aware that both men were looking for a reaction to that statement. He gave them one.

"Not really," he said, non-chalant as ever. "I've always found space travel rather tedious. Besides," He glanced over to Zorn, "There's been quite enough to fill my attention."

Mr. Kim leaned into the table and folded his hands. "Come now, August," he said somewhat playfully, "We know that you're a man that likes to be in control, one who sets the helm of his own ship, so's to speak." He tilted his head. "That quality is one of the very reasons we wished to have you here in the first place – you're a leader."

August took a sip of his whiskey and put his hands up in mock placation. "All right, at the risk of being discourteous to my new hosts, yes, it has had its share of challenges."

Of course *challenges* in the corporate world could translate to anything from *trivial issues not worth worrying about* to *Oh my God, sell the stock as fast as you can and get out*.

"Again we thank you for your continued patience," Mr. Halafast said. "We want you to know that the secrecy, which is, unfortunately, a necessity at this time, is as much for your protection as ours. I trust that this particular challenge has not been too obstinate to overcome?"

"Challenges are merely opportunities for improvement," Delpero said the very mold of a Chief Executive Officer. "This *particular* challenge has proven quite virulent."

"We thought as much," Mr. Kim said. "Which is why we wished to speak to you now. As you may or may not know, we have just emerged from Jump." August nodded that he did. Even if he hadn't been privy to sensor data, he definitely knew what it felt like when *Lord Ryan* transitioned from Jump Space.

"Our precipitation point," Mr. Kim continued, "is the Spencer system."

If Delpero knew where the conversation was headed, he gave no sign of it. He regarded them neutrally.

"Your cooperation so far has been commendable," Mr. Halafast said. "But let us call a spade a spade, up until now you haven't much of a choice."

"Are you implying that I'm to be given a choice now?"

Mr. Kim mentally nodded to himself. Delpero had a sharp mind, certainly when it came business dealings. He could also sense that someone wanted something of him almost precognitively.

"Yes, as a matter of fact," Mr. Halafast continued. "Our superiors have invested a great deal in your welfare, and as such, they would like to see a certain amount of reciprocity on your part. A demonstration, if you will, of your willingness to work with us."

"I see," August said. "Your associates are looking for a return on their investment, is that what I'm to understand?"

"Precisely," Mr. Kim interjected.

"You realize, of course, that I still don't know who you represent." Delpero said. "You'll forgive me if I'm somewhat reticent to exercise any authority on behalf of an unknown party, even though I'm in your debt for my freedom."

"That is completely understandable, and we would expect no less from someone of your singular position and stature." Mr. Halafast said in smooth response. "Those that we represent are looking for individuals of initiative and intelligence, not unthinking robots who take everything at face value."

"The fact remains, that you want me to grant you something without truly knowing to whom it's being granted." He returned, aware of how the blonde man was side-stepping the issue. "What you're asking for is a leap of faith."

"And a blind leap at that," Mr. Kim said, his dark eyes attentive but not piercing. "Though it could be argued that any leap of faith is made blindly." He waited a beat.

"The point," he continued, "is that you have a choice to make. It is a gamble either way, but you will need to carefully weigh the odds before you decide. There will be no grey area or half-measures beyond that point."

August took in a deep breath, and sipped at his whiskey whose rich taste seemed diluted and bitter.

"Very well, what would you have of me?"

The two men exchanged glances and then turned back to him.

"We understand that Spencer was something of secondary headquarters for Novastar, was it not?" Mr. Halafast asked.

"Yes, as a matter of fact it was. The Spencer branch dealt with business matters in the trailing part of the Coalition. We set up shop shortly after she was pacified," Delpero said matter-of-factly. "It, along with all of its assets were frozen, and summarily ransacked by the government after I was incarcerated." A slight flush reached his cheeks, though he kept his voice level. It was not every multi-billionaire that could speak on the dismemberment of his empire without flying into frenzy.

"We don't believe that all of the assets were raided," Mr. Kim said looking at him very directly. "Notably, we believe your personal vault may still be intact, along with its, shall we say, 'political capital'".

Delpero didn't move or twitch. He sat there very still. Mr. Halafast was of the mind that the ex-businessman had deduced what they were after at the first mention of the Spencer system. It had been a deliberate plant, a meaningful tell, to see what his response might be. Perhaps Delpero had thought that as well.

"It has long been rumored that you maintained a personal treasury of political secrets," Mr. Halafast said. "There are several prominent political figures that are said to be in power today because of your direct intervention. It is also believed that many who might have come to power were nipped in the bud for the same reason. There is validity to these rumors, I take?"

"Big business often strays into the political arenas," Delpero said, his face a placid mask, "particularly when a corporation deals heavily in government contracts."

From Delpero's seat at the table, he was inwardly sweating bullets. He had spent half a lifetime building on what his father had started, going back to Dawn League. Even though the government had restructured itself, many of the same dynasties of power, and in some case the same individuals were still in power. The Vault had been a source of continued persuasion over

many political fronts to ensure that Novastar could quietly hedge out the competition for the juicier government projects. If a particular politician proved to be troublesome, chances were that somewhere in the Vault was a skeleton in the closet that could be used to nudge them in the right direction.

Once the word got out that Dietrich Delpero had dirt on many prominent heads of state, its very existence became a deterrent. Often times, there was no need to strong-arm officials, when they naturally found it in their own best interest to align themselves to the Delpero way of thinking.

August had inherited these secrets along with the family fortune and studiously added to it since. For years he paid good money to ensure that every scandal that was swept under the rug, every black-mail worthy piece of video capture, or falsified financial records, made its way into his possession.

It had always been too risky to keep those near his person for a variety of reasons, so he had opted instead to tuck them away into a quiet corner on Spencer. The planet had always been a fall back area, a safe haven in case things on Aubaine got too hot. That was one of the reasons his personal transport had been outfitted with Jump-4 engines, so that he could make it to safety in just two Jumps. Apparently that idea had also crossed the minds of his hosts, for that was what they had done. They had probably even taken the circumspect route through Lucifer for that matter. Unfortunately, the Vault's usefulness was limited to his physical availability. He had always believed that any potentially sticky situation would have sufficient lead-time for him to escape. His capture and arrest in the Ra system, however, had been swift and complete.

Lord Ryan had been taken away from him, and with it any access he might have had to the Vault. Once word had spread of his dealings in conspiracy to commit murder and treason, nevermind that it was aimed at a bunch of manipulative *bananaheads*, many of his political contacts went to ground, secure in the knowledge that they were out of the Vault's long arm. And they were right – he was the only one that knew its true location and the security protocols to gain entrance to it.

That this unknown group had knowledge of the existence of the Vault didn't surprise him. Kim and Halafast were obviously well-informed on such matters, but how did they know it was on Spencer? Enormous pains had been taken to conceal its location from just about every kind of sensor or detection system available. He had even concocted a series of false leads centered around Aurora to draw attention away from Spencer.

Then it hit him. *Ah, they may have deduced that the Vault is somewhere on Spencer, but they don't know where. That's what they want of me.*

"So, this Vault of yours exists, then?" Mr. Halafast said.

"That's correct" August said, it now becoming clearer what his role was in these strange dealings.

"It is located on Spencer?"

"It is, though I would wager that you knew that already."

Mr. Kim leaned in ever more towards August and met his gaze. "What we are asking is that you lead us to the Vault, and add its political capital to our own."

August returned his gaze steadily, but flicked over to Halafast as he spoke. "Let me see if I understand this correctly. You broke me out of a maximum security prison, whisked me away from under the watchful eyes of the RCN, and brought me here so that I could hand over my list of dirty little secrets?"

"In a manner of speaking, yes." Mr. Halafast said, trying to keep the conversation from going awry. "We believe that the Vault will help affect a... smoother transition once certain changes take place. The information you've gathered together will help shape the future, there is no doubt. Though, I feel I must point out that our superiors' interest in you is not merely limited to this specific item that you bring to the table. There will definitely be a place set aside for you in the new order."

"No doubt," August said dryly, ignoring the dangled carrot Halafast was trotting out before him. "And if I refuse? What then, the air lock?"

Mr. Halafast's sculpted eyebrows went up and Mr. Kim straightened himself in his seat. They looked to each to see which one would field this question. It was Mr. Kim.

"We're not barbarians, August. The files you have in the Vault are important to us, yes, but as Mr. Halafast said, our interest level goes well beyond this particular point. We *want* you onboard with us, and forceful coercion is decidedly not the way for that to happen."

"You are a connoisseur of technology," Mr. Halafast chimed in. He swept his hand around encompassing *Lord Ryan*. "You only need to take a look at this ship to know that for the truth it is. More to the point, you know the business of technology in a way that few others do. You know what upcoming contracts are likely to yield the best results, how to appropriate funds to projects that will push the tech-base forward, and perhaps greatest of all, instincts for the industry."

"And, up until Novastar was halted, it was continually growing by leaps and bounds." Mr. Kim said.

"Yes, we were continually turning a profit when other pretenders to the throne like Kruytercorp and Industrial Solutions were struggling to stay afloat." There was no small amount of pride in his voice as he said that, but contained a regretful edge. "But you haven't answered my question. I need to be absolutely clear on this point. What can I expect if I categorically refuse to cooperate?"

"Disappointment," Mr. Kim admitted. "If we can't see eye-to-eye on this matter, then our business will be largely concluded. We will let you off on Spencer with a brand new identity, a charter ticket to whatever destination you would like, and sufficient funds for you to build a new life. You will, unfortunately, still be a fugitive of the law."

"We would hope that our willingness to deliver you from prison is, at least, a baseline show of our good faith." Mr. Halafast said. "Our superiors felt that any material risks we might have incurred were ultimately worth it to for even a marginal chance that you would join our cause."

"A cause, I might point out, that I still know nothing about." August said firmly.

"Easily fixed, once you show us to the Vault." Mr. Kim said. "If you agree to help us, we are cleared to disclose every facet of our goals and objectives, which will put you more in the know than some who have been onboard with our group for sometime."

Vega Zorn, who had up to this time been silent, placed her hand softly on top of Delpero's. "Think of the Vault as the price of admission, August." she said, her voice silky smooth in his ears.

"Sure, you might be able to make a life for yourself on the run, I know I certainly did." She looked down at the table then raised her pale grey eyes to meet his. "But that's not what you want, I know it isn't. Prison might actually be better for you than what you will find at the end of *that* road." Her hand began to stroke his.

"It's a gamble, that's for sure, but what in life isn't? The rewards, August, the *rewards* are all that you could imagine, and more. You could live like a king, and truly have a hand in shaping the future in your own image." She shook her head.

"That's about the best return on investment you can get."

They were just waiting around for him to finally do what they must've known he wanted to. August Delpero was a man born to succeed. So was his father, and his father before him all the way back to the time in the Third Imperium when his family had enjoyed the privileges of nobility. Back then, his family's drive to succeed was fueled by the need to improve their station. In modern times, that need to imprint themselves on the world had changed little.

"Okay, I'll give you the Vault and everything in it, on one condition."

Both men across the table inclined their heads for him to continue.

"There are a few specific individuals that conveniently forgot about me when I needed them, some I even helped put in power in the first place." August's mask was gone now as the soul-wrenching pain of his imprisonment surged up. Fire was in his eyes.

"I want to see them *burn*."

"Done." Mr. Halafast extended his hand to shake on it. As August took his firm grip and then turned to Mr. Kim to do the same, a feeling of satisfaction washed over him. A wicked smile came over his lips.

Everything I was...and more!

* * *

During his two week stay aboard *Lord Ryan*, August's movements had been restricted to the main lounge, the conference room and his adjacent stateroom. It was strongly suggested to him that he should stay in those areas, and had taken the hint and kept to the approved areas.

While it was an annoyance not to have the run of the ship as he would have in previous times, August had never had much reason to leave those areas in the first place. In fact, he had gone to great lengths to make sure he had everything he needed around him so he wouldn't *have* to leave.

He was pleased also to see that they had kept his stateroom more or less intact. Several of his personal accoutrements had disappeared when the ship was put on the auction block, but by and large, it was the same room. The only thing truly missing was Henri his personal steward. Finding someone of that caliber and discretion was rare, indeed. August toyed with the idea of trying to find his old valet when all this...whatever it was blew over, and have him continue in his old capacity.

Yet there was that splinter in his mind about what he was about to do. Really, the Vault was his only real bargaining chip and he was about to hand it over. All he had was the word of two unknown men that he would be included in further activities which didn't involve chewing on hard vacuum. He'd seen the look of men like Halafast and Kim before, and while their manners were impeccable, he could sense the blade draped in silk that lay beneath their civil demeanor.

Vega Zorn had also given him assurances, but he knew all too well that she could be ruthless in her dealings. Even if wasn't playing the part at the moment, he had remind himself that she was a space pirate. Her closeness during this voyage had helped, as it was surely meant to.

Certainly no complaints in that department, he mused.

The door to his stateroom whizzed open just then and Zorn's tall form occupied it.

"Well speak of the devil and she will appear," August said as Zorn dropped a bundle of cloth on the bed.

"Thinking about me, were you?" She came to stand in front of him. He took both of her hands in his.

"You're not exactly easy to forget, are you?"

She nearly purred, "Hmm...that's true."

He began to pull her close, but she stopped him short with a coy smile. "Now, now, August, there'll be plenty of time for that later. Right now we have work to do."

"Oh?"

"We're due in the launch bay in fifteen minutes, and you need to get changed into some civvies," she nodded towards the bundle on the bed. "In a suit you do kinda stand out."

He stood up and gave her quick peck on the cheek. "Were you always this playful, or did I just miss it completely?"

"Yes," she said with an impish gleam in her eye.

"Well I suppose we shouldn't keep our hosts waiting, eh?" He said, unrolling the bundle to reveal a set of worn fatigues that any seasoned space hand might wear.

"Yes, that's probably wise."

* * *

The personal launch that occupied the bay sat next to a battered, but sturdy-looking cutter. There was quite a difference between the two small craft. Whereas the launch was fairly unremarkable in its conformity to the 'bullet' hull design, it did, however look brand new with its brilliant white paint job and chromed landing struts. Emblazoned on the side of the launch was a snazzy red logo that read "OmniCorp" The 'O' in title formed a stylized planet with land masses that didn't seek to represent, and thereby exclude, any one world. Below the main logo was the tagline, "Making a Difference – Everyday."

Having spent a good portion of his career dealing with brand marketing, What he saw was eye-catching, if not completely vague. It was also a company he had never heard of, and at his height he was meticulous about gathering information on other rival corporations. If his hosts maintained a front company this organized, it was just another way to make him realize how prepared these people were. Oddly enough, he didn't know if he should take comfort in that fact or not.

Mr. Kim appeared at the hatchway, resplendent as always in his business suit and waved them forward.

"Greetings," he said warmly. "Are we ready for the trip?"

Dressed in his causal spacer's attire and ball cap, August seemed shabby next to the professional perfection of the man next to him.

"Certainly," he said, turning to Zorn. "Shall we?"

"Let's," she said, taking his arm.

The inside of the launch proved to be quite different from the outside. From the exterior he might have expected a modest but comfortable meeting area somewhat akin to first-class accommodations on a commuter craft, but the inside was richly decorated to match *Lord Ryan's* interior. A red-velvet curtain separated the common area from the cockpit, but through a gap, August caught sight of the pilot's area. It was equipped with some seriously advanced flight controls and ECM for a craft this size.

The three settled into their seats and stowed their minimal gear. A green light bead lit up to alert the passengers the craft was ready to disembark. Mr. Kim gave the all's clear signal and the craft lifted off, oriented itself and left *Lord Ryan's* launch bay. The skylight at the top of the cabin now showed the clear, twinkling stars.

"Are you going with us to the Vault?" August put as casually as he could to Mr. Kim. "I'd hate to think that I gave up wearing my suit when you get to keep *yours*." He put in the right amount of humor into his words and saw Mr. Kim smile.

"No, I'm afraid not. I'm just along for the ride. There are some other points of business that need to be addressed planetside." His smile widened. "It's just a happy coincidence that we can take care of both items at the same time."

August nodded and kept his smile firmly affixed to his face. He didn't believe for a nanosecond that it was coincidence, but at least he wasn't going to be tagging along to the Vault. It was still an annoyance that he wasn't able to share the ride with Zorn alone. Kim's presence in the launch put a limiting factor on the situation, that would make sure things stayed strictly business. August could try to engage him in small talk, but it would ultimately profit him nothing. Mr. Kim was far too guarded and precise to let anything slip that way.

"How long is our trip?"

"*Lord Ryan* was able to cut some of it off for us," Mr. Kim said, "but it looks like it will still be at least seventeen hours before we're down."

Considering the craft they were in, and the distance from Zakuui, that wasn't bad, but seventeen hours was still a long time to pass the time in stiff formality. A thought occurred to him.

Maybe there's a way to get him to reveal something of his character after all. We certainly have time to kill.

"So tell me Mr. Kim," he said fishing into his pocket and producing a deck of playing cards. "Care for a game of poker?"

* * *

The launch arrived at a private landing field in the early morning local time. They had only been briefly challenged by the port authority on their approach, which dutifully logged the presence of *Omni-12*, a perfectly legitimate transport making a run to one of their dirtside holdings.

Even with a several hour nap, August felt somewhat fatigued and out of sorts as the bright morning light assaulted his eyes. It felt like he had already endured more than a day's activities, but that didn't synch with the world around him who was just waking up. He rubbed his eyes and tried to shake off the disorientation of shiplag.

Zorn and Kim, did not seem the least bit affected by their trip, but both of them were much more experienced as spacers than he was. At least, he knew Zorn was, Kim...well, he was still a mystery.

Their poker match had been friendly enough, but it only served to show August that Mr. Kim was very adept at concealing his emotions. No matter if he held the winning hand or if he

was attempting to bluff, his sculpted Asian features had held that same look of calm, professional courtesy that held no tells or insights whatsoever.

It didn't help August to understand the man any better, because he had only revealed that he didn't reveal anything. He filed that away none-the-less and wondered if his companion Mr. Halafast would have reacted the same way.

An expensive looking limo was waiting to whisk the man in question away to his destination. Mr. Kim turned towards them on the tarmac as the uniformed driver opened his door for him.

"Feel free to make use of any of the facilities here. They are entirely at your disposal."

"Thank you." August returned.

"The business here will take me at least three days. I trust that will be sufficient time for the transfer?"

"More than adequate, yes"

"Excellent," he said smoothing the lines of his suit. "Good luck. I'll see you soon." With that he disappeared into the limo, leaving the two to their own devices.

"All right, well they ain't paying us by the hour, so let's get a move on." August wondered if Zorn seemed like her old self when she said that. Certainly her worn flight jacket and loose pants tucked into combat boots help complete the look.

"Lead the way."

Zorn led him across the tarmac towards a hangar bay that was similarly arrayed with the OmniCorp logo in three meter letters. The side door opened easily to reveal the cavernous inside of the hangar. Sitting on the deck were three enclosed air rafts, two painted in the corporate style and one in one a demure grey that could have looked ordinary on just about any world with contra-gravity. Behind the two, loomed a much larger pinnace that gave the impression of a white eagle in flight.

August recognized the design. Novastar had at one time built a number of them as support craft. They might not be heavy-duty military units, but they were built on the same basic frame and could pull almost as much performance. He also happened to know the amount of credits it took to buy and maintain it, which was considerable.

"How far do we need to go?" Zorn said pointing the amassed vehicles. "It might affect which ride we need to take."

"I'm not sure where we are. Can you show me on a map?"

"Sure."

She produced a data display and brought up a map of the area. A flashing circle indicated their current location, which was only about fifty kilometers southwest of the capitol.

"So where are we going?"

August took the display from her and punched in a few commands. The view of the map scrolled towards a position on the north side of the capitol. The circle outlined a portion of a largely deserted industrial park.

"Here."

"Hmmm...it's not as far out as I thought. Best we take the unmarked then. Looks like that can be a rough neighborhood." She glanced over at him. "Not exactly a tourist spot, is it?"

"That's rather the point."

"Point taken. Climb in."

Zorn slid easily into the pilot's seat and motioned for him to take the co-pilot's station. In moments, the plain-jane air raft was headed skyward and towards an unsavory area.

* * *

Twenty minutes later, the air raft lowered itself smoothly down to street level, weaving its way towards the warehouse that August indicated on the map.

A few tricky turns down some trash-strewn alleys landed them at their destination. No one was in sight. For the most part, people didn't come to this area unless they had to, which is why August had chosen it for his nest egg in the first place.

The buildings hadn't been condemned, exactly, so much as put out to pasture. A few payments through a third party had made sure that that would remain the case for several years to come. Truth be told, August had feared coming to this place to find it bulldozed into a parking lot, despite the good government he'd paid for to ensure its safety.

"Real nice set up you got here," Zorn said checking the gauss pistol she wore at her hip. "Very picturesque."

"Yes, well, you should see it at night. The view is...every bit as pathetic and dismal as it is during the day. You can't see as much of the rust spots though."

She chuckled and then pointed towards the building. "Well, this is your show."

At that, August led her towards a side entrance farther down the alley that was as grime-covered and dilapidated as the rest of the building. August approached the door and pressed his right hand to a large spot of rust on the door frame.

There came a series of metallic clicks, and the door swung easily open without the ear-splitting squeak she would have expected. He flashed her that confident smile of his and stepped in. As she passed the entrance, she made note of the doors locking mechanism which looked much newer and advanced than it would have appeared from the outside.

The interior of the building, however, looked as one would expect. The expansive ferrocrete floor was pitted and grease-smeared. The rusting corpses of what had been loading pulleys hung in the air from steel girders that had fared no better. Aside from that, the building was completely empty with the sunlight filtering in through a blizzard of dust motes.

It even *smelled* abandoned with that dirty, musty odor of a place that didn't see human contact all that often. August continued on with a momentary glance around to make sure all was as it should be.

"This way," he said pointing towards the back wall. The two of them had emerged into the middle section of the building, but it was still a jaunt of more than two hundred meters that they covered before August directed her towards a closed off section whose door was stenciled "Storage" in fading white letters.

Talk about truth in advertising, Zorn quirked a half-smile.

The contents of that particular storage area had been known to move governments in the past and, fates willing, would do so again. Zorn studied her companion, but his poker face was still in place, blocking off any emotional reads she might seek. She couldn't blame for being a little closed off considering the situation, even though there were flashes of his usually charming self that streamed like the sun through the clouds.

August walked purposefully up to the door and placed his hand on the "S". The color of the letters changed from white to red.

"Open."

From somewhere behind the door there was acknowledgment beep and the heavy door slid to the side, revealing the room beyond.

Zorn had half-expected a snazzy computer setup to fold out of the wall, complete with flashing lights and indication monitors. The room beyond fell well-short of expectation as it, too, was completely empty.

"This is all very well and good, but I trust we will get there sometime *this* year?" she said tartly.

That impish smile returned, "Just wait, the best is yet to come."

Zorn crossed her arms and threw back her head in mock consternation; August moved to the far corner and put his thumb to a grease spot. He stood statue straight in that pose as a beam of blue light extended from a screw head on the wall and swept over one of his eyes, then the other.

"Identification confirmed," a female voice said from an unknown source. August stepped back as the sections of the wall folded out next to where he'd been standing. The dingy metal plates opened up like a pair of shutters to reveal sharp shiny lines and flat panel monitors that looked right off the production floor.

Well, that's more like it, Zorn admitted, the holoivid images in her mind falling well short of the advanced security station she saw before her. The monitors all lit up in glowing green text and August studied them for a few seconds.

"Pretty slick," Zorn said unfolding her hands to rest them on her hips, "worthy of Ben Bosley himself."

August turned from the station. "Don't tell me you're a fan."

"It has its merits, but they did sorta lose me at *Time and Time Again*."

"Yeah, me too." Delpero said turning back to study the various screens and read-outs. "Good. It looks as though the Vault's remained intact. No one has been here since I was here last. I'm cracking it open."

At the center of the station, a panel slid back to reveal an old-fashioned keypad with silver buttons. August keyed in a short combination and stepped away from the station.

"Passcode accepted," the same female voice said.

The middle of the floor slid back and a greenish-white light washed the interior of the darkly-lit room. A metal staircase led down into the lower chamber. August motioned Zorn forward as he descended the stairs down.

"Watch your step."

Zorn followed him down and had to stop herself from gasping as she looked around. The chamber was essentially a long hallway that must have run at least fifty meters long from end-to-end. Metal shelving filled the area on both sides of a narrow walkway that were filled to the brim with file cabinets, data storage media, and clearly displayed filing markers. Delpero stood looking at it with a sort of amusement dancing in his eyes. She might have heard about the Vault, but he somehow doubted that she guessed it was *this* extensive. He let her widened eyes sweep around the room for a few priceless seconds, before she realized what he was doing.

"It's all here," he said proudly, like a parent showing off a prized child, "From the wild school antics of Lon Maggart's daughters, to Minister Naruku's five mistresses, down to that moving violation that Tirese Serene never paid on Aurora." He took a few steps through the room and took it all in.

"Bribes, secrets and skullduggery," he said coming to a main computer terminal which he patted lightly, "everything a growing insurrection needs."

That comment brought her out of her temporarily awed-state, her eyes locking onto to him.

"What are you talking about?"

"Oh come now, Zorn, you know *exactly* what I'm talking about." He said, gauging her reaction. "I know I may not be a master-spy like our mutual friend, BB, but I have been known to pick up a thing or two along the way."

Zorn noticed that Delpero's hand hovered dangerously near the computer control panel. She had believed that it was merely a library index, but now she wondered. He'd gone to great lengths to conceal the location of this place, might that include deadly security measures if the Vault itself were compromised, measures that might be just a push of a button away?

"Don't do anything stupid, Delpero." She said fixing a fearless, grey-eyed stare in his direction.

"Don't patronize me, Zorn," Delpero said, returning her stare unflinching, "Your friend, Mr. Halafast, said that there would be a place for me in the new order. Now it's one thing to try to make reforms to system that doesn't work, but it's quite another to have a 'new order.' You can't have a *new* order unless the *old* one goes away."

"That was a plant in the conversation," Zorn fired back, "those two don't say anything that isn't deliberate."

"Yes, well, I recognize sharks when I see them," he said sourly. "So am I wrong? You said yourself that they plan to make sweeping changes to the government. From the hardware I've seen that they have working for them, and their need to 'ease the transition' with all this," he nodded towards the files, "then I can only arrive at one conclusion."

"And what's that?" she could feel her patience wearing thin.

"Revolution."

Her hands went to her hips, which put her right hand only a short space from her gauss pistol.

"That's a very dangerous conclusion, August," she said with steel in her voice, "particularly for someone that has yet to sign on the dotted line."

"Ah, but sign with *whom*?"

"You know I can't tell you that. At least not yet."

"Can't or won't?"

"Same difference," she said sternly, "Now I would appreciate it if you would step away from that panel."

"In a moment," he said. "So am I wrong? Is what you plan a *coup d'etat* of the Coalition government?"

"In a manner of speaking,"

"Talk straight, Zorn."

"Okay, fine," she said with a frown, "I shouldn't tell you, but since you're intent on making an ass of yourself, then fine. Yes, we are planning a move against the government, as you so brilliantly surmised. But, it's not to sweep the RC away completely, all we're looking for is a change in management." She said acidly. "These files, which you've seen fit to hoard all these years, will actually be used to make sure everyone falls in line. So if it means anything to you, the contents of this vault will actually wind up *saving* lives."

"So it's to be an armed coup is it?" Delpero's eyes became hooded. "My God, Zorn - that would make us both traitors, and bloody-handed ones at that!"

"We're already traitors, August," she said her voice flaying into him, "I should be dead before a firing squad, and *you*, my friend, should never see the outside of a prison cell, taste a steak, or know the company of a woman ever *again*."

"Oh yes, I'm glad for your recent attentions," he said with a harsh smile, "but I know they were only meant to maneuver me into agreeing with this counter-movement of yours. Don't think for a moment you have me fooled. You're playing me."

His words struck her as though it were a physical blow, and genuine surprise lit her face. The freckled skin of her faced reddened noticeably.

"Is *that* what you think I'm doing?" she seemed wounded. "Is that...what I mean to you?"

"Am I wrong?"

"Yes, you're wrong!" A fresh wave of anger came to the forefront. "I was the one who convinced the higher-ups to bust you out. I was the one that told them you would be a perfect team player for what's to come. You owe your freedom to *me*. And I did it because I knew you had been chewed up and spit out by the same set of governmental gears that cashiered me."

He started to say something, but she forestalled it with a wave of her hand.

"No, you listen to me. Getting you out was my way of striking back at the system that would have killed me, and make no mistake it *would* have, while restoring a man that I respect and care about back to power. I was helping you. I thought that would have been enough for you, but no – you're apparently such a blind, paranoid control-freak that you can't see a good deal if it came along and smacked you upside your fool head!"

She retreated into silence, adrenaline still thumping in her veins, her breathing came in sharp bouts. Delpero regarded her for a few moments and slowly stepped away from the computer panel with hands out in placation.

"Okay, I'm sorry. I hope you understand I had to be sure."

She cast a hard stare at him and he shrugged.

"You are, after all, the one who told me you'd gauss your own grandmother for a megacredit voucher," he said dryly.

"I was kidding."

"Perhaps, but the information I have accumulated here is worth much more than a megacredit, Zorn. It's *priceless*. I shudder to think what it could do if the wrong people got their hands on it."

"That's pretty noble sounding of you."

"Yeah, well it runs in the family." The mood lightened at his words, but then he frowned. "Seriously, though, both us know information is power, and this information *is* power, I've seen to that myself. I know I may have a lot of Hiver blood on my hands after that business with the Folgorex, some of them were even here on Spencer, but killing banana-heads is one thing. Loss of human life, however, is another thing entirely."

"Yes it is," Zorn said, calmer now, "and I meant it when I said that these files could wind up saving thousands, maybe millions of lives. Let's face it, no revolution is truly bloodless, but

those running this operation want any loss of life, any human losses, to be kept to an absolute minimum. By opening this vault, you've allowed them do just that in a way that may not have been otherwise possible."

"That's something at least," Delpero said. "I suppose that no government that ever came to power from the ashes of an existing one did so without breaking some of those proverbial eggs you keep hearing about."

"From time to time the tree of liberty must be watered with the blood of patriots," Zorn said gravely.

"That's a dismal thought, we're did that sentiment originate?"

"Terra," Zorn said as Delpero wriggled his nose. "It's from the time when...nevermind." Zorn said, knowing that some part of Delpero wouldn't appreciate the aptness of the phrase anyway.

"I will say this," Delpero said moving forward and taking Zorn's hand in his own. The grasp between them was now awkward, bereft of feeling. "I take it as a personal favor that you didn't put a gauss dart in my head just then, or when I opened the Vault for that matter."

"The day is young," she said with a ghost of smile, her hand squeezing his just a little, showing a little renewed promise. "Now if we're finished with all the histrionics here, can we get on with it?"

Delpero nodded a little sheepishly.

"Good, then let's get to work."

* * *

The limo breezed through the security checkpoint with no problem, courtesy of the diplomatic markings that had been added en route from the landing station. The uniformed guard had given a cursory glance at the obviously important delegate riding in the back seat and waved them through.

All around the base, troops jogged in formation and ran through practice drills on the parade ground. Everything bore the snap and polish of professional military personnel right down to the smartly cracking banners that adorned the front of the administration building.

The limo came to a halt in front of the stone steps, and the driver surveyed the area before opening the door. The man known as Mr. Kim emerged, gave the crisp nod that said, "thank you", and started up the stairs to the columned façade.

Brigade Sergeant Major Boris Seitzmann, a burly man in military BDU's and a crew cut stood waiting for him. As the sharp-dressed man ascended the steps, he resisted the urge to salute. Not only was it bad form to salute in the open while on base in case sniper's lurked nearby, it would have been an open admission of what the man in front of him truly was.

He tried to picture the man in the uniform of a Commander, but the image fell flat. It was hard to imagine the man in anything but the tailored suite he wore that seemed to be almost an extension of his personality. Besides, his uniform would have been a bit removed from the ones Seitzmann was used to dealing with anyway.

"Greetings, Sergeant," the man said warmly, extending his hand. Seitzmann took it firmly.

"Greetings, sir. We can talk in private through here."

Seitzmann opened the door and the two of them convened in the briefing room next to the Brigade Sergeant's office.

"Can I get you anything?" Seitzmann said as Mr. Kim sat in his chair and crossed his legs.

"Some coffee would be divine, provided you have any that's fresh."

"Long flight in?"

"In more than one way," Mr. Kim mused with a smile.

Seitzmann poured a generous amount into a mug and added the faintest bit of salt to it, the way Mr. Kim preferred.

Mr. Kim sipped the black liquid and nodded his assent at the taste. Seitzmann settled in behind his desk and waited a polite few seconds for Mr. Kim to take a few sips of his java before speaking.

"I take it you are here to discharge us at last?"

Mr. Kim sat his mug down and folded his hands in his lap.

"That's correct, and very close to original time schedule. I trust that all units are combat ready and ready for immediate deployment?"

"Oh yes, sir. All of them are shipshape and ready, I might even say *eager* to get underway."

"They should be. It was you that was responsible for their training, therefore I can only imagine that their Sergeant was able to impart a certain amount of *esprit de corps*, yes?"

"As much as I could, yes sir." Seitzmann said joining Mr. Kim in a satisfied smile. "Each of them has the necessary world view needed for our operation."

"Excellent. I have a number of transports waiting in orbit that should be landing presently. I would like to see all equipment and personnel loaded and ready for departure within seventy-two hours. This is sufficient, yes?"

Even for the speed and efficiency that he had drilled into his troops, making that kind of deadline would be very tight. There was, however, no way Seitzmann was about to make an admission like that to the man in front of him.

"Yes, sir. More than sufficient."

"And the other details for this place, what of them?"

"Everything's in place. We've got the key areas covered. Of course we can never be sure what an idealistic lunatic fringe may try to do to stop it, but I believe that that too can be easily handled."

"I'm glad to hear it. I want this operation to go as smoothly as possible. No heroes, no martyrs, just a clean shift in command."

"It shouldn't be a problem, sir. We've taken careful steps to ensure that things run by the clock."

"Very good," Mr. Kim looked at the expensive aviator watch on his wrist. "If things go well, then I'll be able to forward you some materials in the next twenty-four hours to give the process a bit more bandwidth."

"Yes?"

"Just a little extra incentive to give the questionable elements reason to comply. I'll include an executive summary of the relevant parts for your convenience."

"That's very kind of you, sir."

"I do what I can."

Mr. Kim flashed that tight smile and took another long draught from his coffee mug, setting it down with finality.

"Well then, I had better get going," he ran a hand over his lapels and snapped his jacket sharply into place as he stood to leave. "I'll be coordinating with the transports, as well as taking care of all the other mundane details that seem to crop up *ad infinitum*."

"Good luck, sir." Seitzmann said, standing and saluted smartly. "I'll see you starside."

"Good day, Sergeant," Mr. Kim said and showed himself out.

Seitzmann continued standing after he was gone and drew his gaze out the window towards the practice field. The troops were hammering themselves slowly but surely into blades to be wielded by men like Seitzmann. The ones he would carry with him to the stars had been hand-picked for this operation, and it was with no small amount of pride that he watched them grow into a fearless fighting machine under his watchful eye.

He gazed out the window, the sunlight glaring in his eyes.

Soon, Boris old boy, soon it will be time to strike. It will be swift. It will be brutal. You've waited all this time, made so many sacrifices to come to this moment in time. Just a little longer now...

* * *

It took a dozen trips with the discreet fleet of air rafts to empty the Vault of all it contained. The empty warehouse floor became a packing ground for bringing the contents up from the lower chamber a section at a time, with several non-descript workers meticulously packaging the priceless cargo into crates and loading them with care.

The process went quickly due largely to Delpero who had already planned for the contingency of one day having to box up his treasures and set up shop elsewhere. The shelving was modular and easily collapsible. The security terminal in the Vault itself was also a card catalogue of sorts, indexing the myriad of dirty laundry in his possession. It too proved to be portable.

Delpero himself found himself at the center of the transfer in much more hands-on role than he would have guessed. In just a few hours after he had re-entered the Vault, he found himself once again in command of people. Zorn had been content to let him run the operation, as he was more familiar with what they were moving in the first place.

Sure, it might have only been herding around a bunch of nameless worker drones instead of heading up a megacorporation, but *dammit*, he was in charge of people again and that rekindled a fire that he thought long extinguished. They looked to him for answers and direction, and he was adept at giving it. It was the first sweet taste of this kind of power in too long, and he wondered how he had ever lived without it.

Zorn stood on the sidelines watching him exercise his limited authority with boyish enthusiasm, seeing the lights come back on in Delpero's soul. He wondered if she'd done this intentionally to give him a glimpse of what he might one day become. In the last few hours, she'd begun to smile at him again, quickly vanishing the harsh collision they had in the Vault. Delpero allowed himself to wonder whether or not she might still wish to share his cabin once they were once again *Lord Ryan*.

After the last data crystal and file cabinet had been scoured clean from the Vault, and August had personally quadruple checked the now empty chamber to make sure nothing was missed, the workers put the fold out security stations into the Vault and then filled the chamber with quick-drying ferrocrete. It was perhaps a needless gesture on their part, but Delpero could understand that the amount of traffic to an abandoned building in single day could possibly catch someone's attention. Better to make sure there was nothing left to find than run the risk. If Delpero had learned anything about his mysterious hosts, it was that they were nothing if not thorough.

At the landing pad, the specially marked crates were transferred to palates, wrapped in a special airtight sealant wrap and loaded onto a modular cutter that was also decorated in the now-familiar white and red OmniCorp style.

What Mr. Kim had given them a few days to accomplish, they had done in less than one, a fact that the man himself was quick to congratulate them on once he arrived back at the base.

"I must say that even I did not expect that kind of turnaround," Mr. Kim said eyeing the crates being lifted into the belly of the cutter in organized sections. "Well done, indeed."

"Thank August," Zorn said. "You should have seen him – he was like a little whirl-wind."

"It just felt good to be back in the saddle again," August said with the slightest bit of embarrassment. "I guess I was just a *touch* over enthusiastic."

"Regardless, you got the job done," Mr. Kim said, obviously pleased at the state of matters. "Good work both of you." His eyes flicked over the both of them with an almost mischievous air.

"It will be at least two more days to get things in order here. There are still some matters that require my attention, but why don't the two of you take those days off? You've earned it."

Mr. Kim turned to collect his personal effects together, including a steel briefcase. "Of course, I would ask that neither of you leave the facility here for security reasons," the mischief was very apparent now, "but I'm sure you'll find the Executive Quarters to be most...um, satisfactory."

* * *

Seitzmann knew intuitively that he would not be getting very much sleep over the next couple of days. It was inevitable, he knew too much of the operational details that others didn't to be away for very long, or allow another less-informed dutyman to take his place. It was going to be a test of even his towering discipline and endurance.

By the same token, there wasn't a whole lot for a trooper to do once they were safely in Jump, particularly not in the cattle car accommodations that would take them out of the Spencer

system. It would be hard to even do proper PT in the close quarters, and drilling while in space would be difficult, if not impossible. Minor ailments and sickness would no doubt run rampant while they were forced together in the enclosed space that would make life unpleasant. Seitzmann had already begun trying to stymie *that* probability by adding extra vitamins and preventive meds to the troops' diet. There was just about nothing worse than being hip deep in a ship full of wheezing and disease-ridden soldiers. The smell alone was enough to kill a full-grown cliff reaver. Low berths, while considered briefly during operation planning had been dismissed. It was more than possibly that the services of these soldiers would be needed immediately after their arrival. The recovery time and uncertainty of cryo were deemed unacceptable.

All of which meant that once they made the transition into Jump Space, Brigade Sergeant Major Boris Seitzmann could finally get some quality sack time. The promise of embracing that comfortable oblivion was much of what was keeping him going when he felt the sand in his eyes, making his eyelids leaden and next to impossible to keep up. Thankfully, his assistant made a mean pot of coffee, a skill that, at the moment, made him an extremely valuable commodity. There were more powerful stimulants available, but Seitzmann was naturally leery of them. There would be enough times when he would wish to bite a subordinate's head off as it was without adding the chemically-induced jitters of the hard stuff to it.

The loading schedule had proven to be challenging indeed. The transports were not uniform in their design or construction, though they each had the same Jump capabilities. That meant the way in which each of them could be loaded was very different from ship-to-ship. Of the six large transports, only two could physically land on the planet, which meant that the other three had to be filled by shuttling personnel and equipment into orbit. Thankfully, there had been several extra small craft that had been ear-marked to help get things moving.

Seitzmann only hoped that the pilots of those craft, like the Sergeant Major himself, would be able to stand up in the long hours of duty without cracking. The burly man looked down at the data display in his over-size hand that contained the latest timetables, and once again he found himself drawn to the same oddity that had plagued him from the outset.

There were six transports in orbit that would form a kind of convoy, but only *five* of them had been made available for Seitzmann's cargo. The sixth was one in a parking orbit nearby its sisters, but it had been made very clear that this particular transport was *not* to be used.

It was even stranger how the transports all came to be used in the first place. The two transports capable of operating dirtside had been military issue, which made loading them child's play. Three others had been civilian models each flying the corporate banner that his superiors chose to fly to conceal their activities. At least, they had *looked* like civilian models from the outside. On the inside, however, they were every bit as ready to house munitions and troops as the military grade vessels. Only their inability to make planet fall kept them from being in the same class.

Again, his thoughts were drawn to the sixth transport. It was neither military nor corporate in its markings. If anything, it looked to be an independent ship. What else could explain the gold and red flame pattern that adorned its hull from stem to stern. Seitzmann had caught a glimpse of the elusive ship itself on one of his many shuttle trips to oversee the loading progress in orbit. The transport had sat there apart from its peers, its distinctive appearance setting it apart, like a tattooed man in the midst of a bunch of straight-laced business types. Seitzmann could only guess as to whether or not it had the same military-grade transport facilities as the other five.

The transport was the subject of much fascination not only for Seitzmann, but among the troops, especially those crammed into tight fittings. An extra transport would alleviate the cramped space some, it was true, but something about the ship struck Seitzmann as different, besides its distinctive paint job.

One of his men had reported that the only cargo the sixth transport had taken was a modular cutter, and while its bulk was considerable, it was hardly enough to fill up the whole hold. All of which meant that either the transport was meant for a different purpose...or it that it already contained cargo.

Seitzmann gave a mental shrug. Regardless of what the transport's role was in the larger picture, it didn't get troops and equipment aboard the transport's they *could* use any faster. He turned his attention back to the matters at hand.

"Here you go, sir" his assistant said, materializing at his side with a fresh, steaming cup of life-giving coffee.

"Thank you, Corporal." Seitzmann said taking in the warm liquid, allowing himself the short moment of delight amid the chaos. It was sometimes surprising to find that the smallest thing could make your day. Today it was coffee.

"Here's the current timetable, sir," the assistant said and laid down a fresh data pad.

Seitzmann grunted at what he saw there. He shook his head and settled in to focus on the task at hand.

* * *

All was in readiness. The five transports were filled to the brim with men and equipment. Everything was in its own place. It had been a Herculean labor to get the job done within in the allotted timeframe, but they had done it and with a solid three hours to spare. It was a standing testament to perseverance, determination and caffeine.

Once the six ships in orbit gave the "all's free and clear" signal, they broke orbit in a staggered pattern and went their separate ways. The destination for each of the ships was, in fact, the same, but it had been determined that the military transports would take a different Jump approach than the corporate runners, and as for the fiery sixth transport, it was also to take a separate path to find their ultimate destination.

Formal orders had been cut to release the troops in active duty on a number of different trailing fronts, when the truth of the matter was that they were all bound for the same place. The orders were flawless – the last "i" dotted and "t" crossed – but they were an elaborate forgery created for the express purpose of covering any possible paper trail should someone be inclined to look.

Likewise, the differing Jump approaches helped perpetuate this ruse. The movement of so many troops off planet was bound to strike someone as strange, and word could get around, and *that* could be disastrous. Even if their departure aroused suspicions, sorting it out would take time, and that would give them just the window of opportunity they needed.

The pair of military transports broke orbit first, and headed towards their supposed destination of Kal, which sat outside the actual borders of the Reformation Coalition. Those that were familiar with their operations would not bat an eye-lash at this. A few hours later a pair of the corporate transports set out ostensibly for a re-supply mission to Shenendoah, merely a private transport being asked to ferry troops and spares to an outlying scout base when available military transports were sparse. Next, the other corporate transport left to seek their fortune in the Teldra system, which also lay outside the official RC borders. Finally, the fiery transport opened its doors to a launch boat and then likewise broke Spencer's gravitational grasp.

It was the launch that contained August Delpero, Vega Zorn and a very pleased-looking Mr. Kim. Once they were safely down and secure, the last transport set a course for their true destination. Mr. Kim insisted, politely, that Delpero and Zorn should stay aboard the launch while he made final arrangements with the transport's skipper to stow the refugee information modules from the Vault. There was a certain amount of impatience that Delpero felt at being asked to keep his seat. It didn't take a genius to know that there was something aboard the strangely decorated transport that was important to Mr. Kim. No, August knew about the files intimately, it had to be something else. He pondered that during the transport's trip out-system.

As they cleared the requisite 100AU's to a Jump Point, a shadowy companion joined them far from the prying eyes of nearby ships or sensors in the deep of space.

Lord Ryan.

Before the two ships Jumped, there was an exchange of cargo both animate and not. The battered *Redwing*-class cutter that already rested in *Lord Ryan's* launch bay switched out with the Vault module and found accommodations aboard the transport. All of which meant that when August was finally given the green light to disembark from the launch once it was safely aboard *Lord Ryan*.

From all indications, Delpero's old yacht was fully fueled and ready to Jump. As her previous owner and operator, he had to wonder how that had occurred. As advanced as the yacht was, she suffered from a distinct lack of streamlining. This inability to skim fuel off of a gas giant

made her dependant on refueling stations to get the juice she needed to achieve Jump. Delpero didn't think it very likely that Mr. Halafast would have risked bringing her close to the planet, considering the steps he'd taken to conceal her presence when they first precipitated into the system.

Delpero turned it over in his mind, the possibilities running through his thoughts. Either *Lord Ryan* had been modified so that she could refuel using a gas giant, or else there was some kind of hidden re-fueling station in orbit around Zakuii, most probably among its rings. Either was a possibility. It would require a Major overhaul of *Lord Ryan's* hull to make her able to skim directly. Admittedly he hadn't been given access to all parts of the ship nor had he seen his ship from the outside. The configuration could be vastly different than his mental image of how she should appear. Then again, it was also possible that there could be a skimmer that harvested the fuel and then served as depot. Or it could be something else entirely.

Really, the mental exercise of trying reason out was happening around him was a reflex because he truly didn't *know* what was going on. It gave him something to entertain himself during the long periods when he was expected to sit down, shut up and not move, even if the language of those requests were expressed in were asked in a civil tongue. In theory, his hosts would disclose their cause to him now that he had delivered the Vault to them. Whether that was to happen or not was another matter entirely. Before his trip to Spencer, August might have thought that the information might never be forthcoming. There had been an edge of cynicism towards his hosts, it was true, but so far they had held up their end of the bargain. Plus, he was still alive, a state in which he didn't think he would continue in once he'd given them what they wanted. There had been plenty of opportunities to rid themselves of him since then, up to and including leaving his body in quick-drying ferrocrete that now filled the Vault chamber.

He knew that Mr. Kim and Mr. Halafast were dangerous, and probably not without their share of ruthlessness, but he had dealt with men like that before. Often men like that were excellent partners for business, once their motives were established. These two had set him free and treated him well in the interim. Perhaps they dealt with him much more on the level than he gave them credit.

For the first time August Delpero actually let himself believe in what they were doing. Perhaps the cause to which he was a part did have just cause to change a system that had proved time and time again that it didn't work.

Now if he could only find out what cause that was.

* * *

Once *Lord Ryan* was safely in Jump Space, Delpero found himself again seated at the head of the table in the conference room. Mr. Halafast and Mr. Kim occupied their usual seats in front of him. Only Zorn's absence from the room, prevented the feeling of déjà vu from the their previous meeting here.

"Well, Mr. Kim has filled me in on the key points of your stay at Spencer, and I must say that you really went above and beyond," Mr. Halafast said. "I had a hunch that you would get into the spirit of things."

Delpero nodded with none of his usual guardedness. It was quite obvious from the gleam in his eyes that he was *pleased* with how things had gone as well.

"If you're so inclined, we would like to send some specific queries your way where the files are concerned," Mr. Kim said. "Your familiarity with them makes you the perfect man to act as a sort of...librarian, for lack of a better term."

Again Delpero nodded.

"We are looking to put these files to immediate use once we reach our destination, so we would take it as a continued sign of your good faith if you would concentrate on this task during our week in Jump." Mr. Halafast said. "To that end, any of the personnel aboard ship, including one or both of us will be made available to you for the timely completion of the task."

"I understand."

"Now then, Mr. Delpero..." Mr. Kim began.

"August," Delpero inserted neatly.

"Ah, forgive me. Force of habit," Mr. Kim smiled and reset himself. "August, you have taken that leap of faith that we asked of you, and did as much with enthusiasm and alacrity. In doing so have finally earned your place among our ranks." He paused and chuckled, "though perhaps saying "our ranks," is a bit of a misnomer in this case. The truth of the matter is that, if you wish it, our superiors are willing to confer upon you an exalted status that goes well above the station that we occupy here." He made a gesture to encompass himself and Mr. Halafast.

"Depending on how things turn out," Mr. Halafast said. "The two of us might wind up reporting directly to you." He let out a short laugh that was echoed around the table.

"What we're trying to say," Mr. Halafast continued, "is that your patience and understanding during what had to be a frustrating and trying time will now, as they say, pay off in dividends."

"We said that once you delivered the files of your Vault to us that we would finally clue you in on who we are and what we are trying to accomplish here," Mr. Kim said with a gesture that took in *Lord Ryan*, and indeed the entire operation. "We hold to that agreement."

Delpero silently rubbed his hands together in anticipation beneath the table.

At last...

"You have more than demonstrated your willingness to work for us when you *didn't* know who we represented, so I must ask you this singularly important question."

Mr. Halafast leaned over the table, and August felt himself mirroring the gesture as he met the man's piercing blue eyes.

"How would you like to be a Technarch?"

Chapter 10

Coeur D'Esprit sat alone in her quarters, wrestling with her demons. They were as tenacious as they were numerous, and worse, they were ganging up on her. As she looked back through the years of her life, there were many points in time that had scarred her – a hundred tiny cuts in her soul that had never quite healed.

The Rebellion.

The *Altinak*.

16.

Scissor.

How had she endured? How had she coped? How had she willingly gone back into space when the stars had claimed so many she cared about with cold indifference?

The soul-searching she did now did not fill her with tranquility, nor did it help put those demons to rest. If anything it infuriated them, making them impossibly harder to overcome. She grappled with them to the last, but no matter how she justified herself, no matter how she tried to convince herself that it none of it – any of it – was her fault, those demons never retreated from the field. They always lurked nearby ready to seize upon her when she was at her lowest.

It struck her as amazing how easy it was to create such monsters of the mind, but hard, how *terribly* hard, it was to fully exorcise them. Though there was a heat at the back of her neck and a flush to her cheeks, she felt as empty and cold as the void between stars.

In the darkness of her chamber, her eyes went to the computer screen on the table in front of her, and the newest exhibit in her mental menagerie of pain. It read:

KALDARA, Michelle Anari; RCES Tacnet Code "Spitfire"; b 18/V/1171, Tolstoy, Oriflamme. Currently C.O., RCS Orion. Twice recipient of the Wings of Halos for meritorious conduct above and beyond the call of duty. Recipient of the Oriflammen Cross with Laurel Leaves for conspicuous gallantry. Current assignment: Patrol Station Delphi, Helios.

For long moments she stared at the profile of the woman she had just killed until the letters themselves didn't seem to have meaning. She traced their curvature with her eyes idly, only coming back to their actual meaning every once in a while.

The cursor on the screen blinked at her, waiting patiently for its next command. Coeur didn't need to scroll down to see Spitfire's service record, to know that the berth aboard the aging corvette *Lirgishkhunan* could be found there. At the time, Michelle Kaldara had been the Tactical Officer, and well on her way to a command of her own.

Coeur knew this all too well, because she had been the corvette's pilot at the time. While they had not been close friends, they had been shipmates with all the camaraderie that came with it.

Perhaps being a glutton for punishment, Coeur brought up the service photo attached to Spitfire's personnel file. She immediately realized it was a mistake as the image took her breath.

Spitfire had been red-headed with the temperament to match, which had given rise to her service moniker. For all that, she had been a diminutive woman with a delicate facial structure that looked to Coeur as if she should have come from Terra's Ireland. It had been no secret that she would one day command a starship of her own – she was far too competent at her craft. Even now, Coeur could see the confident, almost smug self-assurance in her eyes, counterbalanced by lines around her mouth that had been chiseled there through smiles and laughter.

Coeur sighed and pressed her palms over her face. It was one thing to kill a person in impersonal combat, but quite another when you know the other person's name, her history, how she liked her coffee or that she had a four-year old daughter on Oriflamme named Sarah.

It was hard to believe that it had been four whole days since *Orion* had been destroyed, and *Hornet* had not yet left the Lamda-3 base. Even now, the object of their search, *Hokona*, sat next to them in the ventral docking bay. Bringing the situation to a close had proven difficult with *Hornet's* battle damage and the wounded, which kept Crowbar and Physis busy.

Coeur had taken command of the situation as soon as they had landed, but really she had only acted as a supervisor. She wasn't really doing anything gnawed at her, but at least it had given her sufficient space that her crew would not have to see her painful brooding.

She remembered vividly when she had first retreated to her quarters after their enemy's identity was revealed. To her surprise, she hadn't cried. She *had* managed to vomit up everything she'd eaten for the previous three days. It had almost felt like a catharsis of sorts, like she was relieving all that pent up anxiety and fear, but it didn't last.

Her solitude had been short-lived, however, and she'd had to pull herself back together, assuming the calm mantle of authority, however hollow it felt, for Drop Kick's after action report.

The large Marine's face had been bruised and blue in places, but he had flatly refused any medical aid. Bone-tired as he was, for that much was certain around his eyes, he had none of the usual humor in his voice. It was like he had been stripped of all emotion, and only the cold-rolled steel of the Marine Corps had remained. Certainly, the magnitude of the battle inside the asteroid had astonished him, but what was more horrific was that there had been no survivors among the opposition. Not one.

There had been several in this very docking bay that might have survived the attack, but the Ithklur had seen to it that every single man and woman on this level was dead.

As for the Ithklur, Drop Kick had wanted to confine them to quarters for the time being, but his cold disgust at their recent actions was pigeonholed in light of the fact that every hand was needed. After disarming them thoroughly, he had put them to work gathering the bodies together for examination. Raven, who had been visibly shaken by the news that part of their own forces might be involved in this growing conspiracy, wished to examine the bodies and their equipment. Coeur did not envy her that task.

As Drop Kick had reported the events of Lamda-3, Coeur had at first felt anger. It was an unforgivable sin to disobey a direct order from a superior, but Coeur could almost understand their reasoning in making the *Hokona* their first priority.

It was actually the business in Engineering that made Coeur want to throw Striker out of the airlock. It was one thing to break away from the action because a deep-seated feeling of loyalty, but *quite another* to abandon a wounded comrade behind to cover your post, to say nothing of the young woman that now lay in *Hornet's* sick bay.

When Drop Kick and Mercy had discovered Bonzo in Main Engineering, he was unconscious with his gun still clasped in his hand, locked and loaded with firing lines set up to cover the engineer, and practically on death's door. The young woman, whose name tag marked her as one Cassandra Mayfield, one of *Hokona's* engineers, had been bandaged up and stabilized as much as the situation permitted. Somehow, Bonzo had found a medkit down three flights of stairs and managed to hoist it all the way back upstairs, leaving a trail of his own blood to mark his progression. This action had clearly saved the woman's life, and almost cost the Marine his own.

Even with the cloud of dark feelings that hung over this asteroid, Coeur and Drop Kick had immediately agreed that Corporal Alonzo Black should be put up for a commendation at the soonest possible moment. Once Physic had pumped a few liters of blood in the Marine, he had shown immediate improvement. Even after the doctor had rebuilt his knee, Bonzo had insisted on crutches while the new tendons knitted, and went back on duty.

The only other survivor had been the Hiver envoy aboard *Hokona*, who was fading fast in the same stateroom turned cell where the Ithklur had found it. Moving it to *Hornet's* sick bay had been discounted out of hand by Orit – from all accounts the Hiver was too weak even for that. It was fading fast, and that made it Physic's number one priority right now.

Coeur noted with a shudder that there had been other Hivers onboard the ship aside from the one barely clinging to life. They too received the same draconian treatment and succumbed to it. Their captors had unceremoniously dumped the bodies in a corner of the docking bay among the other refuse that was destined to be cycled through the airlock.

But that wasn't the end of it.

Coeur curled her hand into a fist before her mouth, as she thought.

No, there had been another more bitter setback that awaited them within this bay, the very reason which had brought them here in the first place. After careful examination of the *Hokona* and the station itself, there was one element that was distinctly missing amongst the rubble and bodies.

The Alpha Bank.

It was still amazing to Coeur that they had managed to find the free trader in the first place. She told herself over and over that it was a microscopic needle in a planet-sized haystack, but they had done it. They had found her amongst all the infinite number of hiding places.

And they had fought for her, fought with a ferocity and a determination that could have cost them all their lives. To have come so far, only to find that the Alpha Bank itself wasn't present was heart-wrenching to everyone, and Coeur was no exception. It made their struggle seem hollow and meaningless, made their improbable victory feel dangerously close to defeat.

The Alpha Bank was now an even *smaller* needle, and the possible locations it could be had just been reset. All of which meant that they would have to start over, within even fewer lamps to light their way. It had been a terrible blow to morale, but there had been no way Coeur would avoid telling the crew.

Now almost everyone on station walked around in a bleak humor, and shuffled about their appointed duties enveloped in a black haze. It was palpable.

The Captain knew that *Hornet's* crew was torn up, because she too felt it. She had to wonder if she could ever stitch them back together into the effective force they had been before coming to this accursed rock. She hoped so. Their mission was far from over and its weight was oppressive on her shoulders. She could feel herself starting to give way to it.

The minute they were able to leave, Coeur would be obligated to pull out and head back to Kreuzung. Crowbar had effected emergency repairs, *Hornet* could fly, but he would need more advanced facilities to repair the hit to the Jump Drive. Once that was done they would leave Kruyter to continue their mission.

She only hoped that by then she would have a place for them to go.

* * *

In short order, Physic had turned the prison stateroom aboard *Hokona* into a hospital room. Considering how filthy the room had been when she had first entered, she wouldn't have thought it possible. The need for her to heal the patient here instead of in her own sick bay grew of out necessity. Little by little, the knowledge became apparent to her that her charge was slipping away.

Even now the Hiver's wounds had been dressed and its mangled form was festooned with cables and fluid replenishment bags. None of it seemed to matter. The Hiver was just so *fragile*, a state that tore at Physic's heart every time she looked at it, even through her professional detachment.

It was unconscious now, and the odds were better than even that the alien would never come out of it. Physic knew first hand that the will of a being could be the deciding factor in whether a patient lived or died. She'd seen people that were, by all medical knowledge, too far gone to save make a spectacular recovery because they wanted, *needed* to live. Conversely, she'd seen those who should have made a full recovery, fade and die because the ties that kept them clinging to life weren't strong enough to hold. Some had simply given up the fight.

With Hivers it was a different matter. Their capacity for self-preservation was legendary, but when one was in a condition such as this, their reactions could be worlds apart.

An old wound threatened to open as her thoughts strayed towards that memory. She fought it down and went back to monitoring the Hiver in front of her.

Right now, though, she had done just about everything she could for it. Now the rest was up to it. Would it even *want* to come back, given what its captors had done to it?

Anger replaced her sadness, burning bright. The animals responsible for its current state had smashed, cut and burned its central body, not only had they cast out four of its eyes, but they had severed two its limbs. One of them had been its "tail" limb. The smallest of the six limbs was normally used for operating the computer they commonly carried on their undercarriage to communicate. It also happened to carry a reproductive purpose amongst their race, and Physic didn't need to remind herself what the human equivalent of that act would have been.

Her emotions fluctuated for a moment before righting themselves, which seemed to happen more and more as the hours wore on. She could feel herself coming a breaking point, that point where fatigue, lack of sleep and food would start to erode her abilities. If she wasn't mindful, those mistakes could be potentially disastrous to the health of her patients. But if she was resting at a critical moment in a patient's recovery and wasn't there when they needed her most...

It was a grim tightrope she was forced to walk. Even after the immediate crisis was over, it would take her time to decompress emotionally, and more than anything she knew it would never fully go away. Though she'd never been a medic at the front lines of combat, she'd seen

the mass graves of patient's she'd failed to save on Ra. She'd seen how the bodies of the dead had to be burned to protect the living, each of them Hivers. She'd died a little with each of them.

All of which made her determination, her *need* to save this patient that much more vehement. Amid the turmoil in her mind, there came an image of a single Hiver, suffering horribly, while she was within a stone's throw of finding a cure for its malady.

She blinked several times to clear her eyes. No, the Hiver in front of her was still alive. It was not the friend she'd left behind on Ra. For several moments she grappled with untangling the knot of emotions that swirled around her head like a galaxy of pain.

Bleep, Bleep.

The sound roused her from her gathering gloom.

Bleep, Bleep.

Her eyes darted to the medical readouts with trained precision, taking in the greatest amount of data in the least amount of time. All of which told her that her patient was slowly climbing the steep slope towards a conscious state. The prime limb moved ever so slightly and seconds later its two remaining eyes fluttered open and weakly fixed their yellow irises on her.

With one hand she reached for her hand-held med scanner as her other hand sought her comm unit.

"Newton, Newton," she said quickly, but with a steady voice, "come in." The familiar voder came back a second later.

"Yes, Doctor Takagawa, what is it?"

"The Hiver is coming around, and I need you to translate." She eyed the Hiver's readouts Newton acknowledged. She frowned. During her residency, she'd seen patients seemed to rally from their downward slide, but such a surge in activity could be misleading. It had been the source of endless grief for the families of patients when their loved one seemed to recover, only then slip away again. She'd seen it played out over and over in hospital waiting rooms more times than she cared to remember. The body's last stand could instill a false hope that could be devastating, or, if the patient was aware, could be a priceless chance to say good-bye before the end – either one of nature's most cruel jokes or compassionate acts.

As her eyes played across the displays, she saw no actual improvement in her patient's status aside from a slightly increased blood flow to the brain to facilitate consciousness. Her gut told her this was another of those calms before the storm, and it ground like broken glass within her.

"You'd...better hurry," she added into her comm.

* * *

Whiz Bang stood at the bottom of *Hokona's* ramp sorting through the myriad of items that would be loaded aboard *Hornet*. He took a deep breath and held it as he picked up the footlocker. Physic had told him he had cracked at least three ribs when the *Valiant* had come down, and done quite a number on his left rotator cup and ankle. It hurt like hell, but comparatively, he had come out okay. He was still on his feet. Drop Kick had managed to come away with mere scrapes and bruises, but Mercy had broken her collar bone and right arm in two places. Gaia only knows what a mess it would've been inside the crew compartment without the protection of their battle dress. Still, they had all made it, thanks in part to Mercy's last ditch maneuvers that had made their "landing" survivable.

As he felt the pinpricks of pain explode along his ribcage, he pressed the footlocker close to the pain and exhaled. The pressure helped. Not much, but it helped. Luckily, no one else was around just then to see him struggle. He grit his teeth as he walked it over to the neatly stacked boxes a few meters away. Setting it down with a grunt, he took a moment to police the area. There was no sense in getting sloppy, despite his ragged state. The last thing he needed right were stims, but the thought of painkillers had a certain appeal about now.

Suck it up, Marine, he told himself, if you wanted to avoid the pain, you chose the wrong profession!

With a quick about face, he turned towards the white light streaming down the far trader's ramp. Only now, the light outlined a figure moving ponderously slow down its length.

There was something wrong here. Whiz Bang didn't know how he knew, but it was as plain as day. He drew closer to the figure, trying to not to let his ankle affect his stride.

"Physic?" he said, seeing her disheveled state. "You okay?"

Her dark eyes looked at him blankly, as the only thought she only half recognized his voice. Whiz Bang drew near her and she kept descending the ramp slowly looking somewhere between lost and haunted.

"Doctor?" he said again, laying his hand lightly on her shoulder. He thought she might pull away, but the contact seemed to focus her. "What's wrong?"

"My patient is dead." She said. "I couldn't save it."

"Aw geez, Physic, I'm sorry." A tremor ran through her body and he knew the dam was breaking. They had all been pushed to the limit, been forced to within arms reach of mental and physical collapse, and Physic had been leaned upon the hardest. In that instant he knew how unfair it had been, how much they depended on her. If she was breaking up now...

To his own surprise he drew her into an embrace and her arms wrapped around him tightly. The pain it evoked in his ribcage seemed strangely distant.

He pressed his cheek into her dark hair that smelled of blood and smoke, and yet still retained a sweet floral scent underneath. In his arms, he felt her resolve crumble. He felt the tears staining his fatigues.

"It's okay, Orit," he said as soothingly as he could. "Just let it out."

"No, this was different," she said in a whisper, "I've lost patients before, but this was different. I...I..." her voice trailed off.

Whiz Bang's hand came up and gently stroked her hair. He'd never seen the doctor like this before. She'd always been the upbeat sort, continually optimistic even when things looked their worst. Only a few times had she had he ever seen her lose that, and even those times it had been replaced with an aura of calm professionalism. To see her in this state was...wrenching. Whatever it was, she needed to get it out where she could deal with it.

"What happened?"

She sniffed a few times. "The Hiver...it...it told me that it *understood* I couldn't save it. Dammit! Of all the things it could've said, why did it have to say *those words*?"

"I don't know." Whiz Bang said, not understanding why those words would've had the impact they did.

For Physic however, it was a like being struck by a Jovian lightning bolt. Though she felt secure in the strong arms of the Marine, her mind wandered back to the source of the pain, reliving those moments burned in her memory...

* * *

The lights blazed brightly in Cicero's stateroom aboard Hornet as the Hiver lay dying. A black viscous fluid soaked through the bottom of the cushions of the Hiver's bed. It stank of death.

Physic was nearly covered in by now as she worked as one possessed to stabilize her patient. The Folgorex II bio-agent was doing what it was designed to do, and silently she cursed the wars and people that had ever birthed such an unimaginably callous weapon.

Even now she wasn't sure how the Hiver had done it – it had repressed the symptoms of the infection while they made it through the Sauler checkpoint. It was almost as though Cicero had willed himself to show no signs of its malady, even to her examinations, but now it was paying the price for its bravery.

The hell of it was she had the information necessary to formulate a vaccine, but it would take time, time Cicero didn't have. The Hiver was slipping away little by little. Though she didn't want believe it, she was merely delaying the inevitable.

Gaia, how could you deliver the cure into my hands too late to make a difference? One day, I'm sure all I would've needed was one extra day...only one!

"Doctor," Cicero's voder spoke as it typed haltingly on the keypad. Its prime limb turned weakly toward her. "I...can...no longer...see you."

She looked at his six eyestalks and the pupils had gone an inky black.

"Please don't talk, Scissor. Save your strength."

"It...hardly...matters...now, Doctor."

"Don't say that! Don't you give up on me, you hear?" she said with sudden anger. "You held out against this thing for weeks, so don't you back out on me now!" Her breath came in sharper gasps as sweat beads ran down her drawn face.

"It...was necessary...to...do so. Now...however...I...must ask...a favor...of you, Doctor."

She nodded firmly, though the Hiver couldn't see the gesture.

"Yes, Cicero, anything."

"Tell...me...the truth."

The pressure she felt behind her eyes nearly unmade her, but she drew a ragged breath and forced them back.

"The truth is," she said steeling herself, "you are deteriorating too fast. I'm working on the vaccine, but...but..." her voice trailed off as she finally spoke her thoughts into existence.

"But...it will...not...come in time...to...save me?"

"No," she said and her voice caught. "It won't."

"I...understand...Doctor. Please... do not...sadden...yourself."

"What?" she said as one of Cicero's blackened limbs lightly rested on her sleeve. She placed her gloved hand over his limb and held it, clinging to the contact.

Hivers were emotionless creatures, everyone knew that. If they didn't have emotions, that meant they couldn't understand them. Didn't it? How could they know how emotions truly affected humans if the responses themselves were foreign to them? How? How?

How could Cicero have known the significance of the light touch on her arm that felt so much the same as when she had said good-bye to her mother?

"Learn...from...me,...so...you can...save...the others."

"I will, Cicero," she said, holding the contact and feeling the strength of purpose return to her. "I promise."

"Then...hurry.....doctor," it said, the voder slowing noticeably,

"I...will...hold...on.....as...long...as.....I can."

* * *

She had kept that promise. She had learned as much from her friend's death as she could, and that knowledge had saved countless Hiver lives. She had given its death meaning. And that, she realized, was what she needed to do now – act on the information that her patient had imparted before it died, so that it, too, might have a legacy.

It was in that moment that Physic felt something let go within her, like a gangrenous wound being lanced. There was a moment of intense, re-lived pain, followed by a cathartic release and unimaginable relief. That moment in time had long been a weight around her neck, a burden she couldn't somehow remove. She had carried that with her for so long, it had become a part of her, slowly eroding her will, tormenting her with thoughts that somehow Cicero might have lived if only she had been faster, smarter, better. Now...now she felt free of it, as if somehow seeing the same dignity in her latest patient, brought the mark on her soul to a head, forcing her to deal with it at last.

There was sadness, but slowly she came back to herself. She reached deep down as she always did, and found within her those reserves of strength that seemed almost superhuman to those around her. Rising now in her mind like a new dawn was that same sense of purpose that seemed to allow her to throw off the mental shackles of self-doubt and be who she needed to be for those that needed her.

Her whole body relaxed in Whiz Bang's arms. Sensing that the currents in the doctor were subtly shifting, he tightened his embrace against her. To his surprise, she returned it.

When she pulled back, the Marine found that he held an altogether different woman than the one that had come numbly down the ramp. Her eyes were focused and the set of her jaw seemed like before. No, not like before, he amended, no there was something more there now, like a fire leaping suddenly from smoldering coals.

He brushed back an errant strand of soft dark hair, and held her gaze.

"Doc?"

"Thank you," she said with a warmth that the man in front of her could feel.

"No problem, Doc." The Marine smiled crookedly as he wiped away a lingering tear with a brush of his thumb. "Welcome back."

"Well, we can't just stand around here all day, can we?"

"No, ma'am!" he said, taking her cue.

"Well then let's get to work," she said with a genuine smile.

He watched her go and thanked all the gods he knew that they had sent his shipmate's Orit Takagawa. It didn't take a genius to realize that *Hornet* was hurt bad right now. This rock had taken everything and given nothing in return.

If they were ever going to return to the way things were, it would take someone like Physic to show them the way.

* * *

Crowbar craned his neck from side-to-side, feeling a satisfying pop. He flexed his shoulders, slowly rotating around each arm, letting the tension seep from his body. The ice-cold water bottle in his hand came up and brushed across his forehead. He closed his eyes and absorbed as much of the luxuriant cold as he dared before bringing it his lips for a deep, satisfying draught.

He sat back on his workbench with a sigh. He couldn't sit idle for long, but he forced himself to take a slight break before heading below. He looked around the empty passageway, taking in every rivet and spar, with a mix of pride and something resembling regret to his tired mind.

The old girl was damaged that was for sure. The last few hours and days seemed like a blur now, but he had gotten her space-worthy again. That blast had done quite a number on her Jump drives, but the maneuver drive was beat back into shape.

She had performed like a maestro and come through the fire...and that made him love her all the more. The news of the enemy's identity had shocked him like the rest, but the sheer effrontery *Orion* had of firing on them, of damaging *his* ship was enough to insulate him from the worst of it.

He only wished that others had seen it that way, he thought with another swig. For the last two days the Captain had left him to his own devices. She had neither issued orders to prioritize the repairs, nor asked for regular updates on his progress. He had kept her in the loop anyway.

When he posed questions, she had responded decisively, but she was merely reacting, not acting – and even that effort was growing more and more distant with every passing hour. He shook his head at the thought.

I know she's in a dark place right now, but she's picked a hell of a time to go to ground.

But, he couldn't fight two fires at once. Right now he had to deal with the problems as they presented themselves. The rest would have to have sort itself out in time.

He drained the rest of the bottle, stood up and refilled it from the dispensary. Stretching once more he picked up his toolbox and made his way below for the next round of repairs. His steps took him through the strangely empty ship.

It was unnaturally quiet in the corridor, until a sound caught his attention. Pausing, he listened.

There it was again.

Now that he could hear it, it sounded as though it were coming from the access hatch he was about to open.

He detached his flashlight from his belt, gripping it tightly. Was it possible that someone from Lambda-3 had stowed aboard?

There was only one way to find out.

In one smooth motion he threw open the hatch and flashed the harsh white light into the compartment and the surprised figure within.

"Raven?" he asked as the young woman held her hand up defensively to block out the blinding beam. She sat cross-legged in the hatchway with an open, nearly empty bottle sitting in

her lap. She looked like hell. Her eyes were red-rimmed and puffy, not just from lack of sleep but from crying...and from the looks of it no small amount of alcohol.

"What are you doing in here?"

"What does it look like?" she said holding up the bottle. "Pausing to reflect on our current situation and consider it's long-term implications."

"Uh-huh. And what have you concluded so far, may I ask?"

"I have concluded," she said with a bit of a slur, "that we are in way over our heads and that I am not quite drunk enough yet. But give me time, I will be."

"That a fact?" he said as she answered with an unsteady headshake. "C'mon, you know we only get the hard stuff while we're Jump. That's been a standing order on this ship since she first put out to space."

"Don't worry 'bout me, I'm fine."

"Fine, huh?" he reached down and relieved her of the bottle. He brought it up for a quick sniff and the scent of the brew nearly watered his eyes.

Good Gaia, this stuff could almost knock down a full-grown razorclaw.

"Yeah, you're fine," he said looking at the bottle with distaste, "for a Fijan wino on Reformation's Eve."

"I'd appreciate it if you would give me that back."

"I bet you would," he put the bottle out of her reach, "but this is not what you need right now. "

"Yes, it is." She said drawing her knees up to her chest and burying her face. "Yes, it is." Even hidden, he could tell that her face bore the horror they all felt to a greater or lesser degree.

"Look, I know you're feeling it, we are all are, but right now..."

"No, you don't understand."

"Understand what?"

She looked up and his lips tightened at the pain he saw there. "I had the information right there in my hand. It was all right there...If I had looked there...If I had chosen orange instead of blue, none of this might've happened. This whole thing, the whole damn mess...it's all my fault..."

"That's a load of bull and you know it," he said reaching in grabbing her shoulders firmly. "Look at me, *look at me.*" He demanded. As though in daze, he met his gaze.

"The only thing, the *only* thing that would have happened different would be that we would've known the names of the people trying to murder us in cold blood. That's *it*. *Orion* wasn't jacking around, Raven, they were out for blood. And you can be sure they had a pretty good notion of who *we* were and you saw how much that slowed 'em down. So, knowing who they were wouldn't have changed what they trying to do, or what we had to do to them first, by one iota. So, it's not your fault, *got it?*"

He hadn't meant to raise his voice – it was not in his normal character to be stern with anyone. She actually flinched away from him as if she'd been struck.

"Raven," he said, then more softly, "Lauren, I can't have this from you. I need you at the top of your game and this," he nodded towards the bottle, "is not the way. Trust me, I know."

"Now come on," he offered his hand. "let's get you out of there."

"Maybe, you're right." She said as she took his hand and stood up.

"Of course I am," he said with that roguish smile of his. The water bottle materialized at his side and he handed it over to her. She took several large gulps and closed her eyes.

"Here," he said producing a blue capsule from the depths of his toolbox. "This will help clear your head."

"Thanks." She tossed it back with another drink of water.

"Here, have a seat and rest for a minute. I've got to make some adjustments and I'd be just as happy for the company."

"Hmmm...not sure I'm all that good of company right about now."

"I'll be the judge of that." He turned towards the panel where she had been sitting and positioned himself in it far enough to get to work. From the looks of it, Raven hadn't kicked anything loose while sitting in here. The small compartment smelled heavily of alcohol, but also of her floral perfume.

"Hand me that boltdriver, if you would be so kind."

Sounds of rummaging came from her general direction and then cold metal pressed into his waiting hand.

"This may sound odd," she began, "but are you fan of Ben Bosley?"

Though she couldn't see his face, he smiled broadly at the question.

"Ben Bosley? Would that be the Star Spy himself? The man with eagle eyes who has never known fear?"

"Yeah, that would be him," she said with a promising chuckle.

"I've seen of a couple of the holovids back on Lancer," he said. "They seemed a bit predictable overall, but were worth watching. Most of 'em anyhow. *Countdown* was probably my favorite one of the series.

"Mine too, that one and *There's No Tomorrow*. I had the biggest crush on Daschel Sinclair back then. He was so handsome and debonair on screen. I had an autographed poster of him as Bosley hanging over my bed. I used to wonder what it was like to follow him on one of his adventures. The danger, the exotic locales, the spy gear, just the *glamour* of it all – I wondered what it would be like to live such a cavalier life."

"You know that seems a bit odd coming from someone who is actually works for the Intelligence Branch," Crowbar said as he continued to work.

"Yes and no," she said shrugging. "Of course, real intelligence work isn't anything like it's portrayed in the vids. That's because a holo about shuffling through mounds of paperwork and endless analyses wouldn't sell very well to the public.

"When I first got into it, I was a bit disillusioned. There was no Section-36, no secret Griffin's Lair, or dark Cabal. That was all fluff. Intelligence work can be, and often is, very boring. Many of the field agents I've worked with are special forces types that seldom have Bosley's sense of style or knowledge of Aubani caviar.

"And yet, you might be surprised how many intelligence types like myself are fans, just because it shows a glorified, idealized version of that life."

"I take it that your head is clearing now?" Crowbar said. That's a pretty in-depth thought for someone that was slurring speech just a few minutes ago."

"Yeah, those things work wonders."

"Just checking. I didn't mean to interrupt. So you were saying..."

"I don't know, I guess it's because BB was always right when he made a decision and always managed to avoid the catastrophe at the last moment. I guess that's why I'm thinking about him now of all times." Her voice hinted at her earlier sad state.

"Well BB gets to be so suave because he has the script working for him," Crowbar said. "That's how he's able dodge gunfire that should drop a Marine in armor, or disarm bombs in mere seconds that would take a real bomb squad hours. I think that's why a lot of people lost interest with *Time and Time Again* – they abused that 'script' power just a little too much. I mean, no one can outrun a nuclear blast, certainly not when they're carrying the Auroran ambassador's daughter their back."

"Yeah, you're right. That almost required an active contra-grav crane to suspend disbelief." She admitted. "So what about you? Who were your heroes when you were growing up?"

"Who says I've grown up?" he said with a twinkle as he checked the readings on one of his monitors. She gave light peal of laughter, which was why he had said it in the first place. "But, if I had to pick, I would have to say the Red Admiral."

"From the Third Imperium?"

"Yup. His adventures were probably embellished in the retelling here and there, but everything I've read tells me that he really was that good."

"Well I suppose you would be if you wore the uniform for as long as he did. Did you ever recreate any of his fleet actions in the sims?"

"You bet. Personally, though, I much preferred the tales of when he Commanded the small ships. He was a demon with a fleet of dreadnaughts, but the man was the Devil himself with ships not much bigger than *Hornet*. A lot of that gets lost in the legend and media hype. Along the same lines of BB, the stories we see about his life center around the Sceptre Fleet because that's what appeals to people. Audiences can wrap their minds around big fleet movements on the holo-screen at lot easier than the small individual actions – which is really ironic in this day

and age when you think about it. Fleet actions are virtually unknown because there aren't that many ships to play around with, so almost all the important stuff nowadays happens between small ships in small numbers."

"Like the one we just went through?"

"Yep. I think the Red Admiral would've done well in this time. The odds would be constantly against him, the lack of available resources to work with would be negligible, and the chances of victory not so bright and shiny. He'd be right at home."

"Sounds like Red Sun, when you put it that way."

"I suppose so. I never thought of it that way."

"I haven't talked to her lately, how is she dealing with all this?"

"Can't say that I really know, and I've been too busy to really ask," Crowbar said.

"But you're concerned?"

Crowbar stopped working on the panel and slid out of it to meet her gaze.

"Yes, I'm concerned. Between you and me, I hope to Gaia she sorts things out enough to get us back on track. As much as we all might wonder how we could've done things differently, that's academic. We're all real fragile right now, which is why we've got to hold it together." He made a knowing glance at her and then to the bottle of booze sitting on the decksole.

"Okay, I get it. I was acting like a brat, it's just..." her voice trailed off.

Crowbar stood and grasped her by the shoulders.

"There will be plenty of time for us to question ourselves *after* we've managed to pull off a Ben Bosley and side-stepped a gauss rifle pointblank, okay?"

"Okay." She conceded, looking down at the floor. He lifted her chin to where she looked at him directly. Once again he was struck by those boundless, emerald green depths.

"Chin up. No excuses, you hear me?"

"You're something else, Glaive Ertani." She said with a growing smile. Moving closer, her lips lightly brushed his bearded cheek. "And I wouldn't have you any other way."

She turned and strode off in the direction of her quarters.

He watched her go, surprised and still feeling the electric warmth of that contact.

"Um...thanks."

* * *

"So that's what we know," Physic said as she stood in front of Coeur's desk. Almost to reflect her darkened mood, most of the lights in her quarters were turned, casting the Captain's face in grey shadows. She sat toying idly with a stylus on her desk looking off a far corner of the room.

"I see. So this...Erasmus was clear on that point?"

"Yes, Newton translated for me. It was very emphatic that the Alpha Bank was no longer in the Kruyter system, though Erasmus was unsure where it went from here."

Coeur sighed and crossed her legs. Physic had come directly to her with the news that *Hokona's* Hiver, Erasmus, was able to impart before it expired. The Alpha Bank had been discovered by the opposition even before the trader had been towed to Lambda-3.

But apparently, in a final bit of subterfuge, Erasmus had been able to convince the opposition that the Alpha Bank was just a piece of Hivertech that was used to track subtle shifts in their biochemistry during voyages in space, like Hiver thermometer. While the interrogators had had their doubts about many of the things Erasmus had told them, they had apparently written off the Alpha Bank as a curiosity and sent it away on one of their transports for further study.

That was one of the only bright spots that Coeur could see. Unless the enemy made a concerted and careful study of what they had, they would have no idea of the power and importance of what they possessed. Unfortunately, the now deceased Hiver didn't know where that transport had gone. By its recollection the transport had departed a little more than three weeks ago.

That narrowed the playing field some, but not enough. The transport could potentially have a head start of anywhere from six to twelve parsecs in any stellar direction. The longer they waited, the greater that span could become.

Coeur could tell just by looking at her doctor and friend that she had somehow made a breakthrough in dealing with her pain. The posture, the confidence she radiated in the dark was on par with any Imperial officer Coeur ever met. It should have been *her* confidence. She was the Captain, she had to be the invincible one, who neither felt nor showed hesitation, the one who would constantly push forward with the can-do attitude.

And maybe she had filled that role in the past, but now...now all she could hope to do is hold on. Her actions had led them all to this point, her decisions, her drive, all the qualities she had worn so arrogantly had brought them to this. They weighed upon her now, as though an anchor around her neck, dragging her down into the depths. She had no choice but to retreat from the field to save herself. Self doubt had risen to fill the vacuum, the kind she knew could shatter an officer's confidence into a billion tiny pieces. She'd seen it happen to others before.

At the same time, she knew that her crew needed her to be all those things as they sought to cope with situation, just as Physic had surely done. They needed her to be strong and she was leaving them to their own devices, she knew she was. They deserved *better* than that. They deserved a Captain that wasn't so self-possessed as to put herself before them, and they didn't.

Coeur had never thought of herself as a weak, it just wasn't a word she would've ascribed to someone that had gone through everything she had. Now she wasn't so sure. She was presented with the consequences of her actions in all their gross ugliness, in all their jagged reality. What she found there was...abhorrent.

Those two forces drew upon her, paralyzing her. It was a vicious cycle which seemed insidiously designed to grow stronger the more she struggled to fight it. So she stopped struggling, and, like quicksand, it had taken her slowly as she surrendered to it.

"I see." Coeur said sparing a glance at Physic, "thank you, doctor."

Physic stared at her, those dark eyes cutting through her protective apathy.

"So, that's it? Just a 'thank you, doctor' and that's it?"

"That's it."

Physic straightened. "Permission to speak freely, Captain?"

"Denied," Coeur said sharply, knowing where the conversation might lead. "You're dismissed."

"Fine then, I was only asking to be polite, but from the looks of it politeness isn't going get me anywhere with you. It's time Coeur, *high time*, that you stopped wallowing and started putting your house back in order. Of course you're horrified at what happened here, we all are, but you're letting..."

"That will be enough," Coeur cut her off with a warning, "It's time for you to leave."

"No, not until you've heard me out." The doctor leaned over the Captain's desk rest her weight on her tightened fists. "You've got a crew that needs you right now, *Captain*, and you owe it to them, do you hear me – *you owe it to them* – to get off your butt and put things to rights. Because if you don't...then maybe you were never fit to command a starship in the first place."

Coeur found herself on her feet without being conscious of standing. "I'm warning you, Physic, I will *not* tolerate insubordination on this ship. Not from you, not from anyone, you hear me?"

"*Now* you're starting to sound like a Captain again," Physic said leaning in even closer, "but it's not enough. You picked a hell of a time to go into hiding, Coeur. Decisive action is needed now, Coeur, not tomorrow, not next week, *now*. It's time for you to justify everyone's faith in you, or none of this whole bloody mess will mean a god-damned thing!"

"How *dare* you talk to me like this. I will have yo..."

Then Physic did the last thing Coeur would've expected given the doctor's temperament and their years of friendship. Faster than Coeur would've thought possible, Orit's hand flashed out and slapped her hard in the face. For a moment her angry mind was confused as if her brain couldn't quite wrap itself around what was happening. Her hand went to her cheek in shock.

"You...you hit me."

"Wake up," Physic said. "Pain is what tells us we're still alive. Now I know you've harbored survivor's guilt all these years; I know you blame yourself for too much that was out of your control. You wouldn't be human if you didn't, but you've got to face the facts. You didn't die, you *lived*. You're alive right now and nursing a hurt cheek. You have an obligation – no, a *sacred*

duty to do something with that life. Now I know it must seem like a living hell for you right now, but it's not too late. There's still time for you to turn this around like you always seem to do."

Her rapid-fire words battered across Coeur's mind like a broadside of missiles. She could feel them soaking in, even as she struggled to break down each of their meanings. Too much was happening at once.

"You've produced so many miracles since I've known you that I think you have a decent shot at sainthood." Physic said more calmly now, her eyes softening. "And right now, Coeur, we could all use one."

Coeur blinked heavily for a few seconds and took a long, cleansing breath. The world seemed to come back into focus for a moment, though she had her doubts that it would remain that way for long.

"You that know that striking a superior officer is a serious offense, Physic." She said neutrally, massaging her cheek.

"You're right, it is, particularly during a time of *war*." She said with emphasis on the last word. "But, if you decide to bring me up on charges, that means you've managed to get us to a safe haven – alive – and that you've mustered up the courage to act like a commanding officer again. Given that, I think a general court-martial is a small price to pay for getting you back on the firing line."

Physic held Coeur's gaze for several seconds.

"I'll consider that when the time comes." Coeur said.

"Very well," Physic straightened visibly. "I've said what I came to say. Now, I'll be happy to leave you to discharge your duties." She nodded, turned on her heel and strode out of Coeur's quarters.

Coeur dropped back into her chair with an exasperated sigh. Physic had come in here with the obvious intent of purposefully antagonizing her. As angry with her friend as she was right now, Physic had said nothing Coeur hadn't already thought to herself.

She'd stepped over the line with that slap, but it had been like having cold water thrown in her face. It definitely got her attention. Maybe that been Physic's whole plan, to force Coeur's hand to try and let her regular sensibilities reassert themselves.

That's a far cry, Coeur thought, *from the gabby, naïve doctor that I knew a lifetime ago*. Physic had had some serious growing up to do along the way, and had to bear the burden of events in a way no other member of the *Hornet's* crew had. If Physic was truly willing to throw her RCES career out an airlock just for the chance to snap her friend out of her stupor, then maybe that bore further thought.

She took another long deep breath. This darkness was not going to go away anytime soon, she knew. Emotions didn't work that way. There's no miraculous wave of magic wand to make the hurt go away. No, she would have to come to terms with all of this at some point.

But that would have wait for another day.

Her hand moved to the comm. Raven's voice answered on the line

"Yes, Captain?" there was the barest hint of surprise in her voice.

"We've received some new information on the Alpha Bank. I need to brief you on it ASAP. Please bring everything you've gathered so far to my quarters so we can coordinate our efforts."

"Yes, sir!" Raven's voice sound almost jubilant. "I'll be right there!"

Considering the last time Coeur had spoken to her directly, Raven had been almost inconsolable. She too, had apparently jumped the initial hurdle and found herself again.

Well, perhaps I'm late to the party in that regard.

Placing her hands before her on the cold surface of her desk, she looked around the shadowy confines of her quarters with dissatisfaction. Her hand went to the light panel and the illumination levels rose slowly in the room. Slowly her eyes adjusted back to light.

She'd wasted a lot of time already, critical hours that she couldn't get back, but she couldn't do anything about now. An old sentiment from somewhere in a half-remembered childhood memory from Terra came echoing up to meet her conscious mind.

Grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; courage to change the things I can; and the wisdom to know the difference.

Yes, she had slipped up. Yes, she had let her emotions get the better of her. Yes, she had very nearly lost herself, but none of that mattered at the moment.
It was time to go to work.

* * *

Forty-two hours later, the ventral docking bay thundered with the reverberated sound of *Hornet's* maneuver drive. Rising steadily, the tuning-fork bow oriented itself towards the long stone shaft that led back out into the depths of space.

On the bridge, Coeur smoothly negotiated the long corridor of solid rock that had once been the mining corporation's first shaft burrowed into the surface of Lambda-3. *Hornet* responded a bit unsteadily at first, but now something about the controls seemed intensely satisfying and whiskey-smooth.

It's because you are where you need to be, a corner of her mind thought.

"Signal the locks," Coeur said to Deep Six at his familiar station.

"Signaling, aye," the Schalli said and sent the command with a flick of his barbels. The shaft had a complex series of airlocks built to expedite traffic in and out. At their present speed, the locks would start to close behind them, timed so that the outer door would open in time for their departure.

"It is good to have you back at the helm, sir," he said without glancing in her direction.

"Thank you, Sixer."

"Locks are engaging as scheduled," he said, back to business. "We should be starside inside of five."

Coeur hid a faint smile at her astrogator. She could feel that she was coming back to herself after the shock Physic had managed to deliver...but she wasn't all the way there just yet. With everything the ship and crew had to endure, she was intensely grateful for people like Deep Six. While she had been licking her mental wounds, people like Physic and Crowbar had been the centers of strength, rallying those around them as much as they could, bringing the weary flock back into the fold, doing essentially what should have been *her* job. She could see that clearly now.

Then there was Deep Six. He had seen her slip, seen her falter right before his very eyes. If anyone had a reason to doubt *Hornet's* commander it was him, but he hadn't. In the aftermath, the Schalli had been a near insuperable source of serenity and comfort to his shipmates. He radiated a kind of silent tranquility that Coeur only wished she could project. In times like this, it was practically impossible to stay in a sullen or tortured mood while in his presence. She only wished she had realized that fact before she had fallen so far into her current state.

Perhaps it was those large kindly eyes, or the "old soul" wisdom and poetry he seemed to carry with him that did it. It could've been the way he deliberately put the needs of others in front of his own. Or perhaps it was merely that he did not judge people the way humans might in his place.

Whatever it was, Coeur was grateful beyond words that he would be a constant presence on the bridge during what would be her lengthy rehabilitation. Something like a warm glow filled her as she thought of him and, by extension, her crew..

Her hand went to the comm panel and Crowbar's rugged features filled it.

"I'll be needing full power in a few moments." He nodded in acknowledgment. "Will she hold?"

Crowbar looked at her squarely in the eyes. "Yeah, Red, I think she will. She's taken her licks, but she won't let you down."

"Thank you." She said as he nodded again.

Ahead of the ship, the outer lock doors were slowly retracting back. The bay lights strobed red and yellow as they opened like metal jaws seen from the inside. Beyond them was an ever-widening patch of stars like gemstones scattered on black velvet.

Hornet neatly cleared the doors and arced slightly outward as the course for Kreuzung was being laid in. Waiting for them in a wide orbit around the asteroid was the welcome form of

Integrity. The warship made a ponderous track through the stars and her white hull seemed to almost glitter with her running lights burning like beacons in the night.

Dim sunlight from Kruyter's primary spilled over the edge of Lambda-3 as *Hornet* moved away from the SDB on a divergent course, illuminating her solid lines.

"*Integrity* sends her best wishes, sir." Deep Six said. "She says to tell you that...um, I believe the exact words were... 'an excruciatingly unpleasant universe of pain would be gleefully visited upon any other unwelcome guests that decide to come calling during *their* watch.'"

"Please convey my regards to Captain Bellenhall," she replied. "Tell him to watch his six, Sixer."

"Aye, sir," the astrogator said, evidently unaware of the pun.

Not only would *Integrity* be taking over recovery operations of the Lambda-3 complex, and sending her team any further information they found, but she would also be taking up station there for the foreseeable future. It didn't look as though any other ships had gotten away to warn their traitorous fellows of what had transpired at the hidey hole they had fashioned for themselves – which meant that if another comprised ship *did* come by, they would find a nasty surprise waiting for them in the form of a System Defense Boat.

She kept the ship on the rear display for quite some time as they went. She had passed the torch to others. Everything they could reasonably glean from that rock had been recorded and logged. Raven was still compiling the data, but Coeur was certain that her findings would be most...enlightening when the time finally came.

For now, she would concern herself with getting back into the proverbial saddle. She only hoped others would be inspired to do the same.

In space, *Hornet's* maneuver drive flared strong and sure as she made the series of course corrections, propelling her at her best speed towards the nerve center of Kruyter, and the safe haven that awaited her.

The private jet of Leon An-Wing, Sovereign Technarch of Honefestung, glided in to a silky smooth landing at the Dobroye landing field. Within moments, the sleek craft settled down into its own private docking slip that connected it to the spaceport's promenade. Normally, such a landing would have caused it to disembark passengers at a more private venue where a ground limo with government markings would whisk away the visiting V.I.P.s to whatever business had called them there. As the pilots of the jet had reason to believe, this was anything but an ordinary day, starting with four Stingray air superiority fighters had escorted them to the landing field.

An all's clear chime sounded in the passenger compartment, signaling Liu An-Wing, the Technarch's niece and heir, to remove her flight restraints and smooth the slightly rumpled lines of her black suit.

"Will you stop fiddling with that thing, you look fine." her companion and fellow Junior Technarch, Bela Marsaryk, said in an exasperated manner. "Good Gaia, I've known sand cats that preen themselves less than you do."

The Junior Technarch ignored Bela's comment as she stood and gazed at herself critically in the full length mirror that adorned the outside of the luggage bay. The image that stared back at her was tall and statuesque, dressed in a flatteringly tight business suit in her signature color – black. It was difficult at times to know where her shoulder-length glossy hair stopped and her suit began as she toyed with the strands, putting them back where they belonged. Really her colors were all a catalyst to make her smoldering coal black eyes leap out even more than normal.

As her role these days in Honefestung was largely diplomatic, her appearance was an extremely important asset to her effectiveness – and she spared nothing to keep that particular weapon in her arsenal honed and ready. The routine of rigorous self-attention Liu afforded herself only served to provide Bela with an endless supply of impatient sighs, as his own bookish features tended to be disheveled in one way or another. This had the effect of making him look rather like the brilliant, but somewhat awkward scholar he was.

"On of these days you're going to take so long to finish primping that I'll be an old man well into my dotage, with only the most tenuous grasp of reality, when you finally turn around."

"Grey hairs aside, how is that any different than now?" Liu said over her shoulder as she expertly re-applied her lipstick.

"A comedian!" Bela said to the empty compartment as though he had an audience. "Who would've guessed one lurked behind that stern façade!"

"I will at least look professional and dignified when we get to...wherever it is that we're going." Liu replied, with only a little of the uncertainty she felt coloring her voice.

"Assuming, that is, that the unknown parties are willing to wait an eon for you to finish lavishing attention on yourself, thus giving true meaning to the term, "fashionably late," Bela said tartly.

Neither of them really knew why they had been summoned to Dobroye in the first place. If it hadn't been for a vague, if politely worded, invitation from Technarch Mestrovic himself neither of the Junior Technarchs would've been here. With Leon An-Wing in closed door sessions with the Council of Technarchs, and out of touch for the past five days that had left Liu, as Leon's heir, the *de facto* representative of Honefestung.

Usually, she would have to decline such a summons from another Technarch, as not to abandon her post with her uncle away. This was hardly any Technarch, this was a personal invitation from arguably the most powerful man on the planet, with whom her own house maintained an old and binding alliance. To refuse would have been an insulting breach of proper protocol, and that was simply unacceptable, even if the purpose of their courtesy call remained unclear.

At length, Liu looked at her reflection approvingly and exited the docking elbow into the port proper with Bela in tow. As the unlikely pair stepped out into the docking ring, preceded by their four muscular bodyguards, silence greeted them. The rows upon rows of plastic seats were empty. No passengers, or employees for that matter, populated the broad hallways. The shops and restaurants were closed up behind metal shutters. The whole scene looked strangely surreal. It was enough that the Junior Technarchs stopped in their tracks and looked around, perplexed and then looked to one another in a shared mental shrug.

"Are we in the right place?" Bela said consulting the bulky mini-comp perpetually strapped to his forearm. Liu detected a trace of confusion behind their bodyguards' mask of professionalism.

"So far as I can tell, we are."

"This is weird, Liu."

"You're telling me."

"I don't like this, we should go back." he said with a glance at the screen comp, "I just got a download from the infonet. It says the whole port has been shut down due to a bomb threat made by the rebels."

"A claim which I can assure you was false," a voice said as a man in uniform appeared from around the corner, the silver and gold arms of Mestrovic's house flashing on his lapels. "Otherwise I would not be not here."

The bodyguards tensed and closed up around the Junior Technarchs at his sudden appearance. The man in the uniform ignored them and looked directly at Liu.

"Ah, Ms. An-Wing," the man said crisply. "I'm Lieutenant Antonov, Technarch security detachment. I've been instructed by my lord to convey you to Government House straight away, and to deliver this to you personally." He produced a rolled up piece of paper and handed it over to Liu's bodyguard who then delivered it to his charge after a moment's consideration.

Liu examined the paper as she unfurled it, aware that Bela's curious eyes were looking over her shoulder. The letter was hand-written in a flowing script that read:

Ms. An-Wing,

I pray that you forgive my unorthodox request for your arrival, but let me doubly assure you that it is for the best of all concerned. I am truly overjoyed that you could honor my humble request for a visit on such short notice, as it is been far too long since we had a chance to confer.

And to that point, I have spoken with your esteemed uncle, and it is our considered opinion that you are in a unique position to help both of our houses, and by extension, Oriflamme herself. I do hope that these meager words have served to pique your interest, and I look forward to satisfying any curiosity you might have as a result when you arrive.

With regards,

Vitali Fyodorovich Mestrovic.

Below the Technarch's name was Mestrovic's official seal which consisted of an inverted silver triangle surmounted by a golden flame. There was no denying the seal's authenticity, as the house's standard spoke almost as loudly as the elaborately flourished signature whose confident self-assurance in every letter and stroke were characteristically that of Mestrovic himself.

Liu nodded to the Lieutenant to lead on. "Very well, see that our luggage is stowed properly before we leave."

Antonov's eyebrows went up at Liu's use of the word *our*. His eyes darted to Bela's spring-tense form. "With respect, ma'am, I was only instructed to convey you to my lord." He consulted a data pad in his gloved hand for a moment, as Liu's expression darkened.

"Here we are," he said while still looking down at the screen. "We have a different transport waiting for you in Terminal B, doctor." Liu saw her friend smile slightly at the honorific, even though he was still a few months from officially earning that form of address. "I believe my lord wished to ply your socio-economic expertise to matters of another kind, discreetly, of course."

"Of course," Bela said with a sidelong look at Liu. "I live to serve."

The two friends turned to face each other.

"Well..." Bela began, aware that their company was parting.

"Don't take too long," Liu said over him, "there's only so much of your didactic droning that even experts can stand before dying of boredom." She put her hand on his shoulder and her

face broke into a genuine smile, the first one Bela had seen her wear in since their return to Oriflamme months ago. He felt warmed by that sunny expression and squeezed her hand firmly.

"It would appear your shameless amount of self-attention wasn't for nothing after all," he said with a half-smile. "Knock 'em dead, Liu."

"Get back to Honefestung as soon as you can." She said simply. "Take care of yourself."

With that she turned with a nod to the Lieutenant and made her way down the empty corridors, bodyguards in tow. He watched her go until the voice of one of his bodyguards interrupted him.

"Your transport awaits, sir."

It had been the first time the bodyguard had spoken to him directly in long memory. Normally, he was so quiet that Bela had wondered if the brutish looking man were capable of actual speech. Now that he was talking, there was something odd to his voice, something that made Bela feel somehow...cold.

"This way, if you please," the man said, "doctor."

* * *

Less than an hour later, Liu An-wing was ushered into the presence of the most powerful man on Oriflamme. Curiosity gnawed at her, but she relaxed and presented the same controlled, yet attentive presence that was her trademark. Her appearance was flawless, and she could tell her many ministrations were amply noted as she strode confidently in the Technarch's modestly-styled office.

Behind his enormous desk, the Technarch glanced up at her. The grey eyes that looked at her could've belonged to a holoivid actor, and an accomplished one at that. They were bright and expressive, filled with conviction, much like the man himself. The slightest glance or sidelong look could communicate volumes. Of all his personal attributes, his eyes were perhaps his greatest political asset, along with a following and a powerbase that was unrivalled in the Coalition.

"Ms. An-Wing," he said standing and spreading his arms wide. "It does my heart a service to see you again." His smile was as smooth and polished as his voice. He came around from the desk and clasped both her hands warmly. Ms. Gashugam, his office director, quietly shut the double doors to the Technarch's inner sanctum.

"Can I offer you anything in the way of refreshments?" he said, pouring himself a tumbler full of burgundy liquid from a sideboard.

"No, thank you, Councilor," she said with her most sincere smile. "I'm fine for now." He motioned for her to sit in one of the plush chairs and she did so, crossing her long legs. There were not many on Oriflamme that could get away with calling this man simply 'councilor' instead 'my lord', 'your lordship' or some other subservient referential. She was quite sure that those from other worlds in the RC were truly unable to imagine the kind of direct power that a Technarch wielded in their own sovereign territory. They were, in practice, like a king or queen, just as Oriflamme itself was really a league of these independent monarchs working in concert. As such, as the heir to House Honefestung, she was for all intents and purposes a visiting member of royalty in Mestrovic's lands. The ancient oath between their houses allowed a measure of informality, but Liu never allowed herself to forget just who and what Mestrovic represented.

Power.

Even if she became a full Technarch herself, she doubted that she would ever wield the kind of influence that the short, distinguished looking man in front of her held with deceptive ease. It was no secret that Mestrovic was the most powerful out of all Council of Technarchs. As one of the most powerful men on Oriflamme, one of the two most heavily populated planets in the RC, his personal influence could only be matched by someone like Lon Maggart, the current Secretary General of the Reformation Coalition. Most other planetary leaders didn't even come close to commanding the allegiance of so many or having their merest whim bearing the weight of law. It was only because Liu had grown up walking in such high political circles that she was able act as though they stood on level ground, not as a servant, but as an equal.

"I appreciate you coming on such criminally short notice," he said with a playful look. "I'm sure that I gave your Major domo absolute fits."

"I'm sure she'll recover."

"No doubt." He sipped from his port. "Now, I know you must be wondering what this is all about, so I won't beat around the bush as the saying goes." He waited for her approval before he continued.

"Now, as you have heard, we've been having some difficulty with the rebels of late," he said, suddenly serious. "What the news isn't telling you, however, is just how *much* trouble. I'm afraid that 'bad' isn't enough to describe it. You see, over the last twenty hours, they've hit eleven locations in my territory alone, and only two of them were military in nature." His eyes darkened. "Just this morning it was a public transport terminal during a peak hour."

Liu's eyes widened. She hadn't heard even a whisper of this. Certainly there were no reports of this coming from Honefestung.

"I'm sorry," she said.

"And I as well," he answered. "They have hit us in several key areas not just here, but in space as well. Their coordination was startlingly precise and rumors abound that one or more of the outer fiefs have already fallen to the enemy, though we can't get word to know for sure." He sighed. "It is because of this crisis that the Council is still in closed door meetings, as much for their safety as anything else. There has already been one attempt to bomb the Council Chamber as it is, an attempt, I'm glad to say, that failed."

"My uncle? Is he alright?" Her heart was beating quickly in her chest.

"Yes, child," he said in a fatherly voice. "He is well. I spoke with him just this morning. Even though he is sequestered with the others for safety, he asked that I see to your immediate safety."

He saw the dawning horror that she was trying desperately to conceal.

"Right now, we are trying not to cause a panic, as that is exactly what the rebels want – anarchy, chaos and mass social destabilization. I left the Council chambers yesterday to attend to this crisis here when the full scope of rebels' deeds was made clear to me. It is bad out there, very bad. It was fortunate that I was in the position to bring you to a safe haven."

"I am fortunate for that," she said, "but your letter said something about being in a unique position to help Oriflamme, or words to that effect."

"Indeed. While it was a discreet way to bring you here without unduly alarming you, there is more to it than that. If you'll forgive me, I knew that you would hardly refuse my invitation, which I treaded upon heavily to get you here."

"I see."

He was right, it would've been a great *faux pas* to refuse, and he knew that when he had issued it.

"So what can I do to help?"

"Simple," he said. "You can stay safe until order is fully restored. To that end, it was your uncle's wish that you leave the planet with me immediately until he can be sure that it is safe to return."

She shook her head in confusion. "Wait, leave? Now? With all this going on? I can't."

"Yes, you can," he said definitely, "and what's more you will. Leon is an old friend of mine. His family is like my own, and I will do what is necessary to ensure that both of our houses are maintained." There was a bit of an edge to his voice and his grey eyes were hard.

"But, if my own lands are in danger, I can't leave, I..."

"Liu," he said, with a softer look in her direction. "All of the Technarchs are leaving the system with as many of the junior Technarchs until this crisis has passed. This *includes* your uncle. The situation has grown that dire, I assure you."

Liu was generally taken aback by that. If things were that bad her uncle had an *obligation* to stay and protect their vassals and holdings and property, not running away with his tail between his legs.

"Ah, I see your moral dilemma," he said, "and I share it. It seems hardly the duty of a Technarch to flee the scene like rats from a sinking ship, I know. Though it is a distasteful course of action, we *must* survive this. In the end, we *are* Oriflamme." He said with sweep of his hand that encompassed them both. "If they manage to eliminate us, then they will have dealt

Oriflamme a mortal blow, one from which she might not recover. The chaos the rebels so earnestly desire will become a reality. Brother will rise up against brother slaying each other for control of each fiefdom. In short, our realm will tear itself apart. Anarchy will rule the day and untold millions will suffer, unless," he let his voice trail off. "Unless we are able to step back in and reassert lawful control once our combined military forces have restored order and punished the guilty."

She had looked down as he spoke, a panoptic vision of fire, death and darkness playing out on holoscreen of her imagination. Tears began to well up, but she blinked them back.

"Do you understand what I'm saying, Liu?"

She looked into those luminous grey eyes and her world, so neat and tidy a few moments ago, seemed to make sense again. She could not ask for a greater champion to see to her safety than the most powerful of them all, and he was doing this out of a personal sense of loyalty to her House, a house that was truthfully nothing more than a limpet that had attached itself to a whale.

"Yes, Councilor," she said. "I see your point. I am sorry I questioned your wisdom."

"Nonsense," he scoffed. "If ever there was a time for questioning the wisdom of established institution, it's now. It is only because your sense of duty is so strong that you have difficulty. You have a great potential, Liu An-Wing, and until such time as I release you to your uncle, I will act as your guardian to make sure that that potential will be fully realized."

"Again, thank you," she said. "I don't know what to say."

"Thanks are not required, and neither are words, my dear. Everything has been taken care of. We will leave promptly tomorrow on a great expedition and when we return, our Houses will prove stronger than when we left."

"Yes, I understand."

"Good! Now Ms. Gashugam will show you to your quarters for the night and attend to your every need. I have much to attend to before we leave, so I must devote myself to it. We will speak again soon, alright?"

As if on cue, his severe-looking office director opened the doors and motioned for her to exit.

"My lord," she said warmly, standing and bowing to him.

"My lady," he replied with a nod.

* * *

August Delpero stared out of his armored ground limo and marveled at the endless row of empty streets and closed storefronts. No, he amended, they weren't quite empty. Occasionally, he caught glimpses of men in uniform patrolling the surreal thoroughfares and boulevards of Dobroye City proper. August had been here twice in the past and normally found the cityscape bustling with all sorts of activities, a far cry from what he was seeing now.

"Will you stop worrying?" Vega Zorn said in the seat next to him. "You get that little crease in your forehead. Pretty unattractive if you ask me." She laid her hand on his knee.

"There is no cause for alarm, Mr. Delpero," Mr. Kim said from a facing seat. "It's all a necessary precaution for your arrival, I assure you."

"It's also a sign that things are going according to plan so far," Mr. Halafast said. "So, it looks like we won't have to wait too long to get started."

Delpero looked back out the window, seeing his own reflection overlaid on the blank, moving scenery. *Lord Ryan* had made Oriflamme orbit in short order and the four of them had taken the shuttle down to Dobroye's downport. It was still going to take some getting used to that this unpleasant world would be where he revived his fortunes.

Once Mr. Kim and Mr. Halafast had revealed what lay ahead, it didn't really surprise him. After all, Oriflamme had wanted to usurp Aubaine's authority even before the Reformation had reorganized itself out of the old Dawn League. As an Aubani himself, Delpero had been on the receiving end of those sentiments a time or two while visiting. The Oriflammen quality for believing themselves superior to everyone else, despite all evidence to the contrary, struck him as amusing. Then again, it was a typical Aubani response to think that most Oriflammen were prickly, backwards, ego-maniacal backwater rustics whenever they got up on a soap box.

In many ways, that's what would make his revenge so fitting. All of those aristocratic, arrogant hangers-on that had abandoned him to his fate would be crushed by the same barbarians they thought were too stupid to ever truly be a threat. The very thought made him nearly woozy with delight.

While he had never had much use for Oriflamme before, he was fastly coming to the realization that their ideas of how a government should be facilitated were in keeping with his own views on the subject. It should be perfectly obvious to anyone in authority that power had to be maintained within a privileged few and not frittered among the masses. A true democracy, such as the one most Aubani envisioned for the Reformation Coalition, just wasn't practical. If Humanity was ever going to rebuild itself on anywhere near the scale of the Third Imperium, then men of vision would be needed to set the course. Such inspired leadership was largely useless, or even detrimental if those with the vision didn't have the authority to bring it about such as Cleon The Great had done more than a millennia ago.

This revolution, and that, he discovered, was precisely what it was, would see to that – and he was on the ground floor of it. He would be one of the architects of the future and one day, long after he was gone, future generations would look back on him and his cohorts as the guiding hand that had reached down and pulled the human race from the ashes and taught them to stand tall and reclaim the stars.

This was what he was meant to do, he was sure. His whole life, his rise and fall, had all been leading to this moment, and he was determined to make the most of it.

He was eager to get started.

"We're here," the burly driver announced. August looked outside to see the imposing walls of Government House dominating the landscape. It was palatial, as much as it looked like a castle from some by-gone age had been transported here, though one that availed itself of modern protections as noted by its conspicuous lack of windows and numerous security towers.

The driver opened the door for him and Delpero stepped into the late morning sunlight. A swarm of security personnel, some in plain clothes and some in uniform, buzzed around them, securing the area and bringing him through the thick gates of the Technarch's personal residence. They directed him unerringly through the myriad of galleries and rooms that terminated with an expansive office.

Moments later a middle-aged woman whose demeanor could only charitably be called 'stern' opened the doors into the inner office. The four of them entered and the man inside turned to greet them. It was this man, as Delpero understood it that was the mastermind behind the entire operation.

"Ms. Gashugam," the Technarch said. "Bring our guests some refreshments, will you? I'm sure it's been a while since they've had a real meal."

August stepped forward and extended his hand. "Lord Mestrovic, I doubt you remember our previous meeting, but I am August Delpero."

The shorter man took his hand firmly with a smile.

"How could I forget?" he laughed. "It was at that dreadfully dull affair back on Spencer a good while back, was it not?" August nodded to him. "It is not often you meet such a luminary of industry such as yourself, even if the food was nearly inedible."

"And the 'entertainment' was anything but," Delpero added.

They both laughed, and Delpero felt as though he had made an instant friend. It was one of those rare moments in his life where he had met another person with the same kind of drive and way of thinking as himself. Immediately it was like they had been fast friends for years. If the laughter in the other man's grey eyes was any indication, he felt the same way.

"Ms. Zorn," he said turning from August. "How lovely you look. Have you been taking care of our extraordinary friend here?" he said with a glance at Delpero.

"Trying to," she said with a half-grin. "Sometimes it's a full-time job."

Mestrovic beamed and acknowledged Mr. Kim and Mr. Halafast.

"Come in sit down, all of you, make yourself comfortable, please."

Delpero seated himself, and as he did a slight whiff of perfume reached his nose. A woman had sat here recently, and if the enticing floral scent was any indication, she was *pretty*. You didn't wear a perfume like that unless you wanted to call attention to yourself. Delpero had

played the tomcat enough times to know that much at least. Mestrovic might be middle-aged, but if he entertained ladies like that, August's estimation of him went even higher.

"We have much to discuss before our departure." Mestrovic said, "but let me first thank you for throwing your lot in with us. I know it can't have been easy."

"It was not without its share of challenges." He returned levelly.

"Ah! You are a cool customer! I see that our read of you was accurate!"

"Thank you."

"Now in a little while we will need to retire to a final meeting to go over last minute details. It will be a good opportunity for you to meet the senior officers before we disembark."

"Before then," he continued, "Let's take this opportunity to get to know one another in detail. Ms. Zorn has said nothing but good things about you, and I for one, am excited to have you onboard."

"The honor is all mine."

"Now where we do we begin?"

Delpero wasn't sure how long they sat there exchanging life experiences and philosophy. It must've been hours, but the conversation never once lapsed into awkward silences. If anything they had to try not to overlap each other as they were excited to speak on whatever topic they happened upon. Throughout it all, Delpero knew that he had arrived, and it would be glorious.

His star was coming into ascendancy at last.

* * *

The briefing room was quickly filling up as the heart and soul of the upcoming operation took their respective places. Arriving last was Mestrovic himself, August Delpero and Vega Zorn. The senior officers from both the newly reformed Navy of the Technocracy as well as the Soleean Navy were here for this last briefing before the expedition set out.

Sitting at the black semicircular table was Admiral Shannon Hayward, the senior flag officer in the TN. He had been the first to enter the room, and harbored no doubts that he would be the last to leave. As the others settled in, datapads and coffee cups in hand, he sat very still, quietly gazing around him. He had already put everything in order, down to the last detail. The beast was about to be let out of its cage and Hayward would be at the forefront of it. It was ironic that as far as the RCN believed, he was still Commodore "Green Knight" Hayward, dutifully attending his command in the Helios system – certainly not the man about to bring the cleansing flame to the Reformation Coalition like a modern-day Prometheus.

He had been the natural choice to head up this operation on behalf of Oriflamme. He had the command experience, the professional expertise and the leadership necessary to carry out Operation Equinox to successful conclusion, but that wasn't the only reason he had been chosen to carry the standard of Oriflamme into battle. No, the real reason was that he was a patriot, as sure and true as could be. What he was *not*, however, was a monster.

Any revolution attracted its share of fanatics. Shannon Hayward was not among them. Ironically, he saw himself as a 'moderate' revolutionary, if such an animal actually existed. Viscerally, he knew that any revolution could potentially tear itself apart as the possibility of victory came within reach. Too many groups would want their agendas and policies to shape the new order, even *before* the shooting stopped. And when this revolution, and Hayward did not fool himself into thinking it was anything else, came to that point, he would be there with a steady hand to shepherd the great endeavor to its ultimate end.

A burning need for change glowed in his heart, sure as the legendary Golden Flame itself, to such a degree even his closest friends and family did not know how much he believed this change *needed* to take place. Oddly enough, he had always considered himself to be an apolitical officer while he served the RCN. A career spent under the pie-in-the-sky wishful thinking of the current regime had slowly begun to erode his neutrality. Too many years of having to use officially-sanctioned 'Star Viking' tactics, endlessly justified to him as being 'morally right' only underscored to him what monumentally self-serving hypocrites the whole Aubani leadership really was. Too many years of seeing his own people not come home because of some ill-conceived, slapdash operation had worn away his belief in the Reformation Coalition with every letter he'd

written to the families of the fallen. Too much blood had been spilled on a score of worlds, but what had it accomplished? What had it all been for? What had the Aubani done with their spoils besides sit back and feel pleased with themselves?

Nothing. Absolutely nothing.

There came a critical point when someone had to stand up and declare, "No more!" That time was at hand now, Hayward thought as he glanced down at the Admiral's stripes on a sleeve of the his uniform, one which bore no resemblance to the uniform he'd worn since he was seventeen.

There was no small amount of regret that no matter the outcome of their campaign, he would never again wear his old uniform. Sacrifices had to be made for a revolution to wipe the slate clean, and this was one of them. The same went for bold-faced lies being told to the Oriflammen public right now, not the mention the ones he'd facilitated himself on the part of the Navy. The whole business of the rebels and the emergency powers enacted as a consequence were a complete fabrication. It had been a ruse for Mestrovic to seize control of the government and keep the planet in a passive state until such time as he returned the triumphant conqueror.

It galled him that the new age would be founded on a bed of lies, but that again was something he would just have to swallow. Though he was not a cynic, he was a realist enough to know that practically every forcible change in government had used lies and propaganda to grease the wheels until their power base was secure. This one would be no different, and that would just be something he'd have to live with.

He raised his gaze and looked around at the others, his eyes making a tour of the room. Representing the Technocracy on his side of the table, was Boris Seitzmann, the combined Marine Commander, looking as fit and determined as ever. To the Admiral's right sat his flag Captain, Helena Paige, whose brilliance commanded his own flagship, *Phoenix*. She had served as his right hand on Helios, and he was thankful that she had shared enough of his own sentiments to come over to their side when he had asked her. To her credit, she hadn't even hesitated. To his left was his chief of staff, Captain Gunther Ockley, who had also come with him from Helios. He had managed the administrative paper trail that had allowed so many units to secretly leave their posts and join Gold Fleet, which had nearly been an insurmountable task by itself. For the cause, he had been worth his weight in gold. In fact, the Majority of his command team had seen things his way once he had felt them out, and now, they were all in it together.

Across from him sat the ISN contingent. Chief among them was Admiral Monique Alcantara. Over the last year, Hayward had to come to know her. Their combined endless drills and simulator experience told him enough to know that she was extraordinarily competent at her job. If anything, she would have been senior to him in experience, if the operation was being conducted in her jurisdiction rather than in his. She was an attractive woman, too, in his estimation with straight honey blonde hair that curled down her to her shoulders and hazel eyes that seemed to leap out at an observer. The black, silver and gold uniform of the ISN seemed determined to accentuate her figure, but Hayward knew better than to let himself be distracted by that. The woman was a bird of prey, with the eagle-eyed stare that would make any predator envious.

To her right sat her flag Captain, Seth Emory. Nearly as tall and broad-shouldered as Hayward himself, Emory was the CO of the *Golden Flame*, the most powerful ship currently in their order of battle, even if it was on loan from a foreign Navy. Emory had always struck him as being a decent sort of fellow, though his serious demeanor could make him nigh-unapproachable at times. He also seemed completely without the knife-edge severity of his fellow officers. Of all the foreign officers that Hayward had to work with, Emory was one he wished he could keep when their work was done.

Facing across from Seitzmann were the inseparable duo, Mr. Kim and Mr. Halafast. Their customary business suit had finally given way to the uniforms of their native service and both bore the chevrons of a commander on their collar, denoting their service within the Solee's Department of Naval Intelligence. From Hayward's understanding, the two handsome spooks had been on loan to Mestrovic for some time now, helping to lay the groundwork for what was to come. Mestrovic had even informed him that they had played a role in the Hiver outbreak on Ra. The Grand Technarch had caught wind of the Guild's scheme to eradicate the Hivers and sent these two to help Vega Zorn during her operations there, when she had been 'working' for the

Guild...while still on the payroll of Oriflamme. The twosome had apparently posed as doctors and been the first to administer the Hiver Folgorex poison to a living subject. Hayward had never possessed the boundless hatred of Hivers that Zorn, Delpero or Mestrovic seemed to have. If they were any indication to the Hivers' time in Reformation space was going to be limited once the Revolution had run its course.

Finally, on the other side of Alcantara sat one of her other officers, Captain Gaylon Fox of the *Royal Vengeance*. If there was a successor to Alcantara's way of thinking, it was surely this man. Outwardly, he was everything an officer should be – intelligent, diligent, and exacting. Yet he took those qualities a step further into the realm of sophistication, coupled as it were with a smooth manner that belied his cold nature. Despite his suave and sometimes cavalier attitude, Hayward was sure that if you cut the man, he would bleed ice water. He was also to be the senior ISN officer in the Hayward's own battle group. Though he had shown genius-level thinking in the exercises they had conducted in secret, there was something about the man Hayward didn't like, something akin to the unease of knowing a gun had been unholstered in your presence, an expectancy of danger.

On the whole, the ISN's presence brought with it a wealth of ships and experience such that the plans for the operation had been accelerated by several years, but it hadn't been his idea. The decision to involve the Solee at all had originated with Mestrovic.

For Hayward's part, he didn't like involving outsiders into such a sensitive situation, nor did he fully trust the 'good neighbors' reasoning they gave for sending such a large portion of war materials their way. But, the decision had not been his to make, and, like many Admirals in human memory, he had to make the best of a situation while having to account for factors beyond his control. In any case, Oriflamme was never going to be more ready than she was now, even if the average man on the street didn't, and wouldn't, know anything about it until it was all over.

Mestrovic, Delpero and Zorn took their seats, exchanging small talk. Hayward eyed the former CEO casually, his years of naval service allowing him to size up the other man in an instant. Hayward knew the man's reputation in the business sector, and Delpero, now a fugitive of the law, was a reminder that there was no going back.

Everyone was in place. It was time to begin. He stood and folded his data pad under his arm. While this meeting was mainly for the sake of the civilians, thus a relatively small number of attendees, Hayward had insisted on presenting it himself. He could have easily had Helena or one of his Lieutenants do the job, but here, on the eve of their departure, it seemed out of place for anyone else to do this for him.

The lights dimmed and a display lit up behind the podium as he came to stand behind it. The repeater screen in front of him came to ready status and he brought up a star map of Reformation Coalition space.

"Ladies and Gentlemen," he said and his voice ended all side conversations. They all turned their attention to him. "We find ourselves at the moment of truth. There are many that will not understand what we are trying to accomplish here. Those of us on the Oriflammen side will be branded as nothing less than traitors, as we are all fully aware. I am, however, reminded of the quote, 'In the end, treason is a matter of dates.'"

He scanned the room. Those of the ISN were unmoved, but Seitzmann, Paige and Ockley sat statue still. It was one thing to know you were turning against the establishment, but another to be branded a traitor. If you could live with that black mark, then the rest would be relatively easy by comparison.

Relatively.

"Nevertheless, we will persevere, and let history bear the responsibility of judging our actions. Until that time, we will move forward as our conscience dictates. To that end," the map zoomed in on the trailing portion of the RC space. "Here is what we're going to do.

"First, we will split our immediate order of battle into two groups, designated Gold-1 and Gold-2, commanded by Admiral Alcantara and myself respectively. Those units with a Jump-3 or better rating will be assigned to Gold-2, while many of the Jump-2 units will form Gold-1. If you will notice, this will necessitate Gold-2 being comprised of about a third of our overall tonnage available for this operation, while Gold-1 will carry the lion's share."

There were some officers that would've taken umbrage at being relegated to a secondary command during initial action had they been in Hayward's position. The decision to divvy up the fleet was based on the capabilities of their available ships. Gold-2 was much less impressive, just as *Phoenix* was not nearly in the league with *Golden Flame*, but, Hayward was not about to let his ego eclipse his good sense. Besides, Mestrovic had decided to tag along, and having him aboard the biggest fortress they could find was fine with him. If Mestrovic was lost, the revolution would falter and die. There was no one that could possibly match his force of personality, or his drive, Hayward was sure.

"Once we've secured the middle ground, Gold Fleet will rendezvous before proceeding to Phoebus. There we will meet up with Gold-3, our stationing force that's already in place.

"Given the timetables, Phoebus should already be locked down, and serve as a staging ground once Gold Fleet arrived. Any escaping ships from their initial attack would almost have to go to Phoebus on their way to warn Aubaine. If they did, Gold-3 would intercept them on their way.

"We will then add Gold-3 to our order of battle before we refuel, re-supply and move against Aubaine itself."

He felt the tension ratchet up in the room. Aubaine, for all its disconnection from what others called reality, was heavily defended. Even though system defenders couldn't hope to stand against the combined might of Gold Fleet, they would not go without a fight. Once the capitol fell, however, they would have cleared their biggest hurdle.

Their plan depended heavily on two elements – surprise and isolation. One was essential to maintain the other. If they could take Aubaine by surprise before she had a chance to pull reinforcements from other systems, they could crush resistance in smaller, more manageable pockets, while the Technocracy forces remained primarily concentrated.

"From there," he continued, "the only remaining forces of sufficient strength will be Aurora and Spencer, based on their current deployment. As for Spencer, we have yet another stationing force there, Gold-4, which will secure the system with a preemptive strike about the time we arrive at Phoebus. As for Aurora, we've managed to bait many of their heavier units out of position to spinward with rumors of mass Vampire activity."

He was making it seem all very matter-of-fact, but the truth was that he knew many of the people he would face personally, and none of them yet knew that he was their enemy. That was just another thing he would have to live with.

"We will split Gold-2 back off from our forces and they will move coreward to occupy Kruyter. After that, we will take our remaining forces, minus a very powerful occupation force to protect Aubaine, and move directly against Aurora. Once those three Major systems have fallen, we will send envoys in force to the other systems, informing them of that the Reformation Coalition is no more, and that it would be in their best interest to join us in the revolution."

There was a slight laugh that went through the room, but it held little humor. Hayward would go out of his way to ensure that casualties were at an absolute minimum, but he wasn't fooling himself. People were going to die, and he will have been the architect of their deaths.

"Now, that's the bird's eye view of Equinox," He said and the map reset itself. "Let's take a look at the nuts and bolts of the operation in detail, shall we?"

He gripped the sides of the podium, taking a ten second mental breather with which to exorcise any all doubts he might entertain. There was no room for any of it now. He had to be the man Oriflamme needed at this turning point of events.

That was all there was to it.

"We'll start with Spires..."

* * *

Mestrovic reclined comfortably in his chair, listening to the Admiral's steady voice. He was going to prove a valuable asset to the cause, the Grand Technarch decided, both during the Revolution, and certainly after. He was tall and ruggedly good-looking, with the bright eyes of a fighter pilot and the kind of commanding visage that would play well with the holovids. He would play his part just as Mestrovic intended, adding a sense of legitimacy that the military would be

inclined to swallow, lock, stock and barrel. And if he faltered...well, Mestrovic had several methods at his command with which to guide the good Admiral back to the light. He had left nothing to chance.

A great sense of satisfaction suffused the small man. It had been his genius, his ingenuity that had undone Aubani supremacy, even if the Aubani themselves didn't quite know it yet. He had been the guiding force behind this revolution, and now on the eve of it all, he felt a rapt sense of anticipation. Everything that had happened up until now had been leading to this point, and he could feel the hand of destiny guiding him.

In his mind's eye, the universe was burning, and he watched from beyond the stars, looking down on the pitiful state of man, knowing that he had been the one to set the flame. The old would soon be burned away in the cleansing fires of *ekpyrosis*, burned down to the foundations and beyond. All that *was* would be set aflame at the hour of his ascension.

He leaned his head back and tasted that dream. It was sweet. It was glorious. Then, when all was ashes, the fire would give birth to the legendary phoenix, and its burning wings would spread across the stars and shape the course of the future.

He would be the phoenix reborn.

He would be both the destroyer and creator.

He would be the shepherd of the soul's of men.

He would be Father. He would be God. As the others in the room listened to the superfluous details of what was to come, Mestrovic retreated into the promised realms of the world that would be.

And in his mind, he watched it burn.

Chapter 12

Denise Valencia stood upon the waves of a boundless, roaring ocean that filled her vision from horizon-to-horizon. A cold blue light that seemed borne from neither day nor night filtered through fast-moving black clouds as storms raged all around her in the distance.

Blue lightning split the sky in a pyrotechnic fireworks display that ebbed and flowed to a heartbeat that she heard faintly from somewhere. It seemed to be getting closer. Something deep within her reeled from the approaching sound. A corner of her mind wanted to be far, far way from whatever was coming her way.

She turned her gaze away.

Sand crunched between her toes. Looking down, she found that she now stood upon a vast white beach that ended abruptly at a line of trees. Moving with lethargy, she brought herself directly into the woods.

But that same sound followed her even there. A primal, blinding fear began to well up in her. She *had* to get away, that she knew. She plunged even deeper into the forest, but the dreaded sound that was fastly eroding her mind with the fear it brought. She was hunted now, she was sure, and the hunter was not far behind.

Abruptly, she stopped as she found herself at the edge of an unfathomably high precipice. The waves crashed and broke upon the jagged rocks below. The dizzying height made her head swim.

Now, there was nowhere left to run.

"*What? What do you want?*" She cried, near hysterically, to the turbulent skies that continued to crackle with flashing Jovian bolts overhead. "I have nothing more to give you! Do you hear...*nothing!*"

"Snapper?" a familiar voice came from behind her. Whirling around, an armored figure stepped from the tree line. "Are you okay?"

"Vin?" she said weakly, seeing the markings on his armor. "Is that you?"

"Of course, it's me," he said, the blue light curving around his fully enclosed helmet. "Don't worry...I will protect you. With my life if I have to." He spread his metal arms wide in an expected embrace and she flew to him.

Her arms encircled him fiercely and she laid her head on his chest.

"I never wanted *any* of this." She sobbed. "The way they look at me now, out of the corner of their eye – I can't stand it! They think I don't see it, but it's all so clear."

"Yes, they think you're a traitor." Something about the tone of his voice made her look up at the closed visor. "And with good reason." His voice sent daggers into heart.

"But you don't think that I...that I would ever...*could* ever..."

She pulled away from him, finding dark spots on her skin where his hands had touched her.

It was blood.

He held his hands up where she could see, almost in a gesture of supplication. Blood dripped from his hands like rain drops.

"This is how I reward traitors." He said, his voice strangely menacing and alien. "This is what I am, Snapper, *never* forget that." The visor of his helmet slid up to reveal a face was a parody of the one she knew, the one she loved. In that moment she knew, the Angel of Death stood staring back at her.

"*No!*" she screamed as she scrambled back against the edge of the cliff.

That awful sound of the heartbeat returned, now to deafening proportions, but somehow she could still hear.

"Don't make this more difficult than it has to be." He reached out for her, seizing her wrist. His baleful red eyes seemed to fill her universe "I'll make it quick...I do love you, after all."

She heard herself scream as she tore away.

Then she was falling...falling...falling...

* * *

She woke in tears with a desperate inhalation of breath. A tremor surged through her whole body and for a moment she shook like a leaf in Autumn. Her heart was beating so fast that it echoed in her ears.

Her head lay on his chest, and through the pounding of her own heartbeat she could hear his. A feeling of relief flooded though her. It had just been a nightmare. It wasn't real. Her mind was playing tricks, letting off steam, or any number of clichés that could be assigned to it. The tears that pooled under her eyes, remained however, and even brushing them away, the wetness returned slowly.

Sitting up, she swung her legs over the edge of the bed. Cradling her head in her hands, she let it out, slow at first. Then it came in full. It felt like someone had punched her in the chest. Her jaw clenched and locked into place.

Behind her, she heard him stir into wakefulness. He always was a light sleeper.

"Denise?" he said, sleep coloring his voice. She felt him rolling over to face her. A warm hand settled on her shoulder. "What's wrong?"

She shrugged off his touch as though it burned like acid. She hadn't meant to show such revulsion. He didn't deserve that, but the dream had been so vivid, and her emotions were so

raw. Why couldn't he sense that the last thing she wanted right now was to be touched? Why couldn't he *know*?

"Snapper?" he said now, fully awake. "Talk to me."

She wanted to tell him what she was feeling, that her emotions were tangled and clouded. He knew her well, and had managed to help her through those times when she'd fallen down in the past, but this...this was too big. If she was unsure of her true feelings, outside of knowing that she was hurting, what were the odds that *he* would understand it if *she* didn't?

"Nothing." She lied. "Just...go back to sleep." She got up and went into the fresher space and closed the door, conscious of the fact that if she returned to bed, he would most definitely try to hold her. She waited in the fresher for what seemed like an eternity, splashing water on her face and taking in her ragged features in the mirror.

Then she removed her robe from the waiting peg wrapped it around her shoulders, belting it at the waist. Sliding the door open a crack, she heard him sleeping again. She gave him one long look before she hit the button to open the door and walked out.

Hours later, he woke up alone.

* * *

"*Hornet*, this is Kreuzeng Control, we have you on approach to Repair Bay One. Please acknowledge." a female voice said over the comm.

"Acknowledged, Control." Coeur said as the asteroid grew larger on her scope. Their flight path was slowing veering them towards one of the two repair bays reserved for the SDBs.

"Welcome back, *Hornet*. Control out."

The bay doors opened as they approached, spilling white light out into space. As the little ship passed through, the bridge was flooded with the illuminations through its viewports. It gave the compartment an almost angelic cast.

The doors sealed behind them as a set of zero-g cranes, nearly as big as the ship itself, reached out like the hands of a gentle giant and tugged the far trader securely into place. A docking tube extended from the structure and "elbowed" around to connect to *Hornet's* port airlock.

"Positive seal on the hatch, sir," Deep Six reported. "Ancillary umbilicals are being connected now."

"Thank you." She switched on the ship's intercom, which beeped distinctively with the "all hands" signal.

"We've just completed docking," she began. "Please find a stopping place to what you're doing and join me at the hatch to disembark." She paused. "But first, a few moments ago I received a statement from Director Serene, that she wished me to read aloud to all of you. It reads as follows." She cleared her throat and began to read the message verbatim from her panel.

To the intrepid crew of the RCS Hornet,

On behalf of the KruyterCorp. megacorporation, I would like to personally welcome you home and extend my eternal gratitude for your efforts on our account. For my part, there is no superlative I can find suitable enough to describe the Herculean task that you have accomplished or the service you have rendered to us. My colleagues and I are firmly of the belief that there is no finer ship in the fleet, nor any other crew worthy of steering her between the stars. We are all very proud of you, and look forward to expressing our thanks in person once you arrive.

There was a break in the statement obviously meant to show a pause and change of tone. It then continued:

And now that that is out of the way, you should know that we've arranged a welcoming party for all of you that is meant to be as decadent as is it is ostentatious. In fact, I think we've truly outdone ourselves this time. Should you find yourselves embarrassed beyond belief by the

continuous and persistent flow of compliments, thanks and praise, then we'll know we've done our job. Just remember, we mean every one of them. So, come on home, folks. The door is open. The table is set. Don't keep us waiting.

Sincerely,

*Tirese Serene
Director of Operations*

* * *

"I think that went pretty well," Director Serene said with a sip from her steaming coffee cup. "All things considered."

After the party finally wound down to its inevitable conclusion, Serene, Coeur, Physic, Raven and Gyro had retired to the Director's opulent office, to avail themselves of coffee and conversation. Drop Kick had been invited as one of Red Sun's senior officers, but politely declined, citing that he wouldn't want to get caught in what he called the "All Girls Club."

"I have to hand it to you, Tirese, this was a brilliant move for morale," Coeur said. "Thank you."

"Don't thank *me*," Serene said with dismissing gesture and a nod towards the doctor. "It was all Physic's idea, not mine."

"Guilty," Physic said with a coy smile as all eyes turned to her, "but you really raised the bar. Though I'm sure I may have to exercise for weeks to work off that meal, much less the desert!"

"I promised 'decadent,' didn't I?" Serene said.

"And you certainly delivered." Raven put in.

Shortly after leaving the ship, the crew of the *Hornet* found themselves as the guests of honor of a grand reception generally reserved for planetary leaders. There had been a sumptuous feast, live music, dancing and lots and lots of alcohol. Serene had even dipped into her personal stock of wine and liquor as a show of thanks. Sixer had even managed to find some Schalli *ee'kwat* that was normally forbidden him aboard ship. It turned out that, at this occasion, Sixer was a happy drunk. Crowbar had joined him in quite a few toasts himself and soaked up the fabulous spread. Even Newton had seemed to enjoy himself, if nothing else than for the curious behavior he was able to observe from his shipmates.

They had all been welcomed to what amounted to a hero's welcome. It had definitely been enough to raise their spirits. Even Coeur felt herself riding high on the positive emotions that had been nearly palpable in the banquet hall.

Even through the fanfare, there had still been an underlying tension that seemed to center on Drop Kick. All of the Marines had been seated together, including the three Ithklur. Drop Kick had made a point of engaging them once or twice in conversation, but Coeur was pretty sure that was just for public consumption. The Sergeant Major still harbored a fiery core of anger directed at them for their actions, or rather their inactions. That particular point, had not been addressed just yet, and Coeur was not looking forward to the time when it was.

And then there was Snapshot. All the attention had seemed to annoy her, rather than lift her up. She was almost, but not quite, able to conceal her dismay at being forced into the limelight so soon after learning that her countrymen had been responsible for so much suffering in the Kruyter system. Preliminary reports from Raven about Oriflamme's direct involvement here were pointing to all kinds of frightening possibilities and that was almost certainly going to make it worse for her.

"I felt a little sorry for Vin." Serene said after a moment, in line with her thoughts. Coeur's eyes darted to her quickly. It was possible that the woman was, quite literally, in tune with her thoughts.

Serene returned her look and shrugged. "You don't have to be a telepath to know that there's something wrong between the two of them." Her eyes tracked over to Gyro and she quirked an eyebrow. "What's the story there?"

Gyro sipped her own coffee and considered how to answer. Snapper was, after all, one of her best friends, going back even to the Academy. The thought of engaging in what amounted to gossip with their commanding officer present made her more than a bit uncomfortable.

Sensing, as she was so keen of doing, the mood of her guest, she sat back in her chair.

"Look, I'm not hunting for the gory details, I just know that Nemyer was pretty free with handing out the emotional baggage *before* it turned into Oriflamme, to say nothing of after. I just want to make sure my girl is okay."

During the party, Serene had spent a considerable amount of time talking to Snapshot for that very reason. In that case, the older woman's wisdom and empathy, not to mention their shared ancestry, had seemed to help Snapper shed some of the outer layers of her shell.

"Okay," Gyro said with a glance to Coeur, "she has been sleeping on the extra bunk in my quarters the last few days. Speaking as both her XO and her friend, I know she's having a real hard time dealing with the idea that Oriflammen nationals seemed to be running the show out there. More to the point, I think that both *Orion* and the forces inside the station forced us into position where we had to kill or be killed, giving no middle ground, and showing outright contempt for the lives of non-Oriflammen people. In many ways, that pretty much sums up the Oriflammen stereotype, which Snapper has fought against.

The women nodded at her assessment. "I mean, you remember what she was like at the Academy, Red." The other woman smiled thinly. "She had the biggest chip on her shoulder because she was an Oriflammen amongst Aubani, practically their polar opposites. She wanted so much to be proud of her homeworld, however hard that might have been, but I think she felt intimidated even back then by all the Aubani around her, at times even from me. I think she felt she had to continuously prove herself to show that she deserved the opportunities that came her way."

"Which is obvious nonsense considering her talents." Coeur said.

"Yes, but powerful emotions like that infrequently make rational sense," Serene said. "I happen to know that more than most."

"So, now that it looks like Oriflamme may turn out to be the bad guys, on this count anyway, it's like the carpet has been pulled out from underneath her." Gyro said, her features hardening at the thought of the war that must surely be going on in her friend's head.

"Confirming, in her mind, all the bad things people say about the Oriflammen to be uniformly true." Raven said, her fingers idly tapping the side of her mug.

"Something like that." Gyro answered. "There are, after all, no less than six members of the *Hornet's* current compliment that are from Aubaine itself, myself included." She shook her head. "That's got to be messing with her head."

"More than likely," Coeur said. "To some degree it can't be helped. There are certain...operational realities that we are going to have to live with for the time being. I would like you to keep an eye on her for me. If she can't sort herself out on her own, I'll speak with her."

Coeur turned to look at Raven.

"That reminds me. When do you think you can give us the full download from everything you pulled from Lamda-3?"

"I'm still sorting through a lot of it, and much of it I still need to refine, but I think I can have the Major points, along with my own analyses, to you in the next few days or so, a week at the very outside.

"Well, for now, there's no immediate rush. We're not going anywhere until *Hornet* is Jump-capable again. It looks as though she's going to be laid up for repairs for what, at least two weeks?" She gave a glance to her XO and Gyro nodded.

"At the minimum, we're looking at least twelve days of work on the Jump Drive alone. Plus, there are some other repairs to the hull that need revisited now that the station's facilities are open to us. That will add a few more days to the equation."

"I see." Coeur said.

"Ladies, ladies," Serene chided, sliding neatly back into the conversation. "This is turning into a staff meeting. You're supposed to be relaxing, for tonight at least, so I suggest you do so. Keep up this extremely responsible behavior and I won't share the very old, very *expensive* bottle of Auroran champagne that, as it happens, is being brought up at this very moment.."

She looked around and an array of smiles answered her.

"Good. Then if that's settled, let us get back to our schedule of uninterrupted epicurean bliss, shall we?" She smiled wickedly, turning her gaze toward Raven, "Now then...Lauren, while we're waiting...why don't you dish on Crowbar. You two were sitting *awfully* close to one another tonight..."

* * *

Bonzo limped through the entryway of Kreuzeng's expansive medical ward. While the infirmary aboard *Hornet* was certainly advanced, it was a mere broom closet to the hospital-sized facilities that greeted him. Rows and rows of medical beds spread out ahead, with the Majority of them thankfully empty at the moment. The Marine took in the scene for a moment and then moved toward the more intensive care units at the back of the facility.

Before each step the cane in his hand made a metallic clink on the deck as he leaned on it for support. His rebuilt knee was not fully integrated, at least not yet. He had at least graduated from the shoulder crutch, but it was still a sign that he was not back to his usual self. He would be just as glad when he could be rid of the blasted thing.

He didn't have a lot of time today for visiting, only an hour or so before he had to report for duty, but he couldn't help the feeling that drew him here. He knew that he was responsible for the patient he came to see, and knew that his actions had....

"Bonzo?"

The Marine abandoned his rapidly darkening mood and turned to find Physic standing there dressed in a full set of civilian scrubs. She noted that the Marine was in his RCMC dress uniform. The presence of a pair of golden wings, radiating out from a starburst among his "fruit salad" caught her eye and she immediately knew why he was uniform. It would still need confirmation pending review, but the Marine was being allowed to wear the Wings of Halos in the meantime, and it didn't take a genius to know why. Her eyes narrowed a bit, but there was an understanding there as well, a shared sympathy that Bonzo returned with a short nod.

"Well, Corporal, I must say that you shine up pretty well."

"Thanks, Doc," Bonzo chuckled. "Who woulda thought, huh?"

"How's the knee?"

"It's like I twisted it in a bad game of astrobball, so it is a bit sore, but I'll mend."

"Well, I take that it from your clothes that you're not here for a checkup?"

"Negatory," he said. "Just came by to give my regards to your patient."

"I was just about to check up on her. She's right this way." Physic moved through the medical space with obvious ease as Bonzo *clinked* behind her.

They entered one of the enclosed spaces at the end of the hall, and Physic slowly drew back the light blue curtain on its runners.

Behind it lay the only surviving member of *Hokona's* crew, who, Bonzo was surprised to find was awake and fairly alert. A raised tray of hospital food lay in various states of consumption in front of her.

"Good morning, Cassandra," Physic said warmly. "How are we feeling today?"

"Much better, Doctor," the young woman said in voice that was still a bit weak. "Thank you."

"You have a visitor." Physic said, presenting the Marine with a wave of her hand. "I just need to check a few things and then I'll be out of your hair."

Bonzo limped forward a few steps and removed his cover. She looked many times better than the last time he saw her. While the woman's right cheek bone was still a shade of purple, there was no longer any swelling. Her blonde hair had been untangled and was gathered into a thick ponytail, with a lock of it trailing down her left temple. She was still pale, but her clear blue eyes were alert and took him in professionally. He felt her curiosity as her gaze tracked over to his name tag that simply read: BLACK, then completed the journey back to his face.

"Hello, ma'am." He said with open respect. According to their records, she carried the rank of Lieutenant. Though she was from was of a foreign navy, the Marine was still addressing an officer.

"Hello, Corporal," she said, extending her arm so that Physic could take her blood pressure. "I'm told that you were the one that saved my life."

"That's true, and almost died as a result, I should point out." Physic said between taking counts.

Bonzo could feel his face redden ever so slightly. "Um, well...I just patched you up until the cavalry could arrive. The Doc here is the one that really did the job. If that fellow hadn't caught me napping, perhaps there wouldn't have been a need."

Cassandra drew in a breath and waited for Physic to finish her diagnostic. Bonzo could tell that she was holding her response until the doctor left the room. Finally, the doctor was satisfied. "Give me a ring if you need anything, okay?"

"I will," she said. "Thank you, doctor."

Once Physic left, Cassandra turned back to face her visitor.

"I appreciate your modesty, Corporal Black," she began. "I did however request to see the image capture of when they found the both of us. I have *no* doubt that what you did saved my life, and put your own at greater risk."

"I was..."

"Hold on," she said, smiling gently. "Before you say that you were 'just doing your duty' I know that there was only so much sealant in that med kit, just as I know that you chose to give it to me rather than to use it for yourself."

He nodded, almost meekly.

"I also know what you had to endure to get it," with those words her voice softened. "I owe you debt of honor that I will never forget, Corporal, and it pleases me that you came to see me, so I could tell you that in person."

"Please," he said quietly. "We're not in the same service, so if it's all the same to you, call me Alon."

She considered it a moment.

"Very well, then I insist you call me Cassandra," she said with a genuine smile. "You understand that it's a reflex to address you by your rank."

"Yes, ma – Cassandra." He corrected himself.

"It may take some time for me to fully...come to terms with everything happened on board that station." She said after a moment, and a shadow passed over her eyes.

Bonzo could feel a surge of anger at what she must be remembering. They had captured her ship, abused her physically, killed her shipmates and Gaia knows what else. There was some satisfaction that he had sent at least some of the responsible parties on an express ticket to meet their maker.

"But," she continued. "I am confident that I will fully return to duty at some point, and I have you, Alon, to thank for it." She placed her pale hand on top of his. "I know that my thanks is a pretty empty return on what you did for me, but you have it none-the-less."

Bonzo clasp her hand tightly, and his eyes glowed.

"Shows how much you know about me." He said, leaning down and lightly kissing her forehead. There was a twinge of doubt that struck him that perhaps that gesture might have been over the line, too personal, but as he straightened up, the look in her eyes told him it had been most welcome.

"Unfortunately, I have to go for now." He said. "There's an unpleasant duty I have to discharge." He replaced his hat on his head. "But now that you're awake, I'm sure we'll see more of each other."

Cassandra nodded. "I'd like that."

He squeezed her hand one more time, surprised a bit that he had never let go of it, and then took up his cane and clinked out the door.

* * *

Drop Kick's face was a hardened mask as the three Ithklur filed into the large conference room. They came to attention before him sharply, their backs all ramrod straight.

Red Sun, Newton and Director Serene sat to Drop Kick's right, Mercy, Whiz Bang and Bonzo sat to his left behind a large metal table littered with glittering carafes of water and matching tumblers. The Sergeant Major drew a silent breath as his granite hard eyes scanned across the three aliens. Reaching over, he thumbed the RECORD button on the device in front of him.

"I've called the three of you here to discuss your recent actions aboard the Lambda-3 station." He said, fighting to keep his voice firmly under control. "I've invited Director Serene to sit in as the senior representative of this system, and Newton is here as a representative of the Hiver Federation. Do you have any objection to their presence during these proceedings?"

Raptor straightened, speaking for them all. "No, sir."

"In that case," Drop kick said. "Let's begin."

The Sergeant Major paused, collecting his thoughts before he opened up the truly twisted can of worms that lay before him. The three Ithklur, while ostensibly under his command, were not part of the RCMC, and therefore were outside the bounds of the Uniform Code of Military Justice. Their official status was that they were on detached duty from the Federation Guard that accompanied M. Genghis. As much as Drop Kick would like to see these events play out in a full court-martial, that was going to happen since they were outside any jurisdiction he or the RCMC might possess. It was even possible that the three of them might have a form of diplomatic immunity that M. Genghis might have secured for them, given the esteem the Hiver community extended him.

But this wasn't a court-martial, it was just a meeting on behalf of the official record that would form the basis of his report to the RCMC, if and when he was in a position to file it.

"First, I feel we should establish a few points for the record." He glanced at his notes, not that he had to. "When M. Genghis first recommended you to us, were you given a clear understanding of the organizational structure that you would be required to follow during this assignment?"

"Yes, sir."

"And did you clearly understand that you and your squad would report directly to me while you were stationed aboard RCS *Hornet*?"

"Yes, sir."

"Were you aware of, or under the influence of, any countervailing orders that would have caused a direct conflict with the established chain of command during the events of Lambda-3?"

Raptor paused for perhaps five seconds, and the silence seemed to echo in the room.

"No, sir."

"You hesitated to answer the question when it was asked," Drop Kick said levelly. "Why is that?"

"Neither I, nor either member of my squad, were under such *orders*, sir. That is not to say that we were not acting under pre-existing *obligations*."

"I see." Drop Kick said with another glance at his papers. "Given your responses, I would formally ask an explanation of three separate events that occurred on Lambda-3. First, your squadmate, Striker, did willfully quit Main Engineering after he was specifically ordered to remain there. Additionally, he did so while the other member of his team, namely Corporal Alonzo Black, taccode Bonzo, and *Hokona's* surviving engineer, Lieutenant Cassandra Mayfield, had sustained wounds that required immediate aid. Second, you and your squad did disobey a direct order and leave Main Industrial while myself, Corporal Mercedes Gannon, taccode Mercy, and Corporal Robert Ryan, taccode Whiz Bang, were under fire by hostile forces. Third, you and your squad proceeded to the ventral docking bay of Lambda-3 where you prosecuted an assault on the personnel there. There were no survivors on the entire level, even among those that were obviously non-combatants."

Raptor and the others were staring at a point a half meter above his head as he asked the questions. Drop Kick leaned back in his chair.

"You have the floor."

Raptor stepped forward, still staring over his head.

"Sir, I can address your second and third points. As for the first point, I will allow Striker to give an accounting to you in his own words."

Drop Kick nodded and motioned for him to continue.

"To address your second point, my squad was informed by Striker that the *Hokona* was indeed aboard Lambda-3. By extension, that meant there was a possibility of surviving Hivers somewhere on the station, which turned out to be true. Once we received that information, it was clear that that must be our next objective and that we should act as quickly as possible before the enemy divined our intent."

"You then chose to disobey a direct order to return, leaving three of your teammates in jeopardy." Coeur said. "Please explain why."

"At the time we were leaving Main Industrial, our teammates were *not* under fire, sir. There were no standing orders saying that we could not go, so I ordered my squad to the ventral docking bay. It was only after I issued those orders, while they were being carried out, that we received the recall order. We were firmly committed to that course of action, as I explained over the comm before we disembarked."

Red Sun and Drop Kick exchanged a quick glance and Coeur nodded to the Marine to address this point. It had been her right as ship's Captain to officiate this meeting, a right she was more than willing to pass along to Drop Kick. It was not that she didn't want to sully her hands with the matter, but more so because this was a problem in his house, and he would want to be the one to clean it up. Plus, the RCES did not have the layers of military structure, tradition and jurisprudence that the RCMC had, so it was right that the senior Marine present would oversee it. If however, this ever came to an actual *trial*, she was more than willing to get directly involved. It was pretty much a given that that's what Drop Kick wanted to come out of this. That he might never get it was a thorn in his side.

"So, for the record, you are citing that the primary reason you disobeyed an order from a superior was because you yourself had issued orders that then could not be recalled once given. Is that correct?"

"Yes, sir."

"Very well," Drop Kick said distinctly. "Please continue."

"As for your third point, I gave the order to Striker to eliminate all remaining personnel that were not killed outright during our initial attack, including those that were seriously wounded. The official tally of wounded dispatched in this way, as reported by Striker, was a total of thirty-nine personnel, including six armed guards, eighteen unarmed personnel of unknown vocation, and twenty-one unarmed technicians."

Eyes widened on Drop Kick's side of the table. The Ithklur didn't sound as though they were bragging, per se, but Raptor didn't seem to want to keep the litany of his deeds to himself either.

Just keep talking for the nice recorder, Drop Kick thought acidly, each comment is another nail in your fikking coffin.

"My order to do this was two-fold. Some of the personnel were, as I stated previously, seriously wounded – some to such a critical point that they would not have survived had Dr. Takagawa been the scene immediately to treat them. Left to what would only be a slow and agonizing death, the act of releasing them was the only conscionable option available to us at time."

In his mind's eye, Drop Kick could almost see the terrified looks of the people in those last few seconds of fear and pain as Striker moved their ranks delivering his 'mercy.' And yet, the greater part of Drop Kick made the mental distinction that those people *had* been the enemy.

"Furthermore, the act was also a punitive action against those that had been a party to, as we were ill to discover, the deliberate torture, mutilation and murder of multiple Hivers. I feel I must point out that the original compliment of *Hokona* consisted of twelve Hivers, none of which are now currently alive. So, whether the personnel carried arms at the time of our arrival, or not, was irrelevant. Their very presence was a tacit approval of the methods employed there. I decided to make an example of them and put them down like the vermin they were."

You just don't know when to shut up do you?

Drop Kick had to wonder if the Ithklur had any idea that his words were almost the exact opposite of what he should be saying in circumstances like this. While his unflinching honesty was somewhat refreshing, without hint of any kind of spin control, he was actually digging himself deeper. The looks of horror around the table were beginning to be harder to conceal, particularly from Director Serene. Not only was she from a non-military background, but who knew what she

might have been able to pick up on the surface thoughts of *these* three. "So, once again to clarify, you are stating that your primary reason for ordering the deaths of those in the ventral docking bay was a form of retribution or vengeance?"

"Yes, sir."

"And was Hunter involved in this action as well?"

"No, sir. I ordered him to stay with the Hiver you called Erasmus and see to its safety."

Of the three, Drop Kick had the least problem with Hunter. He had neither participated in the desertion of Main Engineering, nor given the *coup de grace* to so many on the floor of the docking bay as Striker had. That was not to say, that might have done the same thing in Striker's place. All he had really done was obey the order of his immediate superior. While he wasn't blameless in what happened, Drop Kick was least inclined to throw him out of an airlock. As much as the official record should damn Raptor and Striker it shouldn't take Hunter along as well.

"And did you, yourself, participate in the retributive killings as well?"

"Yes, sir," Raptor said without hesitation, "though I did so only to those in my immediate vicinity as I secured the perimeter. The numbers were included in the totals I stated previously."

"I see. And did it occur to you during this time that survivors might prove a valuable source of intelligence on the nature of the obviously clandestine operations going on aboard the Lambda-3 station?"

"Yes, sir, it did."

"And you ordered their elimination anyway?"

"Yes, sir. I weighed the possibilities, and the reasoning I described to you ultimately won out."

Drop Kick laced his fingers together, resting his elbows on the table.

"Well, you have addressed my second and third points. Is there anything else you'd like to add before we direct the floor to Striker to explain my first point?"

Raptor again stood there like a statue for several seconds. It was obvious that there was more Raptor wanted to say. Whatever warring factions fought within him, silence apparently won.

"No, sir. That is all."

"Very well," Drop Kick had actually wanted to Raptor to say more, it would've been all the more rope with which to hang himself. "Striker, please step forward."

Raptor took a half-step back just as Striker took a half-step forward.

"Before we get into my first point, do you have anything you'd like to add to Raptor's description of the events in the docking bay, including the part you played in them?"

"No, sir. I believe Raptor adequately described them." The slightly smaller Ithklur's voice was a bit more sibilant and low, like a sinister whisper.

"In your own words, please describe why you, against orders, chose to leave Main Engineering when you did, given the state of the wounded at the time."

Coeur glanced over at her friend, the Sergeant Major. She knew that part, was a particularly a hellish test of his self-control, even more so than the actions that directly affected him.

"We had achieved a limited tactical surprise on the forces that were in possession of Main Engineering. They knew we were advancing, but the speed and audacity of our assault was quickly turning the momentum in our favor. I did notice, however, that Corporal Black's mobility was somewhat limited after our landing in the elevator shaft. At the time, it did not noticeably affect our ability to push forward and maintain our tactical advantage. It was only when Corporal Black sustained a wound that truly impeded his mobility that it became apparent he would need to be left behind if the pace was to be maintained."

Drop Kick's jaw clenched and he ground his teeth together, then forced himself to relax. The Ithklur were doing a good enough job of burying themselves that he should be smiling. Somehow he couldn't do it even then.

"Did you attempt to render aid to either Corporal Black or Lieutenant Mayfield before you left?"

"I gave Corporal Black the full balance of my med-kit, saving none of it for myself."

"I see. And did it occur to you at the time that the emergency sealant used in the standard Ithklur field kit was neither rated nor applicable for human use?"

"No, sir. It did not occur to me at the time."

"Did you attempt render any other aid to the wounded?"

"No, sir."

"So, can you describe why you chose to disobey your standing orders to remain in Main Engineering once it was secured?"

"Certainly," the Ithklur said. "The area was secure and enemy resistance had been effectively neutralized, so the objective our orders described had been successfully carried out. Lieutenant Mayfield's presence confirmed that at least one crew member from *Hokona* was on station. That opened the possibility that other crew members might also be present, including members of the Hiver contingent aboard *Hokona*. That necessitated that I remove myself from my current position and deliver that message to my immediate superior in person. In cases like this, the use of any long range communications equipment, such as the kind found in our battle dress, is strictly prohibited as it could be possibly intercepted by the enemy."

"And the 'necessity' as you describe it, superseded the need to render more direct aid to Corporal Black and Lieutenant Mayfield, the latter of which was also a crewmember of *Hokona*." Coeur interjected.

"That is correct, sir."

Drop Kick's eyes narrowed. Striker was the one that the Sergeant Major would've liked to stand up against a bulkhead and execute. If Bonzo or Mayfield had died as a result of his criminal disregard, Drop Kick wasn't sure he would have even bothered taking a statement. Despite the near ticker tape parade that Serene had thrown for them upon their arrival, the fact remained that they were all cut off from the government and the support base of anything outside the Kruyter system, and that meant that they were all living by lifeboat rules.

"I must point out to you, Striker, that the orders given to you at the time included two components – to secure Main Engineering and *hold position there until relieved*. As you pointed out, you did achieve the first part of your orders, but you failed to comply with the second part. Do you have an explanation you'd like to share?"

"I do, sir." Striker said. "The situation changed in such a way to make the standing orders invalid. I adapted to the change in circumstance to the best of my ability."

"I see. Do you have anything else you'd like to add?"

"No, sir."

"Then it would seem that our business here is largely concluded." Drop Kick said as he reached over and dutifully turned off the recorder. "Raptor, please stay for a moment," He looked at the other Ithklur. "Wait outside." He then turned to the rest of the panel. "Could you give us the room, please?"

There came the sounds of shuffling and moving chairs as five humans and a Hiver retired from the room. Drop Kick, remained seated, his hands still clasp in front of him with a gaze fixed on the senior Ithklur.

"Sarge, looks really pissed," Mercy said to Bonzo as they stepped into the hallway. "He was just so...*cold*."

"You have no idea," Serene said at her elbow, and the young woman turned to look at her. "Just his surface thoughts alone were pretty overpowering." Her eyes glittered just a tiny bit. "Though, I'd love to be a fly on the wall in there just about now." She said as the door sealed behind the crowd.

"With all due respect, ma'am," the Marine pilot said, "I'm pretty sure you *wouldn't*."

* * *

The door sealed shut, and the air in the room carried a charge in the space between the two men. It was weighty and pregnant, even though neither of them had yet moved or said anything. It almost seemed as if two gunfighters waited for the other to make a move, and in the case of the Ithklur that might truly be the case.

"Sit down, Raptor," Nothing in his tone could've been mistaken for a request. The tall alien hesitated, as though he were going to resist, but then gracefully settled into one of the chairs none of the Ithklur had used during the meeting.

"You need to listen to me, because this is the first and only time I will say this to you," he said in a voice would have made liquid nitrogen jealous of its cold, "I don't care what your previous allegiance or obligations were before, from now on you're primary – *your only* – obligation is to *Hornet* and her crew until I say it isn't."

Raptor glared at him. "It's obvious you can't apprecia...."

"I wasn't finished," he cut the Ithklur off sharply. "It's clear you don't have the foggiest idea of how deep in the excrement you really are right now. Well let me enlighten you. If you or your people *ever* fikking pull something like that again, then you had better hope I'm already dead, because no Hiver, no little origami god, *no* force that exists in the universe will keep me from you, and hopefully you've got two brain-cells in that primitive cranium of yours to understand what I would do to you then."

His volume had become a crescendo at the last. Adrenaline and all the pent up anger that he'd been forced to swallow for public appearances blazed in his veins.

"You are lucky, *damned* lucky that no one died as a result of your criminal negligence, because if Bonzo had bled to death, or if Mercy or Whiz Bang had died in that crash, all three of you would've been chewing on hard vacuum by now!"

Raptor returned his gaze defiantly.

"I'm not afraid of death, little human," The Ithklur said, ignoring the viper stare that was growing in Drop Kick's eyes, "but you...you are consumed by it. What's more you hide it, denying that you carry it at all. You deny yourself in turn because of it. You are not what you are."

Drop Kick's fist hand smashed down on the wooden table and he stood.

"That's *it!* This is the end of the line. You've made it clear just how pathetic and empty you really are. You're going into confinement until such time as I can send you and the rest of your freakshow back to M. Genghis with a fitness report that will make you wish you'd never been born. Wanna know why?"

Raptor tensed and his long tail began to writhe back and forth as he stood. Then surprise lit his scaly features as a Drop Kick's side-arm appeared in his hand, leveled at him from five meters away.

"Don't, or so help me I will put one through your throat," the Marine said. Drop Kick had anticipated that Raptor might take their impending confrontation to a physical level, and the Sergeant Major wasn't about to have any of that.

"The *reason* you'll wish you were never born is that I will personally tell Hammer Lathrop what a bunch of arrogant, self-serving, *animals* you are and that all Ithklur, not just you, should be banned from operating in our space. Permanently. And you know what? He'll listen to me. But I won't stop there – oh no, that's just the beginning. Then I'm going to hand the statement you just made over to the *media* and volunteer to give interviews. And believe me, they will have a feeding frenzy that will make a school of piranha look rank amateurs by comparison. *And then*, after they've had a field day and crucified you in the court of public opinion, every single Ithklur warrior, every god-forsaken, ugly one of you, will have a black mark against their prowess and integrity, all because of *you*." His voice flayed at the Ithklur like an ice-laden whip.

An instant passed in which Drop Kick genuinely thought he would have to make good on his promise to shoot, but then, that gave way to something like shock and even...fear.

"You...you would really do this?" Raptor said as though he couldn't quite believe what he was hearing.

"Oh, you better believe it," Drop Kick sensing the other falter, and seizing upon it. "And I will do it with a song in my heart."

The large alien clasped his hands before him, almost in the human gesture of prayer, his luminous yellow eyes slitted closed. When they opened, Drop Kick knew that he had finally found the chink in his armor. Those eyes, normally so fierce and penetrating were wide, and seemed almost lost, like a child alone in the woods.

"Do you...truly *hate* me that much?" he said and his voice actually caught.

Drop Kick was *this* close to firing back a scathing retort, but he stopped short. Looking at the Ithklur, it struck Drop Kick like a bolt from the blue – there was something child-like about what he was seeing in Raptor, something that should have been so obvious to him all along. In that moment of clarity, he could see the other's utter confusion, the utter and *genuine* confusion. That notion that Drop Kick might visit such retribution not on just him, but all of his kind was totally

at odds with what he perceived as reality. He could see that the Ithklur knew that the humans around him believed he had done a great wrong, though in his own mind it was only a difference of operational opinion, a difficult case of mismatching command protocol, but nothing more. As the repercussions of Drop Kick's threat raced through his mind, he couldn't make the mental leap of why anyone would want to slander his people in such a way.

As much as Drop Kick couldn't fully put himself in the Ithklur's mindset, Raptor was becoming aware of just how much the human in front of him truly despised what he had done. Even if the Ithklur couldn't fully understand *why* the situation was so disastrous, he *could* understand the penalty that Drop Kick was proposing and extrapolate the severity of his actions.

And that's when something unexpected happened. Raptor moved, and only years of RCMC training allowed Drop Kick to interpret the gesture in time and hold his fire.

Raptor held his palms upward and fell to his knees.

"If you wish to claim my life, I will gladly lay it down, but I ask you to spare my warriors and their names. If blood must be paid, then spill mine now and let your hate find its end with my death. *Please, do this, I beg of you!*"

At first, it seemed that it was one of those odd emotional outbursts that the Ithklur were known for, but it wasn't like that. No, Drop Kick had never worked personally with them until this mission, but everything he had read told him that an Ithklur begging for *anything*, wasn't normal. Then again, Raptor was not exactly a normal Ithklur.

The Marine had no doubt that the trembling alien would do as he said and die acting as a lightning rod for his companions. He had gone into this wanting the Ithklur to give him an excuse to send them away, or at least take them out of the equation somehow. The difficulty he and Snapshot were having had added extra fuel to the fire.

That situation had left him raw and bleeding around the edges just by itself. He had nearly died, his command was disintegrating around him and now the woman he wanted to call his wife was distancing herself from him just when he needed her love and support the most. Even now her absence twisted inside him like a serrated blade.

He had *wanted* this fight, wanted to say all those things that had built up and vent the seething plasma that lurked at his core. The last thing he had expected was to see an Ithklur begging to be allowed to sacrifice himself so that others could be spared. Now that it had happened, the Marine felt like the ogre, the one that takes pleasure in kicking a dog.

Making it back to Kreuzung had been like warm, cleansing salve on *Hornet's* wounded crew. While they were showing promise that they might return to a familial state, they were all still fragile and delicate from what had happened. Just under the surface, they were all still in shambles and he was certainly no exception.

But things didn't have to stay that way. And, if he *allowed* them to stay that way then maybe he didn't deserve the stripes on his sleeve after all. Perhaps there was a way see to navigate the innumerable mental minefields that surrounded his soul.

"Raptor," he said more normally and the alien looked at him with earnest, pleading expression. "I need to know one thing."

The Ithklur bobbed his head up and down.

"Are you capable of defending *Hornet* and her crew just as whole-heartedly as you were prepared to defend your men just now?"

Those yellow eyes searched his face and lingering pain glowed within their depths.

"I don't know."

"Then that's the real question you need to answer for me," Drop Kick said, putting his weapon back into its concealed holster up his sleeve. "We're in deep here, Raptor, *real* deep. I can't afford a question mark on my side, not now, not with all of this going on. So, it boils down to this – you're either in all the way, or not at all. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

"I understand."

Drop Kick nodded. "Decide what you're going to do, but don't wait too long," he said. "And for Gaia's sake, get off the ground. You're embarrassing us both."

* * *

Coeur sat down in what had become her regular spot in Director Serene's office, crossed her legs and laced her hands in her lap, mentally preparing herself for what was ahead. Next to her, Drop Kick took his seat and settled a steaming mug of coffee next to him on the table. Far from the rigorously measured meeting with the Ithklur, this gathering was semi-informal. It just so happened that it was probably one of the more important councils she would ever sit in on including the one she'd shared with the surviving officers aboard *Altinak*. Raven's report on the totality of what they had learned from Lambda-3 had seemed agonizingly slow in coming over the last few days, but now that it was here, there was something almost akin to stage fright that danced around in her stomach.

Besides herself, only Drop Kick, Raven, Gyro and Director Serene were in the room. Coeur had read some of the executive summaries already, and that had been enough to give her shivers. The details of Raven's report would only be for the ears of her senior officers and the system representative. Despite their growing friendship, a part of Coeur didn't want to hand such sensitive intelligence over to a civilian, however trustworthy. As the overall mission commander, she had the right to restrict anyone from the key details. That was only a small part of her. Even though Kruyter wasn't a nation-system such as Aurora or Nike Nimbus, it was still as system under the banner of the Reformation Coalition. After *Hornet* eventually left the system, it would fall to her to protect the RC's interests in Kruyter, and if it came to it, defend it from hostile powers. So, civilian or no, Serene had to be kept in the loop as much as possible.

Gyro and Serene both took their places, each with a small plate of unobtrusive "meeting food" that had been provided for them. Raven stood and was busily setting up her information were it would pipe through the holographics in Serene's office.

Coeur leaned over to Drop Kick as he was in mid-sip.

"I wasn't going to pry," she whispered, "but before we get into all of this, I'm dying to know what you said to Raptor when you were alone. I don't think anyone's ever seen an Ithklur look quite that...broken. Ever."

Less than an hour after Raptor had come out of that private meeting he had gathered up Striker and Hunter and marched them down to Kreuzeng's security center. Apparently on their way down, they had caught Serene's assistant, Ben-Abdul alone in the corridor. Recognizing him as a figure of authority, Raptor, now back to his usual intimidating demeanor, with the others flanking him on either side, had informed Ben-Abdul that they were to be taken immediately into custody and given quarters in the station's brig. Confused, and somewhat disturbed by the Ithklur's level of seriousness and insistence that they be locked up, he finally relented and led them down to be processed by the station's security personnel. That had met with even more confusion as the Ithklur explained their case for being incarcerated, convincing the security man – very *vociferously* she'd heard it said – to let them *into* the jail.

"I said more than I probably should have, actually," Drop Kick admitted, matched her low voice. "In light of everything, I think I was able to communicate to him my level of displeasure in terms he could understand."

"I bet you did."

There was more than just curiosity behind her question. The Ithklur represented an immensely valuable resource to continued operations that could not be overlooked. Whether or not she could continue to avail herself of that resource was a decision that now rested with the Sergeant Major.

"Will they be coming along with us when we leave, or will they need to stay put in the brig?"

Drop Kick shrugged. "That's a more complicated matter than it might appear on the surface. The short answer right now is, 'I don't know.'"

"I was afraid you were going to say that," she said sourly. That left a hole in her ability to plan, an x-factor she couldn't be easily taken into account.

A holographic image came to be in the air above their heads, depicting a cutaway version of the Lamba-3 station. Coeur and Drop Kick immediately turned their full attention towards it, along with the others. Next to the station was a miniature version of the RCS *Orion*, whole and undamaged, hovering next to it. Coeur suppressed a mental shudder at seeing the long, needle-like hull.

“Okay are we ready?” Raven announced to a series of nods and acknowledgments. “We’ve got a lot of ground to cover, so I’m just going to dive right in. As tempting as it is to jump straight to my conclusions, if you’ll forgive the phrase, I want to first build the foundations of my case before I get to my final thoughts. I believe you’ll see why in a few moments.”

She looked at her data pad and then set it aside.

“After examining all the physical and electronic evidence I could find aboard Lambda-3, it became apparent that Oriflammen forces were responsible for the operations there both in space and on station. Now before someone accuses me of pointing out the glaringly obvious, keep in mind I’m talking about the Oriflammen *military*, and not just a rogue ship or group of ex-patriot mercenaries. No, I’m talking about sanctioned forces operating as they would normally, but doing so in Kruyter space – forces that I might point out we thought were safely on our side until now.”

She took that brief pause so necessary when conveying information of this nature to let her initial statement sink in. She found that she had their rapt attention.

“Inspection of *Orion’s* wreckage didn’t turn up much other than to prove her identity. Identification of the crew was impossible. On the station itself, however, I able to gather this...”

In a separate space in the air, names began to glow clearly enough to read. “While there were many people we couldn’t identify, these are the ones where we were able to get a positive I.D. That accounted for forty-two of the total one hundred and twenty-six people inhabiting the station.”

Drop Kick’s face fell as some of the names began to ring bells in his mind.

“As you’ll notice thirty-nine of the forty-two of them are, or have been, an active-duty member of the Oriflammen Marines within the past six years. In fact, these eleven names,” a few of them grew brighter in the air, “are from the same *unit* that is supposed to be stationed on Spencer as we speak. Judging by their level of habitation, it looks as though they have been aboard Lambda-3 for the better part of a year. There are progress reports, payment records and even letters to family all concerning these people that have come from Spencer dating to as little as *three* months ago.

“So what we have here is someone high-up in the Oriflammen Marine Corps that has been covering for their absence very convincingly. Since it is extremely difficult for most civilians to judge the whereabouts of military personnel at any given time, particularly if they are stationed in another system, their families would have to assume they were where they were supposed to be. With an insider to cover their trail, they could be anywhere without raising suspicion...and I believe I may have identified the insider in question.”

The image of square-jawed man with a crew cut winked into existence and the cold knives in Drop Kick’s heart twisted. He had known where this was headed, but seeing the service picture sent chills running down his spine. He didn’t even have to look at the name.

Oh, Black Bear... what have you done?

“Boris Seitzmann,” Drop Kick said unhappily, and all eyes turned to him. “Taccode Black Bear. He’s a Brigade Sergeant Major and he’s good. He’s very good.”

“He’s also one of the few people to hold that rank in both the Reformation Coalition Marines *and* the Oriflammen Marines. Not only would he have the influence to hide the paper trail, but nearly every one of the forty-two that I I.D’ed was either trained by him personally, or was associated with him someone that was. There were three star mercs from Spencer that we identified as well and at least one of them was also trained by him during his tenure in the OMC.”

She glanced at Drop Kick.

“Unless it’s a coincidence of astronomical proportions, this is practically the ‘smoking gun’ indicating his involvement in what we’ve seen. I pulled his service record. It was quite impressive.” His dossier replaced the names of the dead.

“Not only is he a seasoned combat veteran, stemming mainly from his time running SAGs to spinward, but his record suggests that he’s an inspired leader, adept at inspiring a bone-deep loyalty in his subordinates. He apparently is equally skilled at training some the cream of the crop that currently wear the uniform of an Oriflammen Marine. During my research, I ran some statistics on all of those that have trained under him. They were something on the order of twenty-two percent more likely to receive recognition for outstanding performance, and about thirteen percent more likely to earn a citation for bravery or service above and beyond the call of duty. In

short, he's one of the best and he trains the best. Would agree with that assessment, Sergeant Major?"

"Yes, I'm afraid that's him pretty much in a nutshell."

"I understand that you know him personally, is that correct?"

"That's right, I served with him at Aurora when I was practically out of boot camp, and then again a few years later at Trybec. I know the business with his wife and brother almost beached him, but nothing I know of the man suggests that he would be capable of sanctioning the activities we found, particularly what they did to Lieutenant Mayfield and the Hivers. However, if he was behind any of this, I would suggest you screen your people again, Tirese." The telepath raised an eyebrow. "Boris wouldn't have been running an operation out here unless he had at least one person, possibly more, stationed here on Kreuzeng minding the store."

Raven smiled thinly, "Well, since the Sergeant Major here is *also* a mind reader, I'll go ahead and skip over my next point which was to quietly check KC's personnel."

"Already in progress," Tirese said, making notes to herself. "Considering the, shall we say, unorthodox way that we set up the sweep in the first place, whoever they were probably couldn't get a message to L-3 in time. When you consider how long they were operating invisibly in our backyard that told me there may be a wolf in the fold somewhere." She said. "I know that Captain Bellenhall is practically chewing on broken shards of glass that something of this magnitude was going on under his nose without him getting some much as a whiff of it. I feel only the faintest bit of remorse for any poor souls that come to re-supply a covert base that isn't there anymore."

"Well, I've taken the liberty of downloading Seitzmann's full service dossier to your personal queues for review," Raven said, bring back around. "As I said, his record is extensive, so I encourage you to go over it in detail. Now," she said mentally switching gears, "it appears that the operational security they had running here was pretty tight. Practically every databank they had set up was rigged with a timer failsafe. If keycodes weren't input after each interval, the computer commits suicide, which is what happened in the main administration offices they were using as their headquarters."

"However, I did manage to find a few scraps of information, mainly from hardcopy memorandums and hand-written notes. From that, I was able to identify the station commander, who I identified as Knight Commander-3. It appears he, or she, as the case may be was in the tram that was destroyed by the Valiant's missile fire here," she said and the tram system highlighted on the cutaway map.

"There's not much on how they organized themselves here, but from the looks of it this Knight Commander was in sole authority with no second in command. Apparently if the leader fell, work would continue until someone else came from outside to relieve them. My estimate was that this was a security measure meant to stratify and compartmentalize the operation in case something backfired."

"Question," Gyro said and Raven waved to her to speak. "You mentioned that there were a hundred and twenty-six people on board, but only forty-two of them were confirmed Oriflammen." Raven nodded. "That only accounts for a third of the people. What about the other two-thirds, do we have any clues about them?"

"No, we don't. They are total unknowns," Raven said. "There are a few other indicators on about another ten in the form of tattoos, clothes and even haircuts, that lead me to believe they might have been mercenaries from some of the trailing areas around Shenandoah or Spencer, but I don't have them on file. Many of the bodies were in too bad a shape, but several groups were complete ghosts as far as the information I have. In particular, those groups were the ones camped out in Main Engineering, the ventral docking bay, and first attack wave that met the Valiant as they entered Main Industrial." Once again the areas stood out on the holomap.

"Since Knight Commander was killed and unidentifiable among the wreckage, we have no way of knowing whether or not he or she was also associated with the Oriflammen military. So, at this point, I don't have enough information to determine whether the Oriflammen were indeed running the show here, or if another group was using them as an adjunct to their own forces. While the facts would suggest, with *Orion's* involvement, that the Oriflammen were the driving force, my gut tells me that there is more to it than that. As Gyro pointed out, there were possibly more non-Oriflammen here than the third of them that we know have gone rogue."

“And speaking of *Orion*,” she said and the ship grew larger in the display, “Her last known position was Delphi Station in Helios where she was tasked with piracy suppression and commerce protection. The last report I have for her was dated to four months ago when she put in for re-supply. After that she was reported to have been headed on a long tour to coreward, specifically in Baldur, Enkidu and Nike Nimbus, that is, until she turned up *here*.”

“I know that she could’ve gone rogue on her own accord, but considering what we’ve seen so far, I rather doubt that’s the case.” She turned to look at Coeur, “I know you believe that Spitfire was commanding that ship. For what it’s worth, I personally believe that she was over there considering what you told him about her coupled with her combat record. Unfortunately, we can’t verify that as gospel truth. There is no mention of her anywhere on the station even though they infer her existence, and she is definitely referred to as a “she”, through context clues. In fact, they don’t even refer to the ship as *Orion* at all, but rather as the *Charlemagne*.”

Coeur conceded that with a slight nod of her head, though she had no doubt in her mind that Michelle Kaldara had been the one shooting at her. The tactics had had Spitfire’s fingerprints all over them. Raven was correct, however, there was no physical proof to confirm it had been her over there.

“Still, we are facing a possible scenario in which this group was actively working with potentially compromised elements of the RCES and RCN.”

Silence followed that statement. Raven switched gears

“Now, that pretty much covers the personnel they had working for them. The real question here is what they were doing there in the first place. If the whole *Chiron’s Star* business was a mask to cover their capture of *Hokona*, then it would appear that *Hokona* stumbled across their operations and had to be dealt with. It’s my belief that that entire encounter was made purely by accident. Which leads us back to just what they were hoping to accomplish out here – and why were they willing to kill anyone who found out about it. First let me point out what they were holding, and then I’ll get into what I believe was their probable use.”

The holographics changed again, bringing up a manifest of the things Raven had been able to catalogue. The top of the list was fairly mundane with rations and supplies, but as the list lengthened, the items at the bottom became increasingly more interesting. Some of the things Coeur already knew about, as did Drop Kick, but seeing it all in one place painted a startling picture.

“Stored aboard the station were no less than seven mixed palettes of ship-grade Scorpion and Pandarus strike missiles, contact nukes and X-ray lasers respectively. Those are generally used in ships ranging less than 600-tons, so they could’ve been easily used by *Orion* or ships of comparable tonnage and capabilities. There were a total of sixteen mobile SAM launchers, with twenty-eight intact Falcon anti-aircraft missiles and a copious amount of spares and replacement parts for the launchers. There were thirty-four ground vehicles, ranging from ATVs to APCs, including three Pyrrhus support sleds. Many of the vehicles were in various forms of disrepair. Though we didn’t find any actual suits of battle dress present, we did find tools, equipment and spares that could service them. There were two fully intact *Fury* assault landers and spares to keep at least six of them up and running. Additionally, there were over forty crates of light infantry anti-armor weapons, including fixed and seeker mines as well as the hand-held variety. Below that, there were *ninety-four* palettes of RPG’s, mortars with accompanying rounds, missile launchers, heavy machine guns, ACRs, grenades and enough additional small arms and ammunition to equip at least one full-strength, modern infantry regiment with a lot of breathing room to spare.”

Raven’s eyes once again swept over her audience.

“If you want the specific weapon mixes, again the full download is in your queue. Though, I should point out that there was an odd mixture of new and relic-tech in almost every category I mentioned. In some cases it might be a relatively crude weapon retrofitted with state-of-the art fire control, or new modified to accept relic ammunition. In the case of the vehicles, some of them had been patched up pretty well, but it was obvious that that had seen some action sometime in the past, though how far back in the past is unknown. So, there was an obvious lack of uniformity present among many of the weapons and that suggests to me that much of it has been cobbled together from here and there.”

“From SAG missions?” Drop Kick asked.

"I believe so. It's public knowledge that Oriflamme has been conducting raids on the Back Face of the RC for years. The fruit of those operations isn't shared with the rest of the RC, nor does it make to the Auctions. Instead it goes into a black hole somewhere. Aubani Intelligence has tracked a number of pieces that have made their way on to the black market, but by and large they seem to vanish into thin air." Coeur noted the tiniest bit of frustration behind her words. Trying to get any real picture of what Oriflamme actually did with the spoils must be a mind-bending task. "I think that we may have found a portion of that black hole here, on Lambda-3."

Serene raised her hand and Raven nodded to her to speak. "Could that be what we're seeing here, a large-scale smuggling ring with Oriflammen guns pimping themselves out for a percentage? I mean, we've certainly had our share of smugglers in Kruyter like the fiasco with *Ellen Arc* and *Nimble Dancer* a while back."

"That's a good point, Director," Raven said. "That thought occurred to me at first too. While I don't discount that that does occur, I don't think that's the case here. Part of it is how large the scope of the operation was just from what we've seen first-hand, not to mention all the behind-the-scenes support they must've had to get this far. Second was *Orion's* involvement. While it might be possible to bribe a starship Captain into lending a hand with something like this, it seems like smugglers would want to capture *Hornet* intact to either sell her or expand their capacity. They didn't do that. Along those lines, the biggest part of it was how fanatically they were willing to defend the station from the inside. In my experience most pirates and smugglers want the money that the lifestyle brings them, and it's awfully hard to spend money when you walk into a grav tank the way they did."

"That's true, I suppose," Serene said.

"So, if these weapons were ear-marked for some purpose other than just assets bound for black market, the nature of them begins to paint a picture of what their true purpose might be. The Majority of the equipment would be useless in ship-to-ship boarding actions, which means that it was intended to be used dirtside, on planets."

"Great Gaia," Serene said.

"Uh-huh," Raven replied grimly, "and understand that this laundry list of weapons represents only what they were carrying when we happened upon them. There is no way to tell whether this is everything they had, or if additional arms have been cycled through them already."

"You think this base was some sort of covert distribution center, is that what you're saying?" It was Serene.

"Yes on both counts. On one hand, it's all a matter of astrographics. Kruyter is positioned like a crossroads very near the center of the Reformation Coalition. From here you're only one or two Jumps away from Nike Nimbus and all the worlds to coreward. Spires and Aurora are only *one* Jump away giving you access to the trailing and spinward directions respectively. Then, finally, you're only a single Jump from Phoebus, which is itself only a Jump from Aubaine. So, this system sits on the middle ground that would make it ideal to send weapons and supplies to, quite literally, any star system in currently in the Reformation Coalition. That, coupled with the fact that it's an asteroid field that forms a ring stretching all the way around the primary, means the population can be easily avoided.

"Asteroid fields give a lot of hidey holes for people that don't want to be found. And let's face it, while we are used to dealing in terms of multiple star systems in our head, we sometimes lose sight of just *how much* space a single system contains. It's practically mind-boggling when you stop and really think about it. Given the megacorporation's fiscal status over the last couple of years, patrolling in the area of L-3, on the opposite side of the primary, would have been impractical at best and cost-prohibitive at worst."

Serene's face was pulled tight just then. It wasn't that she disagreed with anything the younger woman had said. In fact, it was that she agreed with her on the reasons why her system, her *responsibility* had been the perfect place for people like that to take up residence without fear of being discovered.

Sensing her frustration, Raven tilted her head and met the other woman's gaze thoughtfully.

"Understand something, Director, *no* patrol can cover everything all the time in *any* system, much less if you only have two SDB's with which to do it. That's the equivalent of trying

to keep tabs on something the size of four astroball fields using two leaf-cutter ants. Anyone who tells you differently is either lying, or doesn't know what she's talking about."

"She's right, Tirese," Coeur said. "Whoever did this knew what they were doing. There was no way you could've known what was going on."

"I know that, at least intellectually," Serene said, "but what they did to the Hivers and that Mayfield girl turns my stomach inside out. Knowing that they did all that, while I was here drinking wine and eating bon-bons, it just...just..."

"I know," Coeur said, leaning over and resting her hand gently on Serene's shoulder. "I know."

"I'm sorry, I don't mean to draw attention to myself. Please continue." Raven nodded.

"The second point you had was when you said, 'covert distribution base,' because that is precisely what it was. I'm not just talking about the insane security, or their willingness to kill to keep it safe. No, in almost every instance, the weapons themselves were being systematically sanitized. They were in the process of melting, scraping and erasing any and all serial numbers or identifiers off of every piece of equipment that wasn't native to L-3 in the first place. That includes items of both a modern a relic manufacture. In some cases, even batches of individual *bullets* were being cleansed like that. I can't even begin to imagine how many man-hours of effort that would take. In any case, we interrupted them in the process. We know that they were doing this on L-3, because we found the tools they used to do it. During my investigation I found a cache of pistols that had been cleaned sitting side-by-side identical ones that still had the tags and numbers still intact."

"Were you able to glean anything from that?" Gyro said, and Coeur suppressed a grin. By now, the Captain knew that Raven wouldn't have brought it up unless it was for a reason.

"Now that you mention it, yes, and that leads me toward my conclusions. Many of you might suspect where I'm leading with this, but let me go ahead lay it out there for you. Given what happened to us a Phoebus, we know that there is a hostile force operating there that may well have subverted the legitimate government. As I have mentioned to Red Sun before, one of the mercenaries that attacked us bore some indications that he might have been from Spencer or the surrounding area. There were abundant indicators on L-3 that also point to involvement by both Spencer mercenaries. While that would suggest an obvious link, I had to refrain from making that leap in logic until I found actual proof. Otherwise, I would leave myself open to making one of those flawed assumptions that spell the kiss of death."

Raven took a deep breath and squared her shoulders.

"I found the link, however, that conclusively proves that what happened on Phoebus goes hand-in-hand with what was happening here. You see, the Devlin-5 pistol I took from the mercenary on Phoebus *was loaded with bullets that came from here.*"

"Are you sure," Coeur said, her body poised like a snake ready to strike. "Absolutely sure?"

"Yes, I am. I had Newton run the test ten separate times to be sure it was correct. The markings on the bullets match the ones we found here, in fact, Newton thinks it have even been done by the *same person.*"

"Oh God," Serene spoke aloud what everyone else felt. "So where does that leave us?"

"In dangerous times, I'm afraid," Raven said. "I've already shared with Red Sun my belief that what happened on Phoebus represents some kind of uprising by an outside power. Now, however, I'm beginning to believe it may have been initiated by an *inside* power."

"Oriflamme." Drop Kick said.

"I can think of only one reason that Oriflamme would want to forcibly and quietly seize Phoebus. The only strategic value it truly has is its proximity to Aubaine. Control Phoebus and you have a virtual lock on the traffic, and therefore the information, coming in from trailing, the direction of Oriflamme. If these weapons are meant to be used for planetary operations..." her voice trailed off.

"Then either they are looking to undermine the current government, or try to do away with it completely." Drop Kick said, and Gyro paled noticeably. Unlike some of the others, much of what she was hearing was for the first time.

"Wait a minute, can they *do* that?" the XO who was from Aubaine said. "I mean, could they really think they have the ability to win a *civil war*, given the disparity of technology?"

"I can't answer that," Raven said. "Perhaps they feel they can overcome it somehow, I don't know. There are still a lot of unanswered questions, but my belief now, given all the evidence, is that Oriflamme, or some dissident faction thereof, is about to move against Aubaine, perhaps as the opening gambit of a bid to control the star systems of the Reformation Coalition."

They stared at her with obvious shock, and she returned their looks them levelly.

"Serene," it was Coeur that broke the silence, "Now we really will need to appropriate your courier."

"Then that leaves us with a bit of a problem then, doesn't it?"

"It certainly does."

Kruytercorp maintained three couriers based out of the Kruyter system, all of them rated Jump-2. Each one of them was slimmed down to the bare minimum, and converted into what was for all intents and purposes a flying mailbag. Unfortunately at that particular moment only one of them was able to fly. One had been dispatched by Serene to Vezina before *Hornet* had ever arrived, and was not due back for at least another month. Another had suffered near-catastrophic Jump engine failure and been side-lined for repairs. Virtually the whole Jump drive would need replacing and it was going to take at least three months to get her back up and running if she was given immediate priority, which she wasn't.

That left the single remaining courier. Truth be told, Coeur had wanted to send it on its way when they first came to Kruyter informing others of what had transpired at Phoebus, but something had stopped her. Instincts or just intuition, a corner of her mind thought that it might be needed later, and she had been proven right. Now that this information had been revealed, the situation was many times worse than it had originally appeared. They would have to send the courier out now.

No ship that was Jump-capable and currently in the Kruyter system had the stride to make it directly to Aubaine without first going to Phoebus to refuel. Even with *Hornet's* inflatable fuel bladder, that added another parsec to their range at the expense of another week in Jump, Aubaine was still out of reach even if they chose to Jump into empty space first. Given the time needed for their repairs, a dispatch ship sent now would do more in the long run than the wounded far trader. Of course, sending the courier to Phoebus was out of the question. If they only had one shot to get the word out and raise the alarm, they simply could not risk that messenger being intercepted by the enemy. The only way that a strictly Jump-2 ship was getting to Aubaine from here would be to take the long way around through Aurora and on "down" to Apollo, Vezina, Schall and *then* to Aubaine. It would, in effect, turn a trip that should be two weeks into five. Considering the pace of events thus far, a lot could happen in five weeks.

If that was their only option, then they would have to make the best use of it. Even with such an extensive side-trip, the courier might also serve the purpose of alerting the other star systems of what was going on. Specifically, there was a Major naval base at Aurora where many of the RC's most powerful warships made berth, including RCS *Thunderchild*. Coeur could only imagine what *Thunderchild's* firebrand of a Captain was going to do when news of this finally got to him.

"We've got to take the Aurora route. I don't see that we have a choice at this point."

Coeur said and Serene nodded in agreement. "Raven, how fast can you have everything you've just presented to us copied and on file?"

"Already done, sir."

"That's what I wanted to hear. Serene, can you write me a letter underscoring the need to get the word out?"

"Afraid that they might think one of their Captains has snapped?"

"Something like that. More to the point, we want to make sure they listen, especially at Aurora since that will be the courier's first stop. You've got quite a reputation there, and right now we are going to have tread heavily on it."

"Okay, I'll get on it."

"While you're doing that, I've got something for you Drop Kick."

"The courier?" he said.

"Yes. Get your Marines over there and make sure it doesn't suffer any unfortunate accidents in the meantime. If we *do* have a mole in place, we have to head them off at the pass."

Drop Kick was on his feet, comm in hand, issuing orders and almost halfway out the door.

“Gyro, go with him.” Coeur said to her XO. “He’ll need the help.”

The young woman shot out of her chair in pursuit of the Marine as Coeur turned to her Intelligence Officer. “You really know how clear a room.”

“Yeah, I suppose so.”

“Okay, let’s get to *Hornet* ASAP and make sure things are secure there.”

“What can I do to help you?” Serene said.

“Get that letter to me, and call in the courier’s crew. She’ll need to launch ASAP.” Coeur said and then they were gone.

Serene switched off the still-glowing holographics and the office darkened dramatically. She turned to her computer and stared at the viewer, her hands hovering over the old-fashioned keyboard in readiness.

Well, I guess I shouldn’t worry too much about the normal niceties. There really isn’t a gentle way to say, “War may be coming your way, just FYI.”

Chapter 13

Takari Bron, better known to his RC colleagues as Blowtorch, was actively attempting to exorcise the demons of boredom from his mind as he sat quietly at his duty station. The system defense boat, RCC *Cervantes*, was ponderously making its way in a wide arch back to the High Port at Spires for re-supply, re-fueling, and, Blowtorch hoped, much-needed R & R.

The long patrols in the outer system could take weeks or months, and for the 23-year old it became exponentially harder to look at empty repeater plots day-after-day. Well, the scope wasn’t *exactly* empty, per se, as their escort, *Ngozi*, kept pace with them a few hundred thousand kilometers away. Other than that, they had never once logged a contact that turned out to be anything other than normal traffic during his tour of duty. Duty, however, was still duty.

Sadly, it had taken only a few months in the service to disabuse him any romantic notions about life aboard a warship. While the skipper had assured him not once, but several times that the best life a SDB could hope to lead was quiet one, Blowtorch had hoped that living on a ship like *Cervantes* would prove to be more than the seemingly endless monotony and combat drills.

The skipper *did* have that patience so critical to the success of a professional spacer was cause enough to secure the young man’s respect. More than that, Blowtorch found himself day-dreaming of casting himself in the skipper’s veteran mold, and one day commanding a ship of his own. It would be something Jump-capable, too, unlike the relatively sedentary *Cervantes*, which was permanently stuck in the Spires system.

Still, *Cervantes* had been home for more than a year, and he had been lucky when a berth had opened up aboard her. The fact he had become her Tactical Officer at such a young age was an impressive accomplishment. Despite the listless funk that occasionally enveloped

him, he was keenly aware that if a Vampire, raider, or other threat set foot in the Spires system, it would be his guns that would answer the call.

That thought was often enough to buoy his attention whenever complacency threatened to rob him of his edge.

The hatch to the command deck whirred open and in stepped the SDB's CO, Erol Van Dorn. At a glance, a casual observer would have never guessed he was in the armed services. Even in his regulation body sleeve, he was hardly recruiting poster material. Oddly proportioned, Van Dorn suffered the opposite fate of Hammer Lathrop. Where Hammer seemed larger than he was in actuality, Van Dorn seemed rather short at a distance, but was in truth more than 1.90 meters tall. The face he possessed was neither handsome nor ugly, though seemingly flat and jowly, no doubt giving rise to his taccode, Mad Dog, but a self-effacing twinkle shown through his faded blue eyes, and his command confidence was tempered by a genuine sense of humor. Always, the soft touch in matters of protocol, he didn't even insist on those under his command calling "sir", preferring instead the more prosaic "skipper".

Blowtorch watched the skipper take in everything around the bridge in a single expert glance before settling into his station. Here was a man, Blowtorch thought to himself, that had seen the Third Imperium before its ultimate dismemberment. There was a certain amount of awe that most remnants inspired in those children of the New Era. They came from a vastly different world, when sector upon sector of space hadn't been hammered flat. What wonders had they seen? What terrors had they endured to have survived the Collapse and the unimaginable holocaust of Virus?

"All stations report in." Mad Dog said after he had made himself comfortable.

Each station did as the skipper asked, with commonplace predictability. Nothing had changed since Mad Dog had been on the bridge a shift before. When it came time for Blowtorch's report, he forwarded the stats on the latest combat readiness drill to Mad Dog's queue. The CO looked at them without comment, but Blowtorch just knew the skipper took in every facet, and could quote from every line if called upon to do so.

From the communications station, Libra turned toward the skipper. "*Ngozi* reports all clear...though, Python wanted to remind you, *again*, that you still owe him a pint of Fijan's Finest."

"Duly noted," he returned with just a hint of feigned exasperation. "No one can take a joke these days. Hide one ace up your sleeve...." His voice trailed off and a wave of short chuckles washed over the bridge.

"Also, the *Star of Montrose*, broke orbit from Spires a while back, and is underway to her Jump Point now."

"Ah, thank you." Mad Dog leaned forward in his chair. "Are we within effective comm distance?"

"Yes."

"Excellent, raise her," the skipper said with broken smile. Ever since he had heard the freighter was making its way through the system, Mad Dog had been excited. Blowtorch couldn't help but wonder if their relationship went beyond being old shipmates.

A few minutes later, the forward viewscreen changed from a diagram of the Spires system to the head and shoulders of a woman in uniform. Her dark features seemed almost chiseled from stone, though any stern element found in her countenance was immediately undone as her bright eyes showed her delight.

"Erol! I heard you were still running that tub out here. When are you going to quit running around in circles and get a respectable job, anyway?" The picture of her face froze in mid-smile, as the two ships were still a tad over one-and-a-half light-minutes apart.

"You cut me to the quick, Boots. If by respectable, the lady refers to being a 'cargo jockey,' and living a meager existence meant only for the coarse and the uncouth, then the answer to madame's question is, of course, *when hell bloody well freezes over.*"

The rest of the crew watched this friendly exchange with barely concealed smiles.

When the image resumed, the woman was still laughing. "Oh, it does my heart good to see you again, Erol." She said, once again ignoring his call sign. "How they ever let an overgrown prankster with an itchy trigger finger skipper a warship will be a mystery to me to my dying day!"

"Oh, it's not so hard to believe," he fired back immediately. "It happened much the same way that they let a third-rate engineer's mate with *grossly* expensive tastes drive a mummified

rust bucket of a freighter.” He let the comment linger for a moment. “Speaking of expensive tastes, can I tempt you with dinner for you and possibly your officers? You’re not too terribly far away as these things go, and I know that ‘ship’ of yours has a broom closet for a mess hall. You know as well as I, the food is always better on an SDB anyway.”

Blowtorch looked on this with amusement. He had heard the Captain tell tales of Sacha Po, whose moniker “Boots” pre-dated the RC taccode, Bootes, she carried more than eighty years ago. She, like Mad Dog, was a remnant, and they had made their trip to the future along the same route. Decades ago their ship, damaged and outgunned, with no hope to make a stand, made a desperate attempt to escape from an ambush around a gas giant. They had escaped, but at appalling cost. Ultimately, out of a hundred souls onboard only five would wake up from their long cryo-sleep to see the modern day. Two of those fortunate survivors from *Altinak*, and the events of Carlyle VII, were now trading friendly jibes at one another across the stars.

Blowtorch felt immeasurably close to the both of them, somehow. He had read of the events that had catapulted these people into the New Era, heard it told from the perspective of a third survivor – his teacher at the Academy, Coeur D’Esprit. He had even struggled through a simulation of the incident in one of Coeur’s devilishly constructed training simulations. With all those pieces present, Blowtorch couldn’t help but feel as though he were apart of their little circle, even though the connection was indirect perhaps existing only his mind. It was as though that little piece of history had come alive before him.

“Yes, I’m sure you have only the finest in carbo-sticks and processed fish patties,” Boots fired back from the *Star of Montrose*. “As tempting as that fare sounds, I unfortunately can’t stay. This run has lots of perishables, and my timetable is as intolerable as ever. Can I take a raincheck for next time?”

Mad Dog sighed a little too loud. “I suppose. I will, of course, have to have the steward put up the decorative plastic-ware and return the red carpet I rented for just such an occasion, but all right, we can do this next go round...”

Blowtorch’s sensor repeater chimed insistently, catching the attentions of the navigator, the tactical officer and the skipper. The young man glanced at the panel, loathe to take his attention from the spectacle playing out before him. He made a double take, before his eyes grew wide at what his instruments told him.

“Hold on, Boots.” The skipper said to the screen, noting his tactical officer’s silence. He shifted in his chair to look at the young man. “Bron, what do we got?”

Blowtorch tried to wrap his mind around what he was seeing on the plot.

“Talk to me, ‘Torch.” The skipper said emphatically, breaking the spell hanging over the young man.

“Skipper...I’m registering Jump precipitations, *a lot* of them, bearing two-seven-nine by zero-three-six! Initial count puts it at twelve, no wait, sixteen.” Blowtorch’s heart felt as though it would burst from his chest.

“Scratch that, am now reading eighteen, *Good Gaia*,... *twenty one* drive signatures that just appeared on our scope. They aren’t even attempting to hide – they’re already banging away with active sensors.”

“They want us to see them.” Mad Dog said quietly. “Show me.”

Boots’ face shrank into a corner of the screen as a tactical display of the Spires system filled it. The twenty-one unknown contacts appeared in a deep crimson red as though the display itself were bleeding. The bulk of the contacts, about fifteen in all, appeared in a tight pack at about 100 AU’s from Spires, virtually on the edge the safe zone for an exit from Jump Space. The remainder were scattered out away from the main body. The unpredictability and time delays of leaving Jump Space had for millennia harried the efforts large fleets. A large force executing a mass Jump could be scattered all over creation when they arrived, and some ships might not precipitate out until a day or two later.

In Blowtorch’s mind, that meant if twenty-one ships had appeared almost simultaneously, it was *very* possible that, whoever they were out there, many more of their sisters were on the way.

“Have they seen us?” Mad Dog asked quickly.

“Almost certainly,” Blowtorch said. “On active sensors at this range, we’d be hard to miss.”

"Then trying to hide is out." Mad Dog rubbed his hand together in thought, then uncoiled from his chair like a spring.

"Update the position of all friendly units," Mad Dog said in deadly calm.

Cervantes and *Ngozi* appeared in green close together with dotted lines indicating their shared course towards Spires. The *Star of Montrose* appeared a far distance off their port bow with a course headed out of the system. The scourge of red unknowns lay on the other side of the *Montrose*, but much farther out from the planet. The only other ship that registered was *Cervantes*' dilapidated counterpart, *Providence*, which had become a near permanent fixture close to the High Port. With engines that couldn't seem to keep in regular repair, the grizzled old ship had been relegated to a role akin to a virtually immobile weapon's platform in orbit around the planet.

"What the hell is going on over there?" Boots face said as her image animated. Like Mad Dog, all her levity had evaporated.

"Not sure. Stand by." Mad Dog said quickly. "Get me a link to *Ngozi*."

"Python is on the line," Libra said. The escort Captain's face appeared next to Boots, their distances close enough for them to speak in real-time.

"Kal, I take it your sensors are telling you the same story?" Van Dorn asked, his characteristically jovial face now the very definition of serious concentration.

"Yes, twenty-one unknowns." Python replied. "Vampires?"

"Possibly."

"Damn."

"My sentiments exactly."

"Sir," Blowtorch said, adding the honorific, "we're getting a read on some of the blips. From her emissions, the lead one in the main cluster appears to be a relic light cruiser, in excess of 20,000-tons."

"Python, confirm that." Mad Dog said to the screen, and then turned to his navigator, Gazer. "Shelly, do the same."

"Right, checking." Python looked at something off camera.

As potent as *Cervantes* was in a fight, she displaced only 400-tons. One of the ships staring her down was literally fifty times her size, and it was only *one* ship out of the twenty-one.

"Looks like it's a match," Python said grimly after a moment.

"I concur," Gazer reported, "and there's more. Some of these ships match some of our Coalition registries, but they are *not* transmitting our IFF."

On Blowtorch's sensor screen, he noted that four of the blips had precipitated from Jump away from the main group, no doubt by accident. That, however, put them in closer proximity to their own group of ships. They were quick to take advantage of the serendipity. The ships maneuvered into a tight formation with the smaller ones sliding into a smooth screen for the one larger ship. Torch tracked their course heading, and saw the sword blade pointed at the throat of Sacha Po. He tagged them, and they immediately lit up on the main screen, highlighted with a gold border.

"These ships are heading for the *Star of Montrose*, sir. Designating them now as Betas 1 through 4."

Mad Dog acknowledged that. "What can you tell me about them?"

Gazer checked over her panels, absorbing the information like a sponge.

"The lead ship, Beta-1 one is easy to read, she's not even attempting to engage ECM. Looks as though she's one of the old *Kinunir*-class cruisers left over from before the Collapse."

That was bad enough news just by itself.

"Beta-2 looks to be about a fourth of 1's size, possibly a modified patrol cruiser of some kind. Beta-3 appears to be the RCS *Reckon*, out of Oriflamme."

"She's the sister ship to *Ngozi*," Python said on the screen. "*Bateman*-class and everything. Only difference is, her Jump Drives apparently work."

Gazer continued.

"Beta-4 appears to be small enough to be a fuel-tender or support ship. It looks as though she's starting to lag behind the others." On the screen the formation shifted as the three larger ships left behind their smaller sister in favor of greater speed.

"Skipper," Libra said. "Beta-1 is broadcasting an omni-directional message. They must've sent it as soon as they precipitated. It's audio only."

"Let's hear it."

Libra patched it through the bridge speakers.

"This is Voice of the Technocracy," a haughty voice said, slightly distorted as though the message had been pre-recorded. "Be advised that elements of Gold Fleet, acting on behalf of the High Technarch, are now, as you hear this message, on their way to seize control of planetary control at Spires. All military units belonging to the former Reformation Coalition, both on the planet and in space, will immediately stand down and surrender to the authority of the Technocracy. Failure to comply, or any hostile action of any kind, be it of a civilian or military nature, will result in the total and utter extinction of the responsible parties."

The voice changed its demeanor, its tone switching from authoritative to almost jubilant.

"People of Spires, fear not, for this is a day of celebration. *Today* the burdens of a weak and corrupt government are yours no longer. *Today*, you ascend to greater heights than were ever allowed to you by your Coalition masters. *Today*, you join the Grand Technocracy of Oriflamme, to embrace your destiny among the stars!" The voice faded with a final punctuation mark of patriotic music.

Mad Dog's face couldn't have been more still if he were dead.

"Message repeats, skipper."

"Turn it off."

"I guess we can rule out Vampires after all." Python said after a moment.

"Or ones with a very poor sense of humor," Mad Dog said, resting his chin on a closed fist, his eyes in a distant gaze.

"We're receiving a rider at the end of the message from Beta-1, Skip," Libra said, her hand to her headset. It sounds as though it is directed specifically to *us*."

"What else now?" he said, "Patch it through."

"To the commanders of the ships in my vicinity, this is the cruiser, *Royal Vengeance*," the voice said. "By now you have no doubt taken our readings and can estimate the array of cannon you are shortly to face. I command you to heave to and prepare to be boarded, now. I realize that, in typical Star Viking fashion, perhaps you are contemplating some act of futile heroism, a final shining moment of defiance. I would *strongly* advise against this mode of thinking. Understand I will accept nothing less than your unconditional surrender. Anything else and I will not hesitate to burn you from the stars. This will be your only warning. *Royal Vengeance* out."

"These boy are serious," Python said, no trace of humor coloring his words.

"Indeed."

"They're powering up weapons, Skip." Blowtorch said. "It looks as though *Montrose* is their primary target."

"I see." Mad Dog turned to the image of Boots on the monitor. "How long until you can Jump?" he said sending the transmission. The message would take at least three minutes to travel there and back, leaving Mad Dog with a few moments to think.

Montrose was the only ship amongst their company with a functional Jump Drive, and the only one that could carry a warning to the other systems. It would also be the first of them that would come under enemy fire. It was simple math.

He knew what he had to do.

"Missile launch!" Blowtorch said excitedly.

"What?" Mad Dog surveyed the viewscreen as it updated with new information. It told the tale with flashing points of light.

The core fleet, including the light cruiser, had launched a salvo towards High Port and *Providence*. It would take hours for the warheads to reach them, possibly enough time for an effective evacuation to be made, but the hammer had fallen.

"Torch, how many birds are we talking?"

Bron swallowed hard. "I can't say, but it looks as though it's somewhere between thirty-five and forty capital missiles."

Sounds of shock resounded through the bridge. A salvo of capital missiles that heavy was hardly the most a battle group that large could produce, but it would be enough. High Port and *Providence*, were most certainly doomed. It was now just a matter of time.

"That tears it," Mad Dog growled.

"I'm still another 43 minutes from being able to Jump," Boots said on the monitor, "On my present course, they'll be on me in less than that. I'm coming about to rendezvous with you. We should be able to form up and coordinate our efforts from there."

"The hell you are, Boots." Mad Dog said immediately into the transmitter. "By now you've seen that they've already fired on Spires. I doubt very much these fellows are too worried about civilian casualties either."

He took a depth breath.

"All of which means that surrender is out of the question. Commander Python, do you agree?"

Python's mouth formed a hard line across his face. "I do."

"Go, get out of here, Boots." He said softly. "We'll buy you the time."

The ramifications of his statement visibly fell on the members of the bridge crew. Blowtorch felt frozen in place, as though someone had doused him with freezing cold water.

"Dreamer," Mad Dog said to the pilot, "Bring us about. Gazer, plot us a least-time intercept course with the enemy. Maximum military speed."

A round of acknowledgments answered him.

"Battle stations."

With that one word, both ships were thrown into a flurry of activity. Alarms sounded. Vac suits were donned. Weapons were brought on-line. Missiles were loaded into their tubes. Warning lights bathed internal compartments in blood red light. Now the endless drills were finally paying dividends. In a matter of minutes, each ship had come to readiness, presenting a sharp edged sword toward the foe.

"Erol, for the love of Gaia, *don't do this!* There's got to be another way!" Boots said, her expressive eyes filled with horror.

"Boots, ... Sacha, this is the only way," he replied with a resolute voice. "Your ship is the only one that has the stride enough to get out of here, so do it. No arguments."

Mad Dog memorized the lines of her face on the screen. Somehow, he knew he would carry it with him until the end.

* * *

Aboard the *Star of Montrose*, Boots sat in her chair looking at an image of her friend, knowing it would be the last she would see him. He knew it too, she could see the look in his eyes. He had just handed down a death sentence to the 34 men and women under his command. It was a hellish exercise in control to keep composed, as she saw *Cervantes* and *Ngozi* change course and get underway to face down her would-be attackers. She heard his voice say:

"Besides, surrender was never really my style anyway."

She closed her eyes, and when she opened them again, his image was frozen on the screen.

"What are your orders, sir?" her XO said from his station.

"Continue to Jump Point." Her voice almost caught as she said it. Almost. "You know what's about to happen to them out there."

Her first officer nodded slowly.

"Let's make the most of it."

"Aye, sir," he said quietly.

Her eyes became riveted on the tactical plot, seeing the action unfold. *Cervantes* was accelerating slightly faster towards the hostiles than her slightly slower counterpart. Even this played into their strategy. By angling out and covering the initial approach vector, *Cervantes* would bear the brunt for *Ngozi* allowing the smaller ship to fire from behind a margin of cover.

Already, the hostile ships were adjusting their course to greet their incoming guests. Boots could imagine the arrogant commander of the *Royal Vengeance* scoffing at what he found on his plot. No one alive knew Mad Dog better than she did, and she knew *Royal Vengeance* was up for more than she bargained for. Mad Dog and Python were about to ram their ships down his overbearing throat.

They would put up a hell of a fight, of that she was absolutely sure.

* * *

On the bridge of *Cervantes*, Mad Dog sat very still, his eyes taking in everything. Where others in his place might feel the need to give a St. Crispin's day speech, he had merely told everyone to do their jobs until they couldn't.

While his calm was a comfort to those on the bridge, the weight of the situation was obvious upon his shoulders, as though he were Atlas trying to hold up the world. Victory was out of the question. The system would fall even if *Montrose* did escape. No one could have held this system under these circumstances – not Hammer Lathrop, not Ethyl Noah, not even The Red Admiral – *no one*. All he could he do was *this*.

To their credit, his bridge crew went about their duties professionally, with only a few flushed faces to tell him of their anxiety. Blowtorch in particular looked drained of all color, but he never faltered in the execution of his job.

"Blowtorch," Mad Dog said, turning in his seat to look at the man that, to his eyes, seemed interminably and tragically young.

"Skipper?"

"Red Sun was your teacher at the academy, right?"

"Yeah."

"She ever put you through exercise 61C?"

He nodded without words.

"What did you do?"

Blowtorch looked puzzled at the question, but his answer seemed to solidify something in his resolve. "I stood my ground against the two Vampires, even though I couldn't aim, firing everything I had until I was gone."

"I see." Mad Dog said, satisfied. "Thank you."

* * *

Boots witnessed the opening volleys on her sensor plot. *Royal Vengeance* had elected to hold herself in reserve, allowing the *Reckon* and the patrol cruiser to engage ahead of it. The two ships poured fire down on *Cervantes* unmercifully, in a torrent of missile and laser fire. The SDB, however, had given up the luxury of Jump Drives to devote space to weapons and armor plating that was considerably thicker than anything she was facing down. *Cervantes* took hit after hit, trailing debris and fuel, but she kept coming. As they raked past each other, *Ngozi* finally revealed herself and coordinated return fire. The traitorous *Reckon* was immediately destroyed in a tremendous fireball, and the patrol cruiser took heavy damage as lasers savaged her flanks.

Their attack was not without its answer. The patrol cruiser managed to target the exposed *Ngozi*, with horrifying accuracy. The escort bucked under the punishment, and spun out of control. Firing to the last, but unable to control herself, the patrol cruiser pounded her further. One minute, it looked as though *Ngozi* had weathered the storm, the next she was a brilliant expanding ball of light and superheated gas.

Cervantes did not let the death of her sister pass lightly. Now focusing on the patrol cruiser, all remaining batteries *Cervantes* had converged on her. The fury nearly broke the patrol cruiser's back. The dying ship tried weakly to move out of *Cervantes*' way, but the SDB bared her predatory fangs, and closed in for the kill.

It was then that *Royal Vengeance* had apparently seen enough, and intervened. Twin 700-mj heavy lasers flashed in the night. One missed, but the other struck *Cervantes* aft and port, tearing her open, dealing a mortal wound. Boots felt that blow, as acutely as if it had been perpetrated on her person, knowing all too well the fiery hell of twisted metal and blood that the crew of the *Cervantes* must be in. Secondary batteries from the *Kinunir*-class cruiser opened up as well, scalpel into her thick skin.

Ignoring the ruined patrol cruiser, *Cervantes* managed to wheel around, and flared her mangled maneuver drive directly at *Royal Vengeance* on a collision course, cannon blazing,

burning bright. A few of its shots actually scored the hull of the cruiser, but the damage, unfortunately, was minimal by comparison.

Once again, the cruiser's heavy lasers fired, this time at much closer range. Both struck *Cervantes* amidships, landing the final killing blow. There was an explosion, bright as the sun, and then darkness.

Cervantes disappeared from the sensor display, and something of Sacha Po's soul went with it. She covered her face with her hands, breathing into them heavily. Sliding them down her face, she pressed her palms together, forming a steeple over her mouth, as if in prayer.

"We're ready, sir." Her XO reported, respectful of the solemn silence that hung over the bridge.

"Very well, initiate Jump."

Like a needle piercing the veil of space, the *Star of Montrose* buttoned up and slid into the enigma of a Jump envelope.

Rest well, my friends, Boots said to herself, *I will not let this stand*.

When she emerged at their destination, she would raise the alarm, before continuing on to Aubaine to do the same. She would tell the people what she had witnessed this day, tell them of the sacrifice that had made her warning possible.

Surely the people of Phoebus would understand.

* * *

His Excellency, Vitali Fydorovich Mestrovic, Grand High Technarch of Oriflamme and self-proclaimed Sovereign of its Peoples, stood in the CIC aboard TNV *Golden Flame*, arms crossed behind him in contemplation. The forward viewport was tightly buttoned up while the mammoth ship was ensconced in Jump Space, and he looked at it in consternation. Something in him felt robbed that he wasn't pacing the upper platform while backlit by the stars themselves, which would have greatly appealed to his own sense of drama.

Clad from head-to-toe in the brilliant marigold orange and fiery reds of his robes of state, it was as though there was a living flame that stood amid the stark silver and black lines of the ship around him. Emblazoned upon his chest was a golden sun whose prominences snaked out in all directions and sparkled ever so slightly in the overhead lights.

It was, in the opinion of Admiral Monique Alcantara of the ISN, a cheap and gaudy trick. Oh, she conceded that Mestrovic himself was quite a piece of work, and that he truly radiated the kind of charisma and power befitting the symbol on his chest. And yet, the robes had been carefully tailored to make his shoulders look wider. With its floor-length cut, it wouldn't have surprised her if his robe also concealed platform shoes to make him look several centimeters taller than he actually was. And to top it all off, there were small sequins sewn into the robe and *glitter* piled on top that, which to Alcantara's sense of professionalism was just downright tacky, as though the robe were a child's costume and not actual clothes.

What's worse was his effect on her shipboard operations. *Golden Flame's* CIC was situated on a platform built above the flag bridge. Filled with repeater displays and communications gear, this was where flag officers would make use of the massive holo-tank above whilst being able to relay orders down to the bridge with relative ease. The ship had all the right facilities to make an excellent flagship in the pre-Collapse era, and certainly today she was virtually unmatched in that regard. *Golden Flame*, or ISS *Relentless*, as she was known to the Soleean Navy was neither the biggest, nor the most powerful ship the 3rd Imperium had built, but in the modern day she was practically a juggernaut. Only a very few relic ships of her overall tonnage had ever been recovered, and it was fortunate, Alcantara mused, that most of them had been salvaged by her own government.

But, it remained true that the nerve center of the fleet was where Mestrovic had decided to keep silent vigil. While he had not once interfered directly with either her commands or those of Captain Emory, that he prowled the upper tier like a hungry tiger was enough to make many of the bridge crew nervous, as it must feel to them as though they were under the scrutiny of a flamboyantly colored microscope. Even if her own people were less susceptible to Mestrovic's

personal gravity, her crew was mixed with Oriflammen personnel. They *were* much more likely to stare and gawk at the newly self-appointed leader of their homeworld.

All in all, Alcantara wished that he had found some other place to play the watchful god-leader, and his tendency to invite his guests to join him, people that Alcantara would have *never* allowed access to the flag bridge, much less the CIC, wore awfully thin at times. He had even gone so far as to requisition a part of the command deck expressly for entertaining these guests!

So, she suppressed a flash of anger when the dedicated lift opened and deposited Vega Zorn and August Delpero not five meters from her command station. Since their departure from Oriflamme, Zorn had gone back to wearing an outfit that would only be politely called “mercenary” by the tactful, and Delpero was wearing a business suit on her command deck, a *business suit*. She quickly stifled a frown and kept her features carefully neutral. The two new-comers however, passed her by as though she were a piece of furniture.

Mestrovic turned slowly and caught them in his grey-eyed gaze.

“My friends,” he said warmly, “please make yourselves comfortable.” He turned to one of Alcantara’s Lieutenants and gestured for to him to bring refreshments. Once again Alcantara suppressed a flush of anger. He was treating an officer of the ISN, one of *her* people, as though he were a mere *steward*. Bile surged in her throat, but the thought of a distant horizon, not yet dawned, filled her thoughts, and she hid a predatory smile.

Oh, the things I do for Queen and country...

“From what I understand, we are nearing the time of our precipitation point into Zloga,” Mestrovic said conversationally. “I wanted the two of you to be present at this historic event. I have no doubts that it will be the first acts of our grand play upon the stage of stars.”

“Thank you, your Excellency,” August said, the title sounding somewhat strange from his lips. “I’m honored you would think of me.” Zorn smiled, but said nothing.

“Oh, pish-posh, August,” Mestrovic returned cordially. “We needn’t resort to titles amongst ourselves *here*,” he said with a dismissing gesture at the CIC. “Besides, you have taken it upon yourself to become one of the architects of this new dawn. The least I can do is have you here to witness the laying of its cornerstone.”

Delpero clasp his hands and bowed his head slightly. “Again, you have my thanks.”

An insistent bleep sounded on Alcantara’s display, which was echoed from below her on the bridge.

“Ah, speak of the Devil,” Mestrovic said with a whimsical note, “Admiral, is that our cue?”

“It is, your Excellency,” she replied. “We have precipitation in an hour.” Her hand brushed against another panel and the Jump alert sounded. The crew busied themselves with all the duties required of them before their insertion back into real space.

“More than enough time for a drink, then,” Mestrovic said absently taking a drink from the tray presented by the Solee Lieutenant. Zorn and Delpero did the same.

In one motion, Zorn tossed back her entire drink and set her tumbler down on the table in front of her. “Hmm, good stuff. I’ll be right back.” She was up and nearly to the lift to find her vac suit before the other two could react.

August took a moment longer with his, but took larger sips to finish it off more quickly. There wasn’t much time to do everything he needed to get ready, and *Golden Flame* was *big*, and that meant getting back down to his quarters was going to take even longer. As he neared the bottom quarter of his drink, he realized that Mestrovic was watching him. The Technarch was sitting there, relaxed and completely unhurried with a languid, almost epicurean air about him.

“Excellency,” The Admiral broke in, “Might I recommend that you and Mr. Delpero ready yourselves with vac suits.” As she spoke, the Admiral herself was in the process of removing her tailored suit from the locker below her station.

“Take what precautions you think you must, Admiral,” Mestrovic said just a little more loudly, no doubt so that everyone in the compartment could hear him. “As for me, I shall remain just as I am now.”

Alcantara blinked at him for a moment, realizing that the Technarch was indeed serious. There were so many reasons to be protected when transiting into the unknown conditions of normal space that they were very nearly too many to count.

“As you say, Excellency,” she said after a moment.

Delpero froze in his chair, glass still in hand. Something in Mestrovic's odd gaze told him that any attempt to leave would carry an unwanted penalty. He stayed put, sipping the remains of his drink even though the need to be vac-suited grew large in his mind. Mestrovic seemed to follow his inner struggle of whether to offend his host or seek protection as time ticked by. The elder Technarch leaned over the table, his voice little more than a whisper.

"As Technarchs, it is imperative that we, at all times, project an attitude of confidence and total fearlessness, wouldn't you agree?"

Delpero sipped his drink to cover his unsure nod.

"Yes...you understand. We are the Spirit of the Revolution, August, we are its ideals made flesh. To allow ourselves to show any measure of fear, any trace of weakness or hesitation is to invalidate in the eyes of our subordinates the very fire that drives us to greatness. If we can convince *them*," he said with a wave in the general direction of the flag bridge, "that the Revolution is alive in *us*, then it will finally take on, as they say, a life of its own. Once they believe it to be so, our new dawn will be assured. Agreed?"

Again, August nodded making sure to maintain level eye-contact.

"Then it is settled – both of us shall shine as an example to the others. Neither of us shall don such plebian modes of 'protection', come what may." He beamed at August, "It gladdens me that you understand." Mestrovic smiled and closed his eyes in satisfaction, which hid from him Delpero's grimace.

Finishing his drink with gulp, Delpero's cheeks began to burn with growing nervousness. Not for the first time, the former tycoon wondered about the kind of people he had fallen in with, and Zorn's absence left him feeling vulnerable in Mestrovic's presence.

Spirit of the Revolution, indeed...

* * *

RCC *Fougade* seemed adrift in the eternal night of the Zloga system, surrounded on all sides by an immeasurably beautiful starscape as it moved with a hunter's grace through the darkness. There was a certain peaceful, drowsy quality to it all, Desmond Pierce, thought to himself, much like the downy soft state before you drift from awake to asleep. The field of stars that greeted him on his plot was almost dreamy, as though it were the sky in some half-remembered bedtime story from his childhood. It was not the kind of musing that many would have suspected the CO of a System Defense Boat to harbor, but the very lack of activity in the "boneyard" system he guarded seemed to have that effect on him. No matter what part of the system he watched over, the stars were always the same, and the quietude of his post made it seem as though he were the custodian of a house whose lights had all been turned off.

Human presence in the system here was very sparse, a mere drop in the bucket compared to the Spires system only a parsec away. Aside from the salvage teams, numbering less than a thousand souls, which continually combed the surface of Zloga for relic tech, *Fougade*, and the system's other SDB, *Osprey*, represented the total of humankind.

Pierce amended that mentally, RCS *El Dorado* had been ostensibly under his command since her Jump Drive had seized up, stranding her in the system five weeks ago. It was amazing how many ships became instant SDB's that way these days, but until a repair crew could arrive with enough spares to get her back into Jump Space, she was part of his team. Scrawny by comparison to a purpose-built SDB, the armed merchantman out of Oriflamme had been relegated to support status for *Osprey* in her wide orbit around the system's stormy gas giant, Novolen. Despite the gas giant's perilous and dangerous disposition, it was still the logical place for pirates and raiders to hide out given its relative proximity to the planet. It was also in a much 'handier' position as celestial bodies went for ships passing through the system to refuel. More than one ship's Captain had paid a heavy price for the expediency it offered, Pierce thought grimly, either from a waiting ship or the furor of the planet itself. All of which meant that *Osprey* was thankful for the extra eyes, and guns, that *El Dorado* provided.

Things had been quiet in the system for a long while. Zloga was deep within Reformation Coalition space. *Fougade* played watchman over what was a crossroads – no, not a crossroads, Pierce thought, a *bridge* – between the spinward and trailing planets of the Coalition.

“Downer?” His XO used RC taccode, “we’re picking up something strange at bearing zero-six-two.”

Pierce turned, “Can you define ‘something’,” he said, looking at his plot.

“Not yet, sir, sensors are having a tough time sorting it out.”

“All right, let me know the minute you have something.”

“Aye, sir.”

* * *

“All stations, prepare for imminent precipitation,” Captain Emory’s voice sounded all through *Golden Flame*’s interior. A buzz of last minute checks and diagnostics played over Admiral Alcantara’s repeater plots.

This was where the rubber met the proverbial road. In a moment they would punch back through into normal space...and then they would see what they would see. It was a moment of heightened anticipation for her, and she could feel her nerves tingling behind the protection of her vac suit. She summoned up all her resolve and mental acuity for she would shortly need to be at her best. There was no telling what the state of Gold Fleet would be at the moment of her arrival. It was possible that elements of her fleet could have precipitated as much as a day earlier without a way to communicate with the flag.

On the other hand, units might not appear until as much as a day or so *after* she did, and she had to contend with every possibility, including a scenario that included *Golden Flame* standing alone. A force this large could easily be scattered all to hell, and it would take the full coin of her experience to immediately assess the situation, react to the conditions that presented themselves and organize them once again into a fleet. That is, until she had to do it all over again the next time the fleet Jumped *en masse*. For Monique Alcantara, there was no regret in this duty, it was simply a part of her job – just as it had been for any spacebourne Admiral throughout the history of interstellar warfare.

“Precipitation in ten,” Emory’s voice boomed over the comm, “nine...eight...seven...six...five...four...three....”

* * *

“Great *Gaia*,” Downer heard his XO exclaim, and realization followed a second later. One moment, the scope had been completely clear with the sleepy night sky Downer adored. The next, a ship so huge in comparison that to the SDB that it almost dulled the senses, materialized into being, with multiple additional signatures winking into existence around it.

The sheer size of the forming precipitation point had skewed the sensor readings so far out of proportion that the operator had at first dismissed what his instruments had told him. Now a *dreadnought* stared down at them from less than 470,000 kilometers away. As stellar distances went, the unknown ship had practically landed right on top of them.

Shocked silence hung over the bridge at what they saw. Downer smelled fear, and felt it mingle with the ice cold lump in his gut.

“It’s a fleet, a *fikking* fleet!” Downer raised his voice just enough break the spell over his command crew. They were all good kids, but this sudden intrusion had shaken them bad, and he could not blame them one iota.

“Sound General Quarters!” The single command broke the icy sheet of fear like a jackhammer. “Helm, evasive maneuvers! Bring us about, two-seven-five, maximum military power.”

“General Quarters, aye!” his XO repeated back.

“Two-seven-five, aye!” The helmsman said flushed with excitement.

"Tactical," Pierce wheeled around, "what can you tell me?"

His tactical officer's hands were visibly shaking, but her voice was even.

"She didn't go dark immediately, so we got a pretty good look," she met his gaze, and it was the look of a condemned prisoner awaiting final sentence. "She masses 100,000-tons, sir." She swallowed hard and continued. "She's a *Resolute*-class Imperial dreadnought, sir, a relic."

Downer's face became a grey, titanium-hard mask.

"We actually have a basic profile on her class, sir," her face following suit to match her CO's. "Looks like one of our salvage teams recovered the specs few years back from an abandoned depot. I'll punch it up."

"To my station," Downer said, and his TO nodded sadly. Not that it really mattered at this point, but Downer thought that it might be best if his crew didn't have *all* the cruel details. They were performing admirably, but you could almost cut their terror with a knife.

He kept his face frozen as the details spilled onto his screen. Barely a minute had gone by since the ship and its ancillaries had appeared, and wrecked his peace. It would take at least five minutes for whoever, or whatever, was in command over there to get the behemoth back on track.

He hoped, anyway.

From his vantage point, it was very possible that what was in command of that ship had no biological component to it at all. More than likely, they faced a Vampire fleet with a nightmarishly powerful ship at its core.

And worse, according to the ship's profile in front of him, *Fougade* was already in range of the ship's secondary particle accelerators, and nearly within optimal range of its primary spinal mounted meson guns.

If the dreadnought wanted to bring his ship to action, there was no way to avoid it, not even at their best speed. In that sense, it was already too late.

"Comm," Downer said, tearing his eyes from the display, "send to *Osprey* the following," he waited for the comm tech to nod in readiness. "Case Violet. Repeat, Case Violet."

Pierce tried to ignore the collective indrawn hiss of breath around him, and went back to studying the information on his screen.

* * *

Alcantara studied her repeater plot, as well as the constantly updated holo tank that hung in the air above the CIC with intense eyes. Above her, a miniature version of *Golden Flame*, rendered in extraordinary fidelity, hung in mid-air with the single contact on their scope outlined in wireframe.

"Active sensors, Lieutenant," she heard Emory's commanding baritone order. It was more of an open display than she would have preferred, but that had been the way Mestrovic had wanted it, a bold and aggressive stance at every instance. Well, he had certainly got it with *Golden Flame's* entry, as the single contact was already veering off and trying to get clear.

"We have positive ID, sir," she heard a voice say to her Flag Captain a moment late as the wireframe resolved itself into the square lines of a *Shukugan*-class system defense boat. "It's RCC *Fougade*, sir, Commander Desmond "Downer" Pierce commanding," the officer said, almost sneering as he said the taccode. "She's right where our reports said she'd be."

"What do we know of her commander, I wonder?" Mestrovic said from his perch to Alcantara. Delpero and Zorn turned to look as well, the former unprotected still and the latter's face hidden by her facebowl. The Admiral had already looked at the information and committed it to memory, but even though Mestrovic had given her virtually free access to RC military databases, it was obvious that he himself had barely given them a second glance.

"He's Aubani, Excellency," she said over her suit's external speakers, and watched Mestrovic's eyes narrow. "Age 41, MSM/CEM." She was about to go on, but Mestrovic was no longer listening. He'd heard everything he needed hear with just the commander's planet of origin. His mind was now on to other things.

"And our little surprise, Admiral, what of that?"

"She's not on the board currently, but I can make an educated guess as to her location. I was about to send the activation code on an omni-directional signal."

The corners of Mestrovic's mouth turned up slightly. "Very well, Admiral, proceed." He turned to gaze up at the tiny SDB trying desperately to distance itself from *Golden Flame*. "In the meantime, though, I should like to make the address personally rather than use my pre-recorded version."

The Lord High Technarch stood and strode over to her dedicated comm officer, who not an hour before was serving him drinks.

"Allow me a moment to compose myself before you send the message."

"Of course, Excellency," the Lieutenant replied.

He turned to face Alcantara and a strange light burned in the depths of in those grey eyes.

* * *

"This is the Voice of the Technocracy," the audio-only transmission piped through *Fougade's* bridge speakers. "I hereby direct and require all units of the former Reformation Coalition to stand down. Belligerence of any kind will not be tolerated, thus your only option is compliance in totality." The voice paused.

The faces on the bridge were confused, and Pierce tried not to let his own show. He had been sure that the relic dreadnought had been a Vampire, which is why he had sent *Osprey* instructions to carry out Case Violet. Under that scenario, he was telling the other SDB's skipper that the system was being invaded in overwhelming force such that direct confrontation was not a viable option. She was to immediately evade any hostile elements and seek shelter within the turbulent atmosphere of Novolen until the cavalry could arrive, however long that might be. If Downer knew one thing, it was that *no one* could navigate the dangers of Novolen like Commander Anna Villanova. Though there was some part of him that wished they would make the attempt so that 'Nova' could cut them to pieces.

But according to this strange announcer, whose voice seemed sickeningly familiar, the dreadnought sailed under some nation's sanction, but which one? The only Technocracy he had even heard about was Oriflamme, but they *certainly* didn't have this kind of tonnage to throw at him.

Did they?

"Commander Desmond Pierce," the voice continued, and everyone sat bolt upright in their seats. Downer blinked as though his name were a figment of his own imagination. "You and the crew of *Fougade* have been tireless defenders of this system, and you are to be commended for that devotion."

Pierce folded his hands in his lap, aware that they eyes of his entire bridge crew were upon him.

"Now I call upon you to fulfill a duty of a different kind, that of duty to your crew."

"They're powering up primary weapons, sir!" Downer's tac officer said, swallowing the terror she no doubt felt.

"By now you must realize that you cannot escape," the Voice said. "You are already well within reach of our weapons. Consider your position carefully, Commander, and then decide how best to serve your crew."

"Message ends, sir."

"Thank you."

"What are your orders, sir?" Downer saw the glimmer of hope dawning in his XO's eyes that they might live after all, despite the uncertainty of things if they did.

"What option do we have?" he said, his dark eyes granite-hard. "We can't run, we can't fight and we can't hide. So where does that leave us?"

Downer's XO looked down already feeling the shame that should have, by rights, fallen squarely on his shoulders. T

They were in an untenable situation with only one way out.

* * *

"It looks as though they are powering down, sir." The Lieutenant reported and Captain Emory nodded silently. *Golden Flame* had already begun to power up and overtake the miniscule SDB, and the distance between them was falling away now that the other ship was standing down.

Emory put a hand to the comm panel on the forearm of his vac suit and buzzed the Admiral upstairs.

"Yes, Captain?"

"Shall I detail a boarding crew, sir?" There was a slight pause.

"A moment, Captain, if you please."

"Of course, sir."

On the CIC deck, Alcantara studied the plot as her command bore down on the unfortunate SDB. Only six of the anticipated fifty-eight other ships had made transit with the flag, but almost all of them had been relatively close by. Solee and Oriflammen crews alike had formed up on *Golden Flame's* flanks with remarkable precision. Not that *Fougade* posed a real threat to any of them under the watchful shadow of the flagship.

"Excellency," Alcantara turned to Mestrovic, "it seems that they have surrendered. Should we take them aboard?" All this deferring left a bitter taste in her mouth, but she carried out her directives just as they had been given to her.

"You know, Admiral, I believe that this is an excellent opportunity to make a bold statement and establish our position to the people on the planet," he said and that strange light Alcantara saw a moment before returned, "Wouldn't you agree, Admiral?"

The Admiral hid a smile at his words. Even though some civilized corner of her brain reeled from what she was about to do, a chance to crush any hope these *Star Vikings* harbored of resistance within their own borders was priceless, and best of all, *it hadn't even been her idea.*

"I would, indeed, concur, Excellency." She said over her suit's speakers and then commed Emory.

"Yes, Admiral?" he said.

"Open fire with all available batteries." This time it was his turn to pause.

"Confirm that last order, sir," he said quietly into his comm, "You wish to *open fire* on the ship *after* she has struck her flag as we requested?" There was no accusation in his voice, no recrimination or sedition at her order, merely a need to be clear.

My flag Captain, she thought, is a better sort than I am. Pity for him...

"Yes, Captain, all available batteries are to fire as they bear."

"Aye, sir."

The primary and secondary batteries were already powered up, and were waiting in standby mode until the order to fire was passed down. The Solee gunnery crews were good, and eager. They took it as a good sign that their sole target had opted to stop struggling so they could murder her.

Cannon flashed in the night, as the twin spinal-mounted meson guns opened up at a relatively close range. Weapon systems meant to annihilate capital ships descended on the SDB like a hurricane, consuming her utterly, along with the twenty-six members of her crew in a blazing funeral pyre. It was brilliant display of pyrotechnics as much as it was an overly excessive use of firepower.

Only a spreading mass of heated fragments gave testament that RCC *Fougade* had ever existed at all.

* * *

Around Novolen, *Osprey* had not yet learned of her sister's death. It would be several minutes before the first signs of the attacker's treachery would reach her, and so, at that moment, all she could do was act on the urgent Case Violet condition. For a moment, the surviving SDB micro-flashed her active sensors to get an accurate snapshot of the world around her, as her weapon's came online. She prepared herself to find a measure of shelter in Novolen's temperamental embrace.

Astern of *Osprey*, *El Dorado*, heard the plea for Case Violet, but ignored it. The merchantman *did*, however, make note of the SDB's sudden change to ready status and followed suit. The alert, whatever it had meant – the CO hadn't even bothered to read the brief – made the perfect pretext to mask his own activities. Though the gunners aboard *El Dorado* had become somewhat complacent over the last few weeks, they'd had ample time to passively refine their targeting solutions. When the activation signal reached them two minutes later, they opened fire.

The modified merchantman carried an 80-mj laser for protection, and mounted only a single missile tube with a minimal magazine, or so *Osprey* thought. Though *El Dorado* was not technically a Q-ship, she had undergone several modifications before her departure from Oriflamme and subsequent 'Jump engine failure' in the Zloga system. These changes had put the wolf in sheep's clothing on near parity with the SDB's armament. They included another 120-mj laser turret, as well as an additional missile tube with matching magazine space, all concealed with enormous pains taken at every turn to keep it that way.

Until now.

El Dorado let loose with a missile from each tube, as well as the three tethered missiles she had drug along behind her to help deal with any 'local threats,' and both of her turrets fired.

El Dorado had not taken into account how fast *Osprey*'s CO would bring her ship to the edge of readiness...or how her moment of active sensors had revealed that the innocuous pings *El Dorado* had sent her way to reconfirm her position were really a covert way of painting her as a target. *El Dorado* got her first volley off at almost point blank range, while still emitting a "friend" on the IFF.

Osprey was quick to answer. She replied with a serpent's speed and point defense took out three of the incoming missiles before they had a chance to impact. Her sudden change threw off the laser gunners and the shot from the 120-mj went wide. Another of the missiles lost its way as the SDB activated sensor drones that mimicked her emissions. The remaining missile and 80-mj laser, however, struck *Osprey* dead amidships, and the system defender belched debris and atmosphere. She was still up and in fighting shape, as SDB's were expressly meant to take a pounding. *Osprey*'s prompt response to *El Dorado*'s gambit had saved her from obliteration, and now her gunner's took aim, targeting the most sensitive areas of the ship, given the situation.

El Dorado's Captain had a sense of the flat, chisel-shaped SDB turning on him like enraged bear, and his blood ran cold. They had failed to bring her down, and now the hammer was about to fall because of it.

He didn't have to wait long.

While her opponent struggled to maneuver and get off another desperate volley, *Osprey*'s two 120-mj lasers went into rapid fire as she came about, and two missiles flashed in, all striking with uncommon accuracy. The merchantman's armor was less than a tenth the thickness of her attacker's, and it showed.

The first volley was meant to cripple, not to destroy outright, taking out their maneuver drive so that they would 'fall' in to the gravity well where the friction of Novolen's turbulent atmosphere would shred them into very small pieces. That was one of the most economical ways to take ships down while using a gas giant for cover, and Case Violet made extensive use it. That kind of slow, inevitable death was no more than the jackals deserved after *Osprey* mauled them severely.

It was, however, unfortunate that during those moments, the SDB also picked up the Lord High Technarch's message to kindly stand down, followed closely by the account of *Fougade*'s final, heart-clenching moments.

Having now seen the extent of 'mercy' they were likely to receive at the hands of Oriflamme ships, Commander Anna Villanova gave the order to return the favor. Seconds later, *Osprey*'s full armament sent TNV *El Dorado*, along with her entire mutinous crew, straight to hell.

* * *

August Christopher Delpero, former CEO of Novastar Incorporated, luminary amongst the most prominent political and industrial circles, and now nascent Technarch of Oriflamme, stood very still upon the deck of *Golden Flame's* CIC, and tried with all his willpower not to vomit.

He had just witnessed the cold-blooded murder of a ship of the Reformation Coalition, and he felt simultaneously hot and cold. How many people had been aboard that ship when it blew, twenty, thirty? *And for what?* They had done as Mestrovic had asked, and he had killed them anyway. It wasn't an accident, it wasn't a misunderstanding – it was an *example*.

A pall hung across his senses; that sickly feeling that galls anyone with a conscious when what has been done cannot be undone. To his left Zorn was still in her vac suit leaning on the forward rails of platform, her face an enigma behind her visor. August had no doubt that if he could see behind her gloves to the hands that held grip on the rails they would have been white-knuckled. She was a pirate and brigand, yes, but in all her notorious career she had never once fired upon a vessel of the RCN or RCES. Even though she had left the employ of the Dawn League *before* it restructured itself into its present form, many of the *people* remained the same, people she knew, people she *respected*. And suddenly all the rhetoric of a forceful, yet bloodless changing of the guard they'd been fed until till now went out the airlock.

August hoped very much that he had kept his outer shell of calm to those around him. Mestrovic seemed very pleased with himself just then, and warning bells sounded in August's head that he better not act as though something was wrong. Once again, however, Mestrovic seemed aware to his moods.

"You are troubled by these events," the Technarch said like a kindly father to a worried child.

"Merely curious," August lied as calmly as he could. "If you had wished to destroy them from the onset, why bother asking them to surrender at all?"

Mestrovic sat up, excitement gleaming in his eyes. The sudden movement alarmed Delpero at first glance, until he realized the old man was eager to answer. August knew then that he had somehow responded correctly.

"Ah, you are an astute one, August," he said flashing a smile, "I see my interest in you continues to be justified! But now that the topic has been broached, let us discuss it frankly, eh?" He tuned from his profile to fully address Delpero, his every faculty focused on his student.

"The reasons are manifold, but for the sake of wit, I shall hit upon on the most pertinent points. First, it was a message to the people of Zloga, few as they are. We both know that virtually all the people here are part of salvage operations, and there are probably several parked starships on the surface that could potentially deliver a ruinous fore-warning to other star systems of our campaign. Now, it is one thing to *threaten* to use force, and quite another to *carry through on it*. Now the people of Zloga know that we are not afraid to use force if needs be, which should instill in them enough fear to make them terrified to leave the planet – enough so that the very idea is not only inviolable, but unthinkable. This will have the effect of concentrating them together as well make them more tractable when our Marines arrive. "

"Second," he continued, "It was a symbolic gesture of unity for our combined crew, working against a common foe, who just happened to be of Aubani extraction, our ultimate foe. More than that, it was good target practice for those behind our larger cannon. If they can pinpoint a ship that small on the first volley, just imagine what they could do against the larger capital ships of the RCN!"

Delpero swallowed his horror, as Mestrovic went on.

"By the time we get to Spires, Admiral Hayward should have nicely pacified the system, and Phoebus has been in our quiet possession for some time now. All of which means that the next time we are likely to see action is Aubaine itself, where our every craft will come to its inevitable test. With that being the case, we should make the most of every opportunity for refinement from now until then.

"And finally....the main reason was to present the enemy commander with a test."

"A test?" Delpero said, willingly taking the bait.

"Indeed. It was a test designed to confirm something I've maintained that is at the core of our endeavor – are the Aubani fit to lead? I put the idea out there they should consider their position, and decide how best to act. Note that I never once called upon them to *surrender*, I merely said they should examine their current state and act accordingly. In essence, I wanted to see what the commander would do, and he showed me his mettle, indeed, or lack thereof. His response was to give in without a fight, preferring the easy way out like a coward. Since only the commander of the vessel could have given the order to submit, I *know* that it was an Aubani that issued it."

"You see," he continued, "despite all their bravado, despite all their sappy idealism, their head-in-the-clouds outlook on life does not help them once they are presented with the hard decisions that life thrusts upon them. If they lack the personal and moral rectitude for the realities of leadership, then it is proof-positive that they should stand aside for those that *do*."

Delpero wanted to scream, and was screaming inside his own skull. He wanted to tell the Technarch in front of him that he was insane, that he was certifiably straight-jacket insane. What's more he wanted to throttle the old man with his bare hands. Surely his strong hands could end the man's life before his outlandishly dressed guards nearby killed him. As it was, he merely nodded, himself locked in a most difficult test since his escape from prison seemingly a lifetime ago.

The man in front of him had shown himself to be a despot, a demagogue, who had truly seemed to buy into his own propaganda. As August stared at him, the very sight of Mestrovic began to sicken him. But, he managed through titanic effort to restrain himself. A voice in the back of his head told him that it would be unhealthy in the extreme to remind Mestrovic just then that his newest Technarch was, in fact, of Aubani origin.

"Admittedly, it was sheer serendipity that allowed the conditions to come about that I might pose the test, but such an occurrence is surely a sign of our fortunes to come."

He turned away with a smug smile and fixed his eyes on the holotank once more.

"And now, this is where the excitement fades and the tedium begins, I'm afraid. Now that the curtain has fallen on the first act perhaps you and Lady Zorn should go and amuse yourselves while we take care of the minutiae here, yes?"

"Your Excellency," Delpero bowed his head and moved towards lift with Zorn falling in smoothly next to him. When they disappeared at last, Mestrovic sighed and looked at the display built into his sofa's arm. After a moment he looked at the Admiral, which had watched the entire interlude in silence.

"I thank you for screening *El Dorado's* failure from the holo tank, Admiral," and she accepted his thanks with a ghostly smile. "I am certain that unfortunate business might have spoiled the mood of my guests. They both show such potential, but have much more to learn, I'm afraid."

"My thoughts exactly, your Excellency," she said in a subtly crafted tone of respect. "I was about to dispatch *Geoffroi de Charny*, *Durendal*, and *Roncevaux Pass* to put *Osprey* down for good."

"Do as you feel necessary, Admiral," he said with a wave of his hand as though he'd barely heard her, "you remain, as always, the very soul of tact and grace."

"Why thank you, your Excellency," Monique Alcantara said with a near feline smile.

* * *

In the Admiral's outer office aboard *Phoenix*, Gaylon Fox sat alone his eyes drinking in the opulence of the appointments around him, the richness of the décor. The Spirit of the Revolution was apparent here, too, with the red and gold motif that resonated in every facet of the room. The Technocracy was obviously proud of the relic ship that they had recovered on their own without the help from his government. It came as no surprise to the Solee officer that they would embellish their prize in such a fashion.

Fox secretly laughed behind his icy blue eyes at his surroundings. Admiral Hayward was indeed a patriot in looks, thoughts and actions. It could not be more apparent if it had been tattooed on his forehead. His *sanctum sanctorum* was an outward mirror of the man himself.

How strange to see such decadence from a people so renowned for their utilitarianism.

An aide materialized at the door.

"The Admiral will see you now." The young man said in a cold voice that was strictly business.

Time to pay the piper, I suppose, Fox thought wryly as he stood and straightened his uniform. Unlike the dark red tunic and olive drab trousers of the aide, the Solee Captain's uniform was a smartly cut black, gold and silver, pristinely worn. Every aspect of his appearance was carefully parade-ready, down to the confident calm he wore as a mantle. He flashed the aide an acknowledgment with his eyes and stepped through the door.

Hayward was behind his large metal desk, his eyes apparently poring over a myriad of hardcopy reports. He did not look up as the Captain entered and came to stand before him. After several seconds, Fox knew no acknowledgment was to come.

"Captain Gaylon Fox reporting as ordered, *sir*." He said crisply. Somehow the character of his voice on his last word seemed at once professional and patronizing.

"Have a seat, Captain." Hayward replied.

Fox made himself comfortable and waited for the sparring match to begin.

"I have reviewed your after action report, Captain, and I find it lacking." The Admiral said, finally looking Fox in the eye. If anyone had ever accused Shannon Hayward of having the 'joking eyes' of fighter pilot, it certainly would've have been now.

"In what...way, *sir*?" he said deliberately drawing out his words.

"In substance, in judgment, in logic... hell, in just plain common sense."

"I'm afraid I don't understand what you mean, *sir*."

"Don't play games with me, Fox," Hayward said dangerously. "I want to know just how you justify keeping *Vengeance* out of an engagement with a modern SDB, letting *Srecko* and *Dobroye*, take the brunt in your stead. Think, Captain, think *very* hard before you answer."

Fox sat back and folded his hands in his lap, taking a moment to consider the fire under steel that sat across from him.

"With respect, Admiral, *Vengeance* was hardly absent from action. In fact, she was responsible for putting an end to a dangerous situation in detail, and did not emerge unscathed, as the battle damage we sustained is ample testament."

"Minor hull damage at best," Hayward passed it off. "What I see here is that you deliberately matched two of the ships under your direct command against hostile units of almost identical tonnage without the support of your *own* ship. *Vengeance* alone out-massed everything coming at you by nearly twice. You had the position and the firepower to, best case, end the confrontation before it truly started, and, worst case, to minimize damage to fleet assets."

Fox accepted that as truth, but the Admiral's ire at losing two ships was only a polite cover for what Fox perceived was truly the heart of the matter. Here, Hayward had ships and personnel from another navy heavily integrated into his command structure. Not only was he reliant on such support, he was *dependant* upon it. The glorious Revolution Oriflamme had fashioned for itself would never have been made manifest without the direct support of the Solee Empire, an inconvenient fact that surely galled one such as Hayward. What if that critical support upon which the entire undertaking hinged was willing to let the natives do the dying for them, and choose not to get their hands dirty? What then? Do you dare take the chance of biting the hand that feeds you, with the Revolution still in its infancy?

In short, it was fear that drove Hayward – fear of not being able to maintain control of the beast that was already set loose, and having to pay for it in the blood of his own people, the Solee Captain believed. To Fox's mind that was very healthy attitude for him to have.

"Sir, from their attack pattern, it looks as though *Srecko* was singled out by both ships, no doubt because they considered it a turncoat. Once an engagement could not be avoided, I believe she was doomed," Fox said neutrally, "unless, of course, *Vengeance* had chosen to interpose herself, and completely shelter her from harm."

Fox watched for the last to strike home, but it did not seem to phase the Admiral.

"And *Dobroye*? She's a yard job, and if you haven't noticed, Captain, there *isn't* a yard here. And she can't leave the system now to get *to* a yard. She'll have to be left behind with the stationing force, if she isn't scuttled outright."

"Then it would seem, sir, that you have gained an additional SDB."

Hayward regarded the man across from him with something akin to quiet shock for a moment before his features tightened to a diamond hardness.

"You forget yourself," Hayward's voice was glacial and filled with unspoken peril.

"Sir, if I may," he said pre-empting the Admiral's growing displeasure. That last remark had been over the line, and he had enjoyed it perhaps too much. "There is another facet to this situation that I believe is being overlooked."

Hayward checked himself, and returned the other man's gaze steadily. "And what might that be, Captain?"

"The will...to fight, sir." Fox said simply.

"Explain yourself."

"This confrontation was quite possibly the first real clash between the forces of the Technocracy and Reformation Coalition."

"*Former* Reformation Coalition," Hayward amended.

"Yes, sir. As such, this initial action can, and probably will, set the tone for the remainder of the campaign, yes?"

"Go on."

"What *Srecko* and *Dobroye* proved to the rest of your command, and incidentally to you, sir, was that they were not afraid to engage forces that were once considered friendly. Even if the price they paid was high, you will have gained twenty-fold more by the banishment of self-doubt among your remaining fleet, since they have finally breached the barrier that might have otherwise seemed insuperable.

"As a military man, you know as well as I how insane the belief of a bloodless revolution truly is. It is a fabrication, a fairy tale civilians and politicians concocted to insulate their minds from the calculated murder of war. With such a green crew, many of whom were civilians until a short time ago, it's better that they learn this lesson here at a way station than in the fires that surely await us at Aubaine."

He paused, seeing his words wash over Hayward.

"I somehow doubt the same effect would come about if *Vengeance* had done their jobs for them."

Hayward said nothing. Fox couldn't resist and added:

"Besides, Admiral, would you truly wish history to record the first decisive blow of the Revolution dealt by a foreign ship with a foreign crew?"

Hayward's eyes drilled into Fox as though they were laser beams.

"Thank you, Captain, I've heard enough." He said at length. "I will be the one to judge the concerns and needs of the fleet from now on, not you. Understand, and I want you to be *perfectly* clear on this point, I will not tolerate a loose cannon at this late date, and the penalty for any further actions of a similar nature will be quite severe. Do I make myself clear, Captain?"

"Perfectly, sir."

"Dismissed." He nearly spat, with an acid tone that could've holed a bonded superdense armor hull.

* * *

The hatch hissed shut on their cabin.

"What are we going to *do*?" Delpero said, his composure gone. His face was flushed and visibly sickened.

"I don't know," Zorn said, noting Delpero's accusing stare. "I don't."

"He fikking *executed* those people!" Delpero said. "What the hell have you gotten me into, Zorn? This Mestrovic has..."

"Lower your voice," Zorn commanded. "And don't lay this all on me. Now calm down and let me think."

"How can you be so calm? Don't you care...," Zorn cut him off again by placing a finger over his lips in the "shush" gesture.

"I think we should take a shower," Zorn said. "I think that will help."

"This is hardly the time for..."

"A shower would be good for our health," Zorn said with a pointed glance around the cabin. Delpero clamped his mouth shut.

Surely they wouldn't have placed listening devices here of all places, he thought. Apparently, Zorn wasn't so sure.

"Okay, that sounds good." He said and she nodded in relief.

They both stepped into the head and Zorn turned the water on the highest setting as Delpero sealed the room. The noise from the water was loud in the closed space. She leaned in and her lips pressed against his ear.

"Now then, I think we can talk."

"You think Mestrovic bugged our room?" he said incredulously.

"Maybe, but this isn't Mestrovic's ship, and we can't have this conversation where there's a chance of someone else hearing," she said shaking her head. "Times like this make me wish I was a telepath."

"This is no time for jokes, Zorn," he said, and she squeezed his arm for him to lower his volume. "Those people are *dead*. He murdered them."

"I know."

"So why would you ever fall in with someone like that?"

"He wasn't like that before now, and I've worked for him for several years now, in some capacities that even *he* isn't aware of."

"The man's insane!" Delpero said between near-gritted teeth. "He wasn't like this on Oriflamme and, Gaia, Zorn, that was only a *week* ago!"

"He wasn't in charge then, not like he is now. Maybe these are his true colors, I don't know." She said sadly. "Key revolutionaries can turn into Emperors all too easily."

"That's great, fikking *great!* You've known him for years, but he waits until I arrive to turn into a raving megalomaniac. That's just *lovely.*"

"Shut up," Zorn hissed into his ear. "You don't know him like I do. He pardoned me when the government put a contract on my head, and he was the one that snatched me off Ra just as they were about to put me in front of a firing squad. And, you should remember that he was one of our silent partners back during the Folgorex business. You didn't know that at the time, but *I* did. I've trusted him with my life a dozen times and he has never shown this side until now, so stop your pathetic whining and use your fikking *head* for change."

Sweat started to bead on her brow from the steamy shower. She hadn't meant to snap at him like that. He was just as shocked and appalled at today's events as she was. But he had always lived a life that was largely insulated from atrocities like this. She, on the other hand, had seen so much that it wasn't as difficult for her to take herself out of the situation however disgusting it might be.

He swallowed and was quiet as she instructed.

"I'm sorry, this isn't your fault." She said after a moment. "Regardless of what we do, you are going to have to keep up appearances. Both of our lives may depend upon it, and that is *not* an exaggeration. You understand me?"

"Yes." He said quietly.

"We need time to figure out what we're going to do. Of the two of us, you're the one that will have to buy it for us. Can you do it?"

"I..."

"Are you *sure?*" she said with sudden fire.

"Yes. I am."

"Then that will have to be enough."

Chapter 14

His name was Isel Voniv, and he worked in Kreuzeng Control's system defense department. At age 32, he had been working for the megacorporation for nine years, seven of them in Kruyter itself. As one of the watchmen of the system, Voniv had helped coordinate the deployment of the SDBs in the system, and monitor activity from several of the remote listening stations spread out through the system. As far as his superiors had believed he had done his job impeccably and was one of KC's valued personnel.

Until now.

His position had allowed him to virtually blind Kreuzeng to the activity going on around them, and he had been very effective at covering his tracks. Any inconsistencies had been written off as simple anomalies. He had managed to keep a lid on things since it had been his job to determine where and when the eyes and ears of Kreuzeng should be at any given time.

That had all changed when *Hornet* had torn up the stars getting here. Voniv wasn't sure what *Hornet's* CO had said to Director Serene, but the steady control of the situation he had maintained for so long had been ripped from his hands when the Director assumed control of deployment herself. Then there had been no way to keep them out of Knight Commander's hair. There wasn't a way to alert them without tipping his hand. So, he had to lay low and put contingencies into place. He even had a patsy to blame everything on, with planted evidence that indicated one of his subordinates was the inside man when the inevitable security sweep came through.

It had almost worked. Almost.

As soon as word came down the pipe that, somehow, *Hornet*, a glorified tugboat, and her compliment had managed to completely eradicate Knight Commander's whole force, including the commander himself, Voniv had invented a reason to take a trip to the only remaining courier, *Cyllenius*, and make some creative repairs to the Jump Engines while the crew was quartered aboard the station. Again, the blame for it all would go to the patsy.

It was all so perfect, and Voniv had been quite pleased with himself by his own reckoning. When he received word that the courier was to depart, he had made sure to recheck his handiwork before she set out in case any of the repair crews had corrected the problem he created.

When he had arrived at the docking bay, Marines clad in battle dress had been there to greet him. They had questioned him about his business there, and he had had a response for almost each question. All it took was a moment's hesitation on the questions, one he couldn't even remember now, and the Sergeant Major had looked at him, and the pieces, so Voniv thought, had fallen into place for the Marine.

He had asked, politely, that Voniv accompany him down to the security station and that set off a sudden burst of panic. In retrospect, he now knew that he had made a serious mistake. He ran. Now that he was rational again, he knew just how stupid a move that had been. Not only was there no place for him to go aboard the station, but it all but confirmed his complicity. He had always played it cool before, and even if he had gone quietly, his patsy would've taken the fall. In that moment, however, the rational part of his mind had receded in favor of a flight response.

He hadn't gotten five steps before one of the Marines nabbed him, threw him over their shoulder like a sack of potatoes and carried him bodily to the interrogation chamber where he now resided, hand-cuffed and tied to a chair.

The door opened just then and the Marine commander stepped through it, now out of his armor. With him were two women, one in a tailored business suit and the other a blonde woman in a very different uniform than the Marine, who glanced at him with such cold detachment that he might as well have been an insect.

"Good morning, Mr. Voniv," the Marine said sitting down. "I believe you know Director Serene." He said almost cheerfully. "But I don't think you've had the pleasure of meeting my new friend, Lieutenant Mayfield. She's the only surviving member of *Hokona's* crew. She has been most insistent about meeting you."

Voniv knew his face was visibly draining of color. He had helped stage manage the whole episode with *Chiron's Star*. Now he was looking at a witness to one of his crimes.

"It seems you've been a busy man lately, Mr. Voniv," the Marine looked at his clipboard. "You're looking at least twenty-eight counts of criminal activity, not including sabotage, accessory to mass murder, weapons trafficking, conspiracy and treason."

Voniv glared at him and strained his wrists against the cuffs.

"I'm not saying anything until I have legal representation." He said stiffly.

Director Serene looked over at the Marine. "I suppose I owe you five credits," she said. "I thought he would give us the runaround first."

"We'll settle up later." He turned his attention back to the man in the chair. "Normally, it would be your right to request such counsel, but that makes the assumption that you still *have* rights." He said and all humor was gone. "Which as I recall, traitors believe that the law of the land doesn't apply to them, and in this case I'm inclined to agree."

Voniv blinked three times and looked to Director Serene.

"Are you going to just stand there and be a party to this witch hunt?"

"Don't look at me," she said coldly. "You've made your bed, and now you have to sleep in it. Or, have you forgotten that I'm a mind-reader?"

Voniv said nothing, and tried to focus his mind into the here and now. It wasn't sure that was going to work, but if she nailed him, it was over.

"Nice try," she said after a moment with a slight smirk. "Your surface thoughts are enough to tell me you're guilty as sin. Oh, you almost had Ericsson take the fall, I'll give you that! But *Hornet's* intelligence officer is very good at what she does, and while you may have fooled me, you didn't fool her."

Again, Voniv was silent.

"So, where does that leave us?" the Marine said. "It means that we don't recognize that you have any rights, we found the 'smoking gun' that proves your guilt, and your fate is entirely in our hands. Then, there is Lieutenant Mayfield here."

The woman in question stood there, statue-still like a waiting spectre.

"You see, your companions did some awful things to her as a captive. I'm sure she'd love to fill you in on all the details, but more than that, you're the only one left alive that knew what was going on out there. So, what's going to happen now is that Director Serene and I are going to step into corridor for twenty minutes and let the two of you get acquainted." He said. "And if you're still alive when we come back, then I'm sure it's because you decided to spill the beans rather than your blood."

The Marine stood and moved towards the door, the Director at his shoulder. Then he turned and spoke over his shoulder. "Personally, I'd give you about a one in five chance."

"Wait! You can't do this!" Voniv said as it became apparent that the Marine wasn't bluffing. This wasn't just the good cop, bad cop routine, or some intimidation tactic. They were going to lock him in the room with a victim. A victim with those...eyes. "You can't—!"

The two left the room and the door sealed with certain grim finality. Voniv met the space cold eyes of the woman in front of him. She reached into her tunic and drew out a matte black shape. She cocked it smoothly with a distinctive metallic *chik-chuk*.

"The cameras are off." She said with the weapon at her side. "So don't bother screaming."

Beads of sweat were forming on his forehead and upper lip.

"You have my full and rapt attention," she said with what could only charitably be called a smile. "I am dying to hear what you have to say."

* * *

"Okay, Mullins, how's she looking?" Crowbar said over his wrist comm as he stood firmly entrenched in the Jump Drive section. A dozen access panels stood open all around him as he punched into code to run the diagnostic. Embedded in the tube-like docking bay were sensor packages to help monitor power levels externally while repairs were being prosecuted. Kreuzeng Control also had much more sensitive equipment for dealing with monitoring systems *internally*,

which was critical when trying to repair something as potentially temperamental as a starship's Jump drive.

The initial estimate for repairs had been at least thirteen days, using every resource KC had. Here he was, only nine days into port and they were already in the final phases of the repairs. He was probably going to shave a solid two days off the projection. Crowbar had worked like a maniac during his on-duty hours, but the manpower available to KC meant that he didn't have to pull a routine of back-to-back sleepless days. Physic had made it quite clear that he was to get at minimum of eight hours each night. All the extra hands had allowed him to act as more of a supervisor, freeing him up to tackle the heaviest projects with the personal touch the ship deserved. *Hornet* wasn't quite ready to fly, but she was getting there much faster than he'd initially thought.

Now that the traitor had been caught, and was in the process of confessing his sins, there was a sense of bone-deep relief each of the felt. Up until now, they had only been reacting to the enemy's actions, always on the defensive. Smoking out Voniv had felt like their first offensive victory that they had initiated on their own.

Of course, in the meantime, it was a bit awkward leaving his ship in the hand of KC's yardies, but seeing her come together so much faster had been enough for him to overcome his knee-jerk reaction to slap someone's hand when they tried to help "fix" his ship.

"She looks like a lady from out here," sensor tech Mullins said from the slip's control station, "and a pretty one, if ever I seen one."

The young belter, lately of Excavator-37, could be a trifle dense at times, but Crowbar had found himself liking the kid. For one, the tech had practically fallen in love with *Hornet* the first time he had come aboard, and that put him stories above those that subscribed to the outright heresy that a ship was just a soulless collection of components stuffed into an empty hull.

The engines around him began to give off an almost subsonic hum as the simulation came closer to a Jump transit. The pitch began to rise and Crowbar's eyes darted between indicators.

"How are the levels?"

"They're in the green this time. Looks like you nailed down that fluctuation, it ain't there now."

"And the grid?"

"It's holding evenly across the hull. It's seamless over that whiskey dent we patched up over the aft compartment. No problems there."

"Good deal." Crowbar spoke a little louder as the engines reached that moment of transit and all the readings looked nominal. "It looks we're happy on this end."

"Yep, she's holding true."

"Okay, I'm shutting them down," he said with few keystrokes on his monitoring panel. "I'll let them cycle all the way down, when they're cold in a few hours, we'll give her another go."

Now that they were in the testing phases, there were pockets of downtime that came from letting the engines cool down completely before testing them over again. Which meant that the break-neck, do-or-die pace had slowed.

He glanced down at his chronometer with a devilish smile. *My timing was perfect, if I do say so myself.* "Since we've got some time, there's another lady I need to visit."

"I hear that," Mullins said and Crowbar could mentally see him smiling ear-to-ear on the other side of the comm. "I'll send Mica on up to relieve you."

"Much appreciated. I'll check back in before I turn in."

"Don't worry boss, we got you covered," he said with a snicker. "Take your time."

* * *

Raven was waiting for him in the overly large cafeteria used by Kruytercorp employees. It was rows upon rows of brushed metal tables and benches surrounded by stone. It had become their favorite meeting spot of late, particularly since they generally met when everyone was on shift somewhere else. So, they had the space all to themselves.

Today was no different as Crowbar made his way down the long aisle to where Raven sat with her mini-comp. An only half-eaten tray of food sat beside her as she fixed her attention on the readout.

"Howdy, ma'am." Crowbar said rustically as he put his hand on top of hers and gave a slight squeeze.

"Well hello, stranger." She replied. She motioned to the other tray next to her, the one she had saved for him. "I saved you a fish cake or three."

"You're the greatest." He said sliding in beside her.

"I know."

"And so modest too, I think I'll keep you around." He said tearing into his meal as she stuck out her tongue at him.

"What are you doing?" he asked between bites.

"I'm cross-referencing databases. Voniv apparently decided it was in his best interest to point us in the direction of some very enlightening records he was keeping. Well, I guess he wasn't keeping a record so much as omitting them *from* the record, but reading between the lines wasn't hard. So, I'm comparing the information we already have to what he gave us and looking for connections. I fed the criteria in and now the comp is grinding away on it."

"Anything interesting so far?"

"Oh yeah...Voniv has been working the marionette strings for nearly a solid year. It was just a few transports at first to get things set up at Lambda-3, but the last couple of months he's been getting quite inventive with reasons to keep things turned on their head, from 'strategic redeployment' to readiness drills and even a friendly set of war games where he pitted both SDB against other, neatly keeping them distracted while he ran a few ships in behind the scenes. From a tradecraft perspective, it was pretty clever."

"Have you been able to get anything out of him as far as what they were hoping to accomplish?"

"Yes and no," she said as she glanced back and forth between the engineer and the screen. "They kept him pretty much in the dark about the exact nature of what they were bringing in. He just knew timetables and exit windows, but other than that, they did a pretty good job of keeping their security tight by not divulging the information to him in the first place."

"Sneaky of them."

"Yes, annoyingly so," she said. "Whoever planned this op was as skilled as they were paranoid, from tip-to-tip. They seemed to account for almost all the contingencies. I don't think it ever really occurred to them that we might get such a first-hand look at them and still be breathing afterward. Even still, they did a good job of muddying the waters on several key points."

Crowbar gave a near unintelligible reply as he swallowed. He was eating like a raw recruit in boot camp. She really couldn't blame him, none of them were going anywhere until *Hornet* was ready. She was thankful of the few moments here and there they had been able to find together during those brief lulls in the repairs.

He was half-way through his third patty when all activity on her screen stopped. The sudden lack of movement caught her attention out of her peripheral vision. Turning, she came face-to-face with the data her latest criteria had offered up. Her eyes danced over the split-screen taking in the small details and churning them around in the mixing bowl in her head.

The look on her face froze Crowbar in mid-chew. "Raven?"

She wasn't listening just then. Her mind was already vaulting forward like sprinter. It was only perhaps a second that she sat there processing everything as the engineer grew more worried.

"That's it!" she said, and Glaive Ertani wondered if he had ever seen a more beautiful smile. "*That's* what they missed! Voniv knew...and he made the mistake of writing it in cypher! The wrong cipher...or the right one as the case may be..."

"What are you talking about?"

She looked at him as though she had temporarily forgotten he was there.

"I gotta run," she simultaneously closed her mini-comp while leaning over and kissing his bearded cheek. Then she was on her feet and running towards the exit, comp in hand, like fighter pilot being scrambled into action.

"That woman," he mumbled, annexing the remnants of her tray onto his own.

* * *

“Well, I’ll give her one thing, the lady’s *persuasive*.” Gyro said across from Red Sun. “I’m just surprised that she didn’t put a bullet in Voniv’s brainpan. Gaia, knows that’s what I would want to do in her place.”

The two sat in Coeur’s temporary quarters aboard the station. Crowbar had politely shooed the Majority of *Hornet*’s crew off the ship to keep them out from underfoot while he worked his magic. Serene had put them in lavish quarters that were easily five times the size of her accommodations aboard *Hornet*.

“Mayfield’s a professional,” Coeur said. “Last time I saw her type was back in the Imperial Navy. From what I know of her history, she comes by it honestly.”

“That fits.”

During the outbreak of Virus, there had been a small group of Imperial ships that had evacuated from the holocaust that had smashed flat everything the Empire’s Final War had missed. But while the super virus was busily destroying whole population centers, an Imperial fleet stationed near the Solomani Rim had evacuated as many civilians as possible and steered towards the Hiver Federation just as the first outbreak was steamrolling their way. That fleet had sailed under the command of Admiral Sir Thomas Mayfield, Cassandra’s great-grandfather. Aboard his superdreadnought, *Empress Porfira*, Admiral Mayfield had successfully led several thousand refugees to the safe haven that they found in Federation space.

The survivors of the Mayfield fleet settled on several planets far from the ashen remains of the Third Imperium. While their numbers were relatively small, the descendants of those survivors were represented in the Federation Navy in high numbers. They brought with them many of the old traditions of excellence and courage that had characterized the Imperial Navy in its heyday.

Coeur had already been in cryo-sleep for several years when the outbreak had occurred, sleeping her way to the future in Tube 23 while Darien had taken the death sentence in Tube 16. So, she had missed the Admiral’s Aeneus-like voyage. Her tour in the Rim shortly before the Solomani offensive made her familiar with the primary player in the exodus. She had never met the man personally, but knew the flag officer by reputation only, as had many that served with her on *Altinak*. If there had been a man with the character, the ability and the wherewithal to pull off such a titanic feat, it would’ve been Sir Thomas.

And now, having met his descendant in the flesh, it was no wonder that the young woman was the latest heir to one of many dynasties found in that small corner of the Federation. The Federation had assigned one of their best to *Hokona* due to the extraordinarily sensitive nature of its cargo. Now that she was solidly on her feet again, she was proving to be a great asset.

Not only had she managed to crack Voniv like an egg in less than ten minutes, but she had also lent Gyro a hand in completing the modifications for the Bulls-Eye program.

“That reminds me,” Gyro said after a moment. “I think we’ll have Bulls-Eye completely ready and integrated by the time Crowbar gets everything else in order. I’ve got Newton finishing up the last bits of coding we need.”

“That’s excellent news,” Coeur said. “How does it stand up?”

“Well, Snapper and I were practically in heaven when we kicked it on for the first time. All of our interlinks between the new systems were near seamless. Newton estimated that our combat efficiency in the sims is up by at least fifteen percent already. I think that number will increase as more of the finalized modules come online.”

“Well, I’ve always maintained that the best defense...”

“...is a strong offense.” Her XO finished for her. “My thoughts exactly.”

The two smiled at each other as the door to Coeur’s quarters bleeped.

“Come in,” Coeur said and the door slid quietly open. Raven stepped through, breathing heavily and flushed with her comp at her side. The look on the young woman’s face was enough to tell Coeur that this wasn’t just any visit. A breakthrough had been made, perhaps the one they had been praying for.

"Tell me it's good news," Coeur said. Raven beamed.

"The best kind," Raven said, and looked as if she might break into dance. Coeur motioned for her to take her place next to Gyro. The Captain and first officer leaned in anticipation.

"We found it, Coeur," she said. "We were able to synch up some of Voniv's records to what Erasmus told us. I cracked the notes he kept - Gaia, *we know where they've taken the Alpha Bank!*"

Coeur closed her eyes for a satisfying three count. She opened them and focused on Raven's face, her every sense seemingly elevated.

"They've gone to Spires."

* * *

Drop Kick nodded to the security officer as the other man buzzed him through. The Marine stepped through the check point as he had done a dozen times know, but his steps did not take him to Voniv's cell. Instead, he took a sharp turn in the other direction and walked towards the back of the holding area. He slowed and then came to a stop at the sight before him.

The cell in question was not very large, perhaps only two meters deep and three meters wide. It had a fold out bed, a rudimentary fresher space and little else. The entire front of the cell was made of a transparency that allowed an outside observer to see every part of the small room. And it was brightly lit with a white light that scarcely allowed any shadows to fall.

In the exact center of the room sat a Ithklur. He had obviously taken great pains to arrange himself as he did. The reflective foil blanket had been ceremoniously arranged in a quad-fold and laid flat on the floor. Then he had arranged himself cross-legged on the floor in what looked very much like the lotus position on top of the blanket. His large hands rested lightly on his knees and his eyes were closed. He breathed so lightly, the Marine couldn't even see his torso move, looking as though he were an emerald statue of some contemplative deity.

Drop Kick paused as he took in the alien before him. To the Marine it seemed as though the Ithklur was a still, endlessly deep pool of water, calm and serene. There was a twinge that he would be the one to throw a stone and disturb the peace of the alien in front of him.

He reached over and pressed the intercom panel.

"We need to talk."

Raptor's eyes opened slowly.

"Word just came down that we're pulling out of this system at the soonest possible moment," Drop Kick said. "I need to know where you stand."

Raptor's hands closed together, his clawed fingers interlacing before him.

"I have given your words great thought and consideration," Raptor said slowly. "I have found that, though our methods are dissimilar, we are both warriors. Battle claims us both as its children, and we have both proved be its proudest sons."

Raptor stood easily from his sitting position, which was impressive considering he hadn't moved from that spot in three days, nor taken food or drink. The tall alien came to stand next to the transparency.

"But that is not enough is it?" He asked rhetorically. "When we take up the call, we must act as a single arm, a single hand with which to strike down the enemy."

Drop Kick searched those yellow eyes and found a sort of wisdom there that it would have been all too easy to dismiss.

"I allowed myself to forget that truth, and, in doing so, have done you and your companions a grave disservice."

"I can't disagree with what you've said," Drop Kick returned, "but we are past the point of apologies. So, battle philosophies aside, I have to know, are you in or are you out?"

Raptor looked the Marine straight in the eye.

"Upon my life, I will follow where you lead, and do all that is required of me. Your war is now my war, your blood is now my blood, and woe be unto those that oppose us. I shall defend you and all of your chosen family as though they were my own, until either victory be ours or until I am no more of this life. And should a thousand enemies stand between us, I will visit upon them

a wrath so unyielding in its application, so inevitable in its resolution that the stars themselves will tremble in my wake.”

Drop Kick took in a long breath and let it out noisily. His hand reached down from the intercom and punched in the release code. The transparency slid back silently and the Marine motioned for the Ithklur to step out.

“Geez, Raptor,” he said. “A simple ‘yes’ or ‘no’ would’ve sufficed.”

* * *

The boarding arm in the brightly lit bay retracted away from *Hornet* and folded in on itself. Bundles of power cables, umbilicals and data connections detached by the dozen as the running lights on the surface of the ship blazed to life. To those standing on the observation deck, it seemed as though the ship were finally waking up after a long slumber. Something in the way it looked, the way it began to move seemed alive again, vital and healthy.

RCS *Hornet* fired its maneuvering thrusters enough to turn her in place along her central axis. As the tuning fork prongs of the ship’s bow came about, the starboard compartment shown through view port, backlighting the figures on the bridge. A woman was seated in the pilot’s couch and the odd shape of a Schalli roller sat beside her. Behind them stood the XO, the missile gunner, the RC Marines, the intelligence officer and the doctor. The only figures absent were the Ithklur, the Hiver and the engineer.

The space was cramped, but those on the bridge had arranged themselves in tight formation as though they were all posing for a picture. Perhaps in some ways, that’s what they were doing, presenting an image to those that had come to bid them farewell.

One of the observers in attendance was one Lieutenant Cassandra Mayfield. Unlike many of the civilians around her, she wore her uniform. She was a pillar of black and silver amongst a field of white and grey. Her eyes held the ship, and the features of the man who had saved her life. She wanted to go with her new-found friends, but the mission was theirs now. Perhaps she could’ve finessed her way into their ranks. Delivering the Alpha Bank had been her original mission, but that mission had changed. She was no longer the person she was, and though she was still recovering physically, she knew in her heart of hearts that she was not up to the challenge of what they might face, not yet. One day she would be, but not soon enough to follow them to the stars. So, the torch had been passed to those capable of making the journey.

Her path would be to head up the *Cyllenius* mission, and warn the other spinward systems of what was to come. Voniv would be going along with her to repeat his story to those of authority.

As the bridge came to directly face the expansive observation port, everyone visible aboard *Hornet* saluted as one. Cassandra braced to attention and her right hand went smartly to the brim of her braided cap. She held that pose, unmoving, until the ship completed its turn and the crew was no longer visible. Her eyes traced the lines of the tiny ship as it continued to move past her field of vision until the blue flare of its igniting engines faded from view.

Godspeed, my friends, she thought, may the stars themselves watch over and keep you.

* * *

“Time to Jump, Sixer?” Coeur said without looking up. They were well clear of Kreuzeng Control by and so far *Hornet* was responding just as her Captain had expected. Battle damage was a peculiar thing, though, and there’d been no time for the standard shakedown.

“Four point two hours, present course and speed, sir.”

“Thank you.”

The Jump to Spires carried a two-fold purpose, and though Coeur busied herself flying the ship, she was already running the possibilities in her head. Not only was there a chance to recover the Alpha Bank, but the Spires system it was possible for *Hornet* to use her collapsible fuel bladder and double Jump to Aubaine without having to go through the enemy-held Phoebus.

If they could do that, they might even beat *Cyllenius* there. Unfortunately, the little courier didn't have the capacity for the specialty built fuel bladder Crowbar had gifted *Hornet* with when he had resurrected her from the scrap heap.

Now that left Coeur in an odd predicament. She would have two extremely important operational goals that could, and probably would, compete for importance – recovering the Alpha Bank and warning Aubaine of danger.

Raven had made it clear that the transport that had gone to Spires had been given specific instructions to wait there until relieved. They even had the system coordinates of where that rendezvous was to take place. If they were still there when they *Hornet* arrived, Coeur would have them.

"Incoming transmission from Krezeung, sir." Deep Six said. "It's Director Serene." Coeur nodded and the Kruytercorp logo appeared for a half-second before Serene's regal features replaced it.

"Captain," she said simply.

"Director," Coeur returned.

"I must confess, I'm not much for good-byes," she said. "Never have been. In fact, you might say that I hate good-byes with the intense, burning passion of a thousand suns. I've said good-bye to too many people in my lifetime as it is. I much prefer a 'until we meet again' instead, don't you?"

"I do."

"Well then," Serene said, "Watch your back out there Coeur D'Esprit, I've heard there are crazy folks on the loose."

"I heard that too."

Serene smiled that holovid actress smile of hers, and Coeur felt the potency even though tens of thousands of kilometers separated them.

"All our hopes ride with you," this was in an almost poetic cadence. "Get in, get out and bring your people home, you hear me?"

"Loud and clear," Coeur said. "And on behalf *Hornet*, we can't thank you enough for all you've done."

"It's been an honor, Captain," Serene said, "but perhaps next time we meet, it will be on somewhat less...*interesting* terms, yes?"

"No promises." The two exchanged smiles again. Coeur had come here with the other woman as a passing acquaintance, and now she was leaving with what she knew was a life-long friend.

"Until next time, Captain."

"Until next time, Director." Coeur repeated. "*Hornet* out."

Four hours and eight minutes later, the ship made its final approach to their precipitation point. The Jump Engines performed flawlessly as they powered up and worked their brand of technological magic. The ship promptly vanished into the mysterious depths of Jump Space, bound for the Spires system.

Chapter 15

Liu An-Wing sat in the comfortably plush chair in her quarters. She had no complaints as to the quality of her accommodations; everything she could need or realistically want on a voyage like this was at her fingertips. Her meals were brought to her at regular intervals and they were exquisite. The attendant that had been assigned to her waited on her hand and foot.

She was not contented with her stay, however. She sat with her legs crossed and arms folded in front her, closed off from any contact. Already she had been in this cabin for a couple of weeks now, since she had first arrived aboard the ship. Time, however, was starting to run together for her. Not once had Mestrovic come to check on her or explain the situation.

The ship had Jumped at least twice since she had been aboard. It had been easy to tell when they had precipitated in and out – there was just that odd feeling that accompanied it, and Liu had enough space travel under her belt to be attuned to it. She had no way of knowing if Mestrovic was even still aboard

Golden Flame, a ship she had no previous recollection as being in Reformation Coalition service, or what system the ship might be in at the moment.

Since no explanation had been forthcoming, she had opted to try and discover one on her own. That had met with resistance that had been implacable. She had tried to leave her quarters, only to have the four armed guards explain to her that she must remain where she was 'for her own safety' as they put it.

Something about the professional gleam in their eyes told her that they probably wouldn't have a problem with using sterner measures if she proved to be unruly.

What that meant was that she was a prisoner, as surely as if the tasteful carpet had been a hay-strewn cell. Two years ago, she might have been content with pacing the room like a caged tiger, or doing something rash like demanding to see Mestrovic, or simply leave and ignore the guards to judge their reactions, but this was not the first time she had been a prisoner.

When RCS *Hornet* had gone to the Mexit system, the ship had come to Oriflamme as a stepping stone on its way to trailing. At the time, Mestrovic had attached Liu and Bela to the ship's crew. It had been a nearly intolerable voyage for many reasons, not the least of which was the clash of wills between Red Sun and herself.

Looking back, Liu knew that two junior Technarchs had been a Major thorn in the Captain's side, but the trip to Mexit had matured her and Bela in ways that she didn't like to think about.

Mestrovic had known that House Honefestung had been on shaky ground during those days, at least Liu's own position had been in jeopardy. It was believed that somewhere in the Mexit system was a cache of relic weapons, ships and equipment that made it a modern day El Dorado. The long lost depot had even been called the Golden Cache. Many had believed that it, like its Spanish forerunner, was a myth, an invention of the mind.

At the time she had held the position of Director of Frontier Surveys, a post that, contrary to what its name implied, meant that she collated data for possible smash and grab operations facilitated by the Oriflammen Marines. The Council of Technarchs had not been all that interested in the planets outside of the Reformation Coalition, save for what those systems and planets might provide in relic technology or raw materials.

An Oriflammen space raider named Kenji "Zero" Wolfowitz had approached her, emphatic that the Golden Cache was actually real. He had been within a hairsbreadth of finding it the first time on Mexit. He needed only a business partner willing to repair his ship, *Crazy Jane*, and fund the expedition back to the Mexit Depot. The rewards, he said, would far surpass the paltry sum of his repair bill. Since he was an Oriflammen patriot, the spoils of the endeavor would go into the Technocracy's coffers, minus a generous finder's fee for himself and his crew.

She had considered his offer, but didn't think much of the man that appeared to be ripped from some holovid of seafaring pirates, up to and including the eye-patch he wore.

Very soon after that meeting, The Council of Technarchs, ever vigilant of ways to gain an upper hand in interstellar affairs, had queried Bela and herself about ways to improve their planet's position within the RC. Possessing a brilliant mind for numbers, economics and sociology, Bela had suggested to the Council that the best way would be to switch their feudal society over market system similar to that of Aubaine. The Council was going to have none of that, aligning themselves economically with their greatest political rivals was the last thing they were willing to do, even if Bela's proposal had made sense. With infinite politeness, they had

asked if there were any other ways to make an immediate impact. Liu had read between the lines. They expected another option right then, so she had mentioned that she had a line on the Golden Cache through Zero and his ship.

That course of action immediately appealed to their way of thinking way more than Bela's charts and graphs. If an Imperial cache of that size could be procured, then Oriflamme's position would grow exponentially larger. They agreed at once and left the details of the endeavor to her to facilitate.

Using that enthusiasm, Liu had convinced several Technarchs to open their wallets to cover the cost of repairs to *Crazy Jane*. It had been a beautiful piece of intrigue that she had accomplished in private meeting rooms, public functions and more than one dance floor.

But then, Zero had left and never returned. At one point, a snapshot of Zero and of his men standing next to a black globe generator had made its way back to Oriflamme. It had been an encouraging photo, considering the absolute rarity of such force field generators in the modern day, but that was the only word they ever received. Weeks turned into months and the Council of Technarchs, in particular those that had fronted the money, began to take a dim view of her. When Zero was finally declared missing, presumed lost, Liu was removed from her position as Director of Frontier Surveys, and Bela, who's only part had been is association with her was summarily denied his promised position at Zentrum Polytechnik University.

In short order, both of them had been beached for Zero's apparent failure. It hadn't been fair, but then again, few things that happened in Oriflamme politics, or the planet itself, could be considered as such. With both of their careers hanging by a thread, Liu and Bela had cooled their heels, waiting for the winds of fate to change again to their favor.

Shortly after the photo of Zero showed up, RCS *Hornet* had landed on Oriflamme bound for the Mexit system. Apparently Aubani intelligence had caught the scent of Zero might've found out there and had put together recovery mission of their own. At first the very thought of sending an 80-year old hunk of junk that far in the Wilds ranged from laughable to certifiably insane. Whole warships many times *Hornet's* size had been swallowed up out there with causes unknown. Aubaine, it seemed must've been in a hurry, desperate, or both to send a single *Jayhawk*-class far trader into the fire without backup or escort.

The same day the ship landed at Dobroye Downport, Liu had received a call from Lord Mestrovic himself. Of all the ones that had lost money on the Wolfowitz venture, Mestrovic had been a vocal defendant of her position, and had never looked down on her as her many of the other Technarchs had. He had simply told her that a ship was bound to Mexit to discover the fate of *Crazy Jane*.

Now that her treatment aboard *Golden Flame* had been less than desirable, she had been replaying many of her past conversations with Mestrovic in her head. That day, he hadn't specifically told her that going along with *Hornet* might prove a way to redeem Bela and herself in the eyes of the Council. She'd been quick to see the advantages of such a trip and told him that she wanted to be included. In retrospect, she wondered if Mestrovic had known how she would react, and let her think that going along was actually her idea.

Once she had agreed, he had told her to do what she thought was best for Oriflamme, and that he would make the arrangements with *Hornet*. When she had arrived on Mexit a few months later, when it seemed that Red Sun was more interested recovering some of Vega Zorn's people than pursuing the matter of the Golden Cache, Liu had decided to take matters into her own hands.

The regime's leader, Emperor Brak, a text-book technologically elevated dictator, had openly displayed that he was in possession of relic weapons, weapons that had no doubt come directly from the Golden Cache. Liu had decided to break from the *Hornet's* crew and resolved to approach Brak in the hopes of securing the cache for Oriflamme's private use, just as Wolfowitz had intended. Once again, she had to question herself at that moment in her life. Had Mestrovic planted the seed in her head? Had he taken advantage of the situation to get her to carry out his will, while believing that it had all been her idea? Now she wasn't so sure.

Regardless of what factors had influenced her decision to seek Brak out, it had been the single worst, most ill-advised decision she'd ever made, and like before, she had drug poor Bela along with her. Brak, as it turns out, only had a fraction of the depot's equipment and was, himself, searching for the Golden Cache. The imperious dictator had not believed for a second

that the two junior Technarchs didn't know where the Golden Cache was, even though they truly didn't.

The two had been thrown into prison, interrogated and repeatedly tortured without mercy or restraint. Even when it became apparent that the Junior Technarchs didn't know anything, the torture and privation continued on uninterrupted. Almost every form of humiliation and abuse that wasn't permanent had heaped upon her. For once in her life, her striking good-looks had been a detriment.

In her chair aboard *Golden Flame*, she pressed her eyes tightly together as memories of her tormentors came surging back. She drew a couple of uneven breaths and forced those demons back into her deepest mental vault.

She'd been a high-ranking member of society literally since birth, and the treatment she had been subjected to was a rude awakening of the first order. She wondered sometimes if Bela would grow to hate her, but he hadn't. If anything, the two of them had grown closer since Red Sun had managed to break them out of Brak's prison, having risked her life and those of her crewmates to deliver them to safety. Bela remained her truest friend and confidant and his absence just now made her truly feel alone.

And now, she found that she was a prisoner once more for reasons unknown. There were no daily torture sessions here, which put this incarceration infinitely preferable to the last time. The question of the day, however, was why? Mestrovic had always been one of her family's greatest supporters. This wasn't some two-bit TED on a backwater planet, this was the most powerful man on Oriflamme doing this to the heir of one his oldest and closest friends.

Why?

Why? Why? Why?

The door chimed sounded just then and she ignored it. It was her attendant, she was sure, and she didn't care for the attention just now. It chimed again, then again insistently. She sighed. The annoying sound had broken her thoughts, might as well see what all the fuss was about.

"Come in," she said loud enough that the computer unlocked the door. Two tall men entered clad in bright orange and red robes. Their dark eyes scanned the room thoroughly.

Liu had lived with bodyguards all her life, certainly enough to spot them when she saw them. These men might be brightly dressed, but she could see the outlines of body armor beneath the swirls of cloth. The chromed weapons each of them shouldered were also nothing to be trifled with, just as the professional edge each of them bore. They were obviously an honor guard of some kind. Liu stood as one of the men nodded to someone outside the door.

Vitali Fydorovich Mestrovic entered with his arms folded behind him. To the Junior Technarch's surprise the smaller man was also wearing the same type of outlandish garb as the guards.

"My Lady An-Wing," he said, grey eyes catching the light.

"My Lord," she said formally, "Might I ask why I have been sequestered all this time?"

"Charming as always," he said. The corners of his mouth turned up at the corners. Then they were gone. "I'm afraid that I come bearing bad news, my Lady. The crisis that has befallen our homeworld has grown unfortunately worse. I pray you will forgive me for not visiting sooner, but matters have required that I be elsewhere." Those grey eyes darkened and he half turned where he was not directly facing her.

"I just received word, not half an hour ago, that one of our ships, the *Viceroy* was destroyed by the Opposition during its exodus from Oriflamme." He turned to look her in the eye. "It's my sad duty to inform you that your uncle was aboard her at the time, along with four other members of the Council." His jaw clenched and he let out a long breath. "I thought you should hear it from me."

Liu felt the knowledge wash over her. Cold fingers of ice gripped her heart. She had been so ready to judge this man, but now that he stood before her, she knew that he was speaking the truth. Her uncle was dead. She froze in place.

"There's more," he said, saddened. "There is evidence that the Opposition has been directly aided by the Aubani military, under orders from the government."

With those words, it looked as though he wanted to spit on the deck. "It seems that they have been supplying the rebels for quite sometime now. Perhaps a guerilla campaign against us

grew tiresome and they wished to dispose of us entirely. That's just speculation. At this point, I don't know."

Liu could feel shudders run the length of her body. Years of training kept her poker face intact. She was *not* going to fall to pieces in front of this man.

"Thank you for informing me personally."

"It is the least I could do." He reached into the folds of his robes and produced a clear datacrystal which he then presented to Liu. "Leon and I both made one of these, in case the other should fall. It is his will and final testament."

The Junior Technarch took it in her hand. It was such a small, insignificant thing. Funny that now it was the only piece of him she had left. She closed her fist around it

"As his heir, that makes you the new Technarch of Honefestung," she nodded at his words. "I have long known this day would come when you would take up his mantle. Personally, I had hoped that I would be dead and gone when Leon finally left this life."

He turned to leave. "Per his wishes, I have already viewed the recording. I'm in agreement with the terms he expresses in them. I hope that you will find some sort of solace with it as well. Farewell for now."

Liu watched him leave with his guards without further comment. This was all happening so fast. What could Aubaine be *thinking*? Could they have truly been the villains that her uncle had always claimed? Her time spent with the Aubani aboard *Hornet* had cooled much of her hereditary anger towards them, but were those friends the exception and not the rule?

Waves of anger and disbelief swept through her like a tsunami. She settled back into her chair without being cognizant of it. Long spaces of time passed before she was aware of herself again and she was surprised to find naked tears drying on her cheeks. Opening her hand, she peered down at the shiny bauble, holding it up to the light.

It was such a small, insignificant thing.

It was all she had left.

The holoscreen came alive as she placed the crystal in the docking cradle. The stern features of Leon Honefestung appeared, intangible and ghostly. The flashing hazel eyes, tired and red-rimmed, seemed to look around the room before seeming to settle on Liu. His face looked stretched, sort of gaunt, as though he hadn't slept, but the sonorous, resonant voice was just how she remembered it.

"Liu," the image began, "if you are seeing this recording, then it means that I've fallen to the enemy. I can only assume it was the Aubani-funded rebels, but really the how's and why's are largely academic now." He took in a deep breath and his eyes strayed from the pick up. "I had truly hoped that I would have more time to devote to this recording, but the very necessity that drives me to record it in first place, also dictates that I act in haste, though the lack of formality and brevity frustrates me. This is hardly the legacy I wanted to leave you, but unfortunately this will have to do."

It was just like her uncle, Liu thought. Obviously, there hadn't been time to recite the ancient litanies or approach his will in the terms befitting his station. Though, much of the rest of the world saw only his steely resolve, Liu had seen the side him that only revealed itself in the company of family. He was the closest thing to a father she had ever had, and she had loved him as though he had been so. Staring at her was the man that had taught her to be strong, though she had often proved a flawed student of his wisdom. Knowing him, the traditions he was forced to abandon had hurt him less than being able to truly say good-bye to her. Her lips began to quiver involuntary.

"The truth is that, as my heir, you are now the Technarch of Honefestung. All of my lands, titles and privileges, such as they are, now belong to you. I have no doubts that you will use them justly. Quite frankly, if the situation is as bad as we fear, Oriflamme herself will have need of resolute daughters if she is to survive. Our very way of life is threatened, Liu and it falls to you to pick up where I left off," uncannily, it look as though he were looking her straight in the eye. "There is so much I want to say to you, so much I want you to know. It would take a lifetime to say how very proud I am of you, and tell you how much joy and love you have brought into my life. Family has always been my priority, and you, Liu, have been the brightest star in my sky. Be strong, and know that I will watch over you from the Great Beyond. You, and Bela, too."

He had rarely smiled, but now he did, and that simple act took her breath. She had to remind herself that it was just a recording, but seeing his face gave the impression that the man was alive and well.

He paused and looked at something off screen. His lips formed a grim line across his face, much more in line with his public persona. "There's not much time, Liu, and I have one more wish to impart to you. My final wish is to secure your future prosperity, as well as that of our homeworld. To that end, I believe that our House must join with House Mestrovic, so that our lines become one."

Liu was astonished by the sudden change in his disposition. It was almost detached now, rather than the warm oil that his other words had been. She tilted her head as her uncle continued.

"To ensure this, my final wish is that you join Technarch Mestrovic in the bounds of wedlock, so that the Old Alliance between our houses may endure forever in the eyes of sacred Oriflamme."

* * *

Hayward stepped through the hatchway, leaving the stark emptiness of the corridor in favor of the bustling activity of the CIC aboard *Phoenix*. Personnel buzzed around the compartment like ant colony, each moving with purpose and forethought. These were not mere drones, they were the founding stones of a new chapter in history, whether they knew it or not. He stood there a moment in the dim light, taking in the dedicated men and women before him, each in a single uniform that matched his own.

Now that elements of Gold-1 were trickling into the Spires system, the tracking station was swamped as an ever-growing number of capable warships filled the space around *Phoenix*. Even the mighty *Golden Flame* herself sat no more than a million kilometers away from where he stood.

Ockley, his chief of staff, had taken notice of his entry immediately. Knowing his Admiral's fondest for seeing his crew in action, he had waited a few seconds before he stood from his station and came to attention.

"Admiral on deck!" he said, his voice carrying perfectly. All activity stopped and every face turned to where Hayward stood. Those that were seated immediately stood and came to attention. More than a dozen people saluted him in unison. He returned the gesture with the long practiced ease of a professional serviceman.

"As you were," he broke the silence and the ant hill resumed what it was doing as though it had never seen an interruption. He settled in next to the holo-tank where Ockley was setting.

"You know, Gunther, I really hate it when you do that," The Admiral said low enough so the others did to hear.

"I know," the Captain said, "but it's good for morale. Don't believe for a second that these kids don't worship the decksoles you walk on, Shannon. All I'm doing is giving them a moment to express it."

"Good for morale, maybe, but not so good for efficiency. I don't like bringing the whole show to a screeching halt every time I happen to walk in the room. It's utter nonsense, and you know it."

"True," Ockley said. "I realize that, and what's more *they* realize that, which gives them all the more reason to want to do it anyway.

"You see, it's that kind of double and triple think that makes me sometimes question your respect for the chain of command," Hayward said tartly, "namely, me."

"See, here and I thought that was why you brought me along in the first place." Ockley said. "But let them have their heroes, will you? They need it now. *Especially* now."

Hayward took his meaning all too well. Since *Golden Flame* had arrived with news of the events in Zloga, spirits had taken a hit. Hayward had been shocked by the stunt Mestrovic had pulled with *Fougade*. Neither Mestrovic nor Alcantara had attempted to hide what they had done to the System Defense Boat. If anything, they had nearly paraded the event in front of his officers. It made him think that maybe his own problems with Gaylon Fox had been minor by comparison.

It was one thing for a ship to be offered the chance surrender and decline, but another thing entirely for a ship to raise the white flag as ordered and then be blown away.

The reports had sent shockwaves through his crew. He had to hand it to Helena's command crew, if they had problems with the way Zloga was handled, they kept it to themselves. He personally doubted that their loyalty to the overall cause had been shaken, but that had been a poor choice on Mestrovic's part. A very poor choice. An incident like that early on a campaign can set a black mark against the entire operation. To the Admiral, it was just one more reason why civilians shouldn't be making calls in a military matter. The Lord High Technarch might have an intimate grasp of the political arenas, but space and war were the venue of the Navy. It surprised Hayward that Admiral Alcantara would've gone along with it, but then again, he thought, maybe he shouldn't be surprised after all.

All of which meant that boosts to morale were sadly needed this early on the road to Aubaine. So, Ockley had taken it upon himself to fan flames of the hero worship many of his subordinates felt for him in the hopes that it would trickle down the ranks. It seemed to be working, even if it was damn inconvenient at times.

"If you two are quite finished," his Flag Captain said from her command chair, "I have the arrival updates for you." The two men looked each other and shook their heads like two boys being scolded by a watchful mother. Hayward accepted the display Helena handed to him.

"The *Orleans* squadron just precipitated in twenty minutes ago." She said. "Not only did they transit together, but they were still in the *formation* from when they Jumped. Pretty impressive, if you ask me."

"Well, let's hope that doesn't deplete our magazine of luck," Ockley said. "We have many more miles to go before we sleep."

"The refueling ships already have them in the queue," she said as Hayward's eyes scanned the display in front of him. "That means we're very close to our 'trigger weight' for disembarking to Phoebus."

The arrival of *Lancelot du Lac* and *Roland the Great* the previous day had helped them get closer to that magical 88% of Gold Fleet's total order of battle. Once that goal was reached, they would begin moving their heavier units to their next port of call at Phoebus.

Even with their absence, the fleet that sat in orbit around Spires was enormous by modern standards. Few people bothered to study fleet tactics in the New Era such as they did in the days of the Imperium. The scarcity of ships, combined with the relative mish-mash of relic and modern technology made it difficult to approach fleet actions the same as the time when warships seemed to outnumber the stars in the sky.

Hayward, however, had not neglected that part of his military education, and now his 'old school' way of thinking was paying off in spades. It was one of the many reasons that he had found himself as the commander of the expedition.

"Has Boris reported in?"

"Yes, a half hour ago," Paige said. "It looks as though everything's quiet on the planet. The lockdown is still on and no shots have been fired."

"Good to hear," the Admiral said. "The garrisons are in place?"

"That's correct. He's making one last tour of the battlements before he rejoins us starside. I don't think it could've gone any smoother, if I do say so myself."

"Music to my ears," Ockley chimed in.

"Let's hope the other systems are just as obliging," Hayward said as he continued to read the progress reports. "I think I'll finish this in my office. Flag me if any more of our people turn up. I want us in Phoebus at the soonest possible moment."

Both Captains were mouthing the words of his last sentence along with him as he spoke. These two could, and often did, finish his sentences for him. This time they were just picking at their stodgy old Admiral. Despite their circumstances, or perhaps because of them, he didn't mind the friendly bout of near *lèse majesté* directed at an officer of his towering rank.

He rose and smiled enough for them to know he got their joke. As he turned to walk away, a thought occurred to him.

They are going to call us traitors, each and every one of us - and they'll be right - we are. No matter the outcome, they will remember the battles, the dates, the names, the orders of battle

and all the endless minutiae that goes along with it. But I have to wonder if any of them will remember that even a bunch of traitors, whose fates were still uncertain, could still find the time to laugh among friends.

* * *

The Flag Lieutenant returned with a tumbler full of perfectly iced whiskey and set it in front of August Delpero, wordlessly replacing the near empty glass on the table. August was tempted to thank the young man, but under the gaze of Mestrovic, he thought the better of it. Servants were servants to the Lord High Technarch's mind it seemed, even if they were a trained naval officer, and they should be never acknowledged directly unless absolutely necessary.

A part of Delpero's mind felt trace amounts of guilt at the thought. During his day, he had not been above treating people like property, or at best like a silent appliance whose only purpose was to do the things he found beneath him. Looking back, he hoped that he hadn't been quite so *open* with his attitudes as the small man across from him. There was almost a sort of veiled contempt that seemed to come over him whenever he had to deal with those that did not warrant his acknowledgement of them as human beings. It was enough to turn August's stomach, made worse by the fact that he might have come to exude the same disregard for others if his return to power had not been clouded by the doubts he now harbored.

Whatever men like Hayward might think, there was no glorious Revolution, no despotic enemy to overthrow in the cause of the People. No, those that followed Mestrovic would shortly find that they had traded a flawed system for a dictatorial one. Men like Mestrovic were no stranger to history, and if the pattern held true, it would be living nightmare for the people of the Reformation Coalition if Mestrovic remained in power. Delpero had no doubt there would be purges, cleansings, renditions and all the tyranny that would come from a fully-realized reign of terror.

It was not the new era that Delpero wanted, nor the one he had signed up for, but here he was – party to madman who seemed less and less inclined to cling any sort of humanity as the days went by. Delpero would have much preferred to steer clear of the old man, but avoidance would've caused suspicion, and the last thing he wanted to do was play into the Technarch's delusional paranoia.

So even though it was repugnant to actively seek the man out and engage him cordially as a favored disciple would his mentor. Once he had mastered himself, he had found that it had been remarkably easy to keep Mestrovic occupied. Often all it took was a well-placed bait of discussing the policies, laws and strictures he would enact once Aubaine had fallen. Once he had done that, all he really had to do was let Mestrovic pick up the ball and run with it, all the while Delpero would occasionally throw in a reaffirming statement or probing question to keep the conversation going for hours on end.

Throughout it, Delpero had managed to maintain a poker face to trump any other he had ever worn. No one needed to tell him that this was the highest stakes gamble he had ever chanced, it was merely self-evident – much like the fact that his own life and who knows how many others might depend on his gift for gab.

The danger that truly concerned Delpero at the moment, however, was the presence of Admiral Alcantara. The meetings between himself and Mestrovic were always on the *Golden Flame's* CIC, which meant that the feline little woman was never far away. She had never interrupted their long discussions, nor had she ever inserted herself into the conversation unless there was a pressing piece of business that required the Lord High Technarch's personal attention. That she was being unobtrusive was cause enough for worry, considering the command and authority she was used to wielding with effortless ease.

And if she wasn't participating, she was most definitely listening even though she barely looked in their direction. She was watching him without looking, sizing him up and if anyone might be able to deduce the monumental bluff that August was running, it would be her.

"That is one of the many-fold reasons why Oriflamme, and by extension her people, is naturally suited to lead in these uncertain times," Mestrovic was saying. "The Empire is gone."

What measure of security and protection she may have once offered in the past died when Archduke Dulinor assassinated Emperor Strophon. Once the Imperium shattered like glass, the rest of Humaniti would be left to fend for itself in the aftermath in penny packets, scattered and alone, throughout known space. Once humankind was balkanized, none of these petty factions had the vision or will to take the dying embers of our race and rekindle the flames of tomorrow.

"And who will do it if not Oriflamme? The Nimbans? Too complacent with no fortitude. The Spiri? As we've seen here, they are pacifistic and introverted, barely worth notice. The Luhtalans? Bohemian hedonists, the lot of them. The Fjians? Fine accountants and friends, but no imagination or initiative. The Aubani? We would not be on campaign if they were worthy in the least. Really, of all the Major peoples of the former Reformation Coalition, only the Balduri can approach Oriflamme's claim. Though only a fool would question their determination or wherewithal, they are too few in number with too little resources to provide the type of leadership that is so desperately needed in these dark days."

"I couldn't agree more." Delpero said saluting with his now full glass of whiskey. "Unified vision and focused concentration of effort were the pillars of my business philosophy. Seeing them justly applied in broader strokes to the new order will be the kind of fresh air I've been waiting for."

Mestrovic looked at him and his grey eyes seemed almost red.

"It pleases me that you understand."

At her station adjacent to them, Alcantara's hands swept across her control panel with sudden energy as she tilted her head listening into her earbud. Normally Mestrovic might not have even noticed, but the lull in the conversation allowed enough space for the red gaze to lift from Delpero and move to the Admiral.

"My lady Admiral?" he said. "I trust that everything is still in its rights?"

"Of course, Excellency." She said after a moment, then raised an eyebrow quizzically. "I'm monitoring an incoming transmission from one of our long-range pickets, *Orleans*. I'm sorting through the details as they are coming in, but apparently we have received a message that I believe is intended for you, Excellency."

"For me, truly?"

"It is addressed to the Keeper of the Standard of Oriflamme, Excellency."

"Ah well, perhaps a bit more of a grandiose title than I deserve, but I suppose I fit the bill, as it were."

"I'll patch the message through to you, Excellency."

A moment later a voice that had been intentionally filtered to disguise its nature piped through the hidden speakers in the table.

"To the Keeper of the Standard of Oriflamme, recognize auth-code Gold 381-Alpha-59. Designation: Backwards Mask."

Delpero saw the old man's eyes widen and focus every attention on the speaker of the words. A cruel smile lit his face as the voice delivered its final note.

"Mission accomplished."

* * *

"Hiya, Snapper," a dead steady voice said behind the young woman. There was an inner twinge that she felt deep in her stomach as she looked up from her control panel, frozen, without turning to face him.

"You have a moment?"

She took a deep breath, straightened her shoulders and turned around.

"Sure, Drop Kick, what do you need?"

He noted her friendly, but altogether formal words. It wasn't a good sign. His eyes darted around the cargo bay and found that no one was within earshot.

"If I didn't know any better, I'd say you were intentionally avoiding me," the Marine said quietly. "No easy task considering *Hornet* isn't that big of a girl."

This was just the kind of meeting she had hoped to avoid. He had given her the space she had silently asked for, but always she could sense the circumspect glances he had cast her

way during their Jump to Spires. She could feel him, waiting on the fringes looking in, waiting for a moment to approach her. She wasn't really up for that scenario, which made it a bitter pill to swallow now that it was here.

"Look, I don't think this a good time to discuss this, okay?" She said moving past his shoulder to gather up her effects.

"When would be a good time, Snapper?" he replied.

She shot him a sharp look back. She could feel her temper beginning its slow boil. Why couldn't he just leave her alone? Why couldn't he just take a hint?

"Can we not do this?" she said with a sideways glance to Hunter, who was busily stowing equipment for their impending Jump precipitation.

"Do what?" Drop Kick's said behind a forced calm. "Talk about our future? Clear the air between us? Come to some sense of an understanding? Rebuild bridges that were torn down, but, for the life of me, I don't know why? Which of one of these things should we *not* do, Snapper?"

She began to move around towards the door, but he stepped to block her path. Leaning down, he said, "Because from where I stand, we need to do all of those things – and none of that will happen unless you talk to me."

She shifted her weight between both legs and her hands went to her hips, and she glared at him with building fury.

"Just talk to me, Denise," he said softer, almost pleadingly. "I need you to talk me."

She fumed as she stared at him, then tilted her head.

"I don't know that I have anything to say."

She saw the arrow of her words pierce of his breast, and felt the almost imperceptible tremor run through him. A part of her felt regret at hurting him, but that part had been pressed way down. The angry part of her, the part that seemed to make up her Majority these days, merely noted the tinge of pain reflected in his eyes, but was unmoved.

"So that's it, then?" his words came out slow. "You're just going to give up on us? Just like that, after everything we've been through?"

She sighed. "What do you want me to say, Vin?"

"That you love me," he leaned in closer, "that you want to be my wife. I'll take either one, just don't tell me you're giving up without an explanation as to why. I think you owe me at least that much."

"Things change, Vin." She said sharply. "I wish they didn't, but they do – and I've changed right along with them."

"You don't mean that." He said. "I know you don't, not really."

"Believe what you want."

"Look, Denise, you and I are just..."

At that moment, the Jump alarm sounded loudly in the compartment and flashing strobe lights heralded *Hornet's* imminent return to normal space. Drop Kick cringed at the interruption and looked up at the ceiling in annoyance.

That's when he felt something cold and metallic being placed in his hand, and looked down at Snapper who closed his hand around it.

"I'm sorry, Vin." She said with a note of finality. "But I've got to go."

Stepping past him, she left to go get on her vac suit, leaving him alone. Slowly, he opened his hand, knowing what he would find there. His eyes lit upon the perfect golden circle that had been once on her hand. His jaw muscles clenched and his breaths came in sharp drafts as his hand closed back over the ring like a vise.

Shaking his head, he turned on his heel and went straight to the locker where his battle dress was stored. As if to try and armor the smoking crater that lay were his heart had been, he went about expertly donning the suit until the tinted visor hid his stony face from the world.

* * *

"Sixty seconds until precipitation, Captain," Deep Six dutifully reported. "Gyro reports that Bulls-Eye is on-line and all systems have the green light."

"Thank you," Coeur said as the various departments sounded off. They were practically at battlestations as they neared a return to normal space. Gyro and Snapshot held vigil at the weapon stations. The Marines had girded themselves in their battle dress. Physic had the sick bay ready and waiting. Crowbar stood by the engines to channel power to the necessary areas. The rest were in standby mode at their stations as Coeur readied herself to take the helm. All told, the tension aboard the ship had ratcheted up like a cable being drawn dangerously taut.

Somewhere in the background of their collective minds was the torment of Lambda-3. This would be first time that they had been thrown back into the fire as team, and Coeur couldn't be sure how they would respond. The last week had been a series of action drills while in Jump Space, trying to hammer out the rough spots that had developed since her team had been torn to pieces. They had achieved at least the veneer of their old selves, but much of their previous difficulty had just been driven beneath the surface. She would've preferred a couple of weeks to work back up to operational status, but that been an impossibility. There just wasn't time.

"Twenty seconds," Deep Six said.

Unless she was mistaken, this would be one of the most important smash and grab missions that would be ever be prosecuted. Already the schematics for the transport holding the Alpha bank were playing across Gyro and Snapshot's targeting displays and repeated on the visors of Drop Kick's Marines. They stood ready to get down to business.

"Ten seconds," Deep Six said.

They were going to precipitate in as close to the transport's stationary reports as possible. A lot was riding on that transport being were it was ordered to drop anchor. Fortunately, the coordinates were on the outer edge of the Spires system. For once, it seemed, the enemy's need for secrecy would work to their advantage.

"Five seconds," Deep Six said.

It all came down to this. Their mission was to get in and get out, whatever the cost. The prize that was riding on their actions was none other than the future itself. Coeur leaned into her pilot station like a bird of prey.

"Precipitation...now," Deep Six said.

Here we go.

RCS *Hornet* punched through the barriers of Jump Space, trading its strange enigma for the boundless night of the Spires system. There was only a moment's disorientation as the ship rigged for silent running, sliding quietly into space like a knife in the dark.

It had been a perfectly executed entrance, but they couldn't be sure what would await them upon their arrival. Now warning sirens blared frantically in every vac suit comm as strobes flashed throughout the atmospherically drained compartments. The ship's passive sensor display lit up with multiple contacts turning to face them, as though the ship had disturbed a hornet's nest.

In an instant, the newcomers to the system found the awful truth of the matter. They were already too late.

Spires was already in the hands of the enemy.

* * *

Lauren Porfira stared in horror at the repeater plot in Newton's workshop. There were nine contacts that each glowed an angry red on her plot, and many of them close enough that *Hornet* could identify them without even having to unfold its enormous passive array. That meant that they were close, very close.

At least three of them were patrol cruisers, four of them were variations of some sort of close escort, and the remaining two were unknowns, but definitely larger than even the patrol cruisers.

She watched as Coeur threw *Hornet* into a divergent vector, futilely trying to escape, even as the red blips powered up to pursue them. Raven's mind was already racing ahead, running the numbers, and knowing what the outcome would eventually be.

The ships out there were going to overrun them. Even if they exhausted their magazine at them, it wouldn't stop them all. It would succeed in making the ship a dangerous target.

She clamped her eyes shut as the tension invaded her. She knew that this scenario had always been a possibility, but she had allowed herself to dismiss it from her thinking. Perhaps she gotten soft now that she had actually come to think of this ship as home, and its crew her family, no matter that her voyage so far had been measured only in weeks. Why had she put a personal stake in all of this? Why had she allowed herself to care?

If Spires was truly occupied, and she had no doubts left that it had, then there was a duty she would have to discharge, a final protocol she'd have to follow. A pang of regret stabbed at her as she arrived at her decision.

There would be no going back after this.

As she stood, two of the Hiver's eyestalks turned to look at her in a silent question "I've gotta go," she said, and exited the room at a dead run.

* * *

"Please tell me you've got some extra juice stored away somewhere," Coeur's voice said over the Crowbar's vac suit comm. "We need it all right now."

The engineer's gloved hands were flying over the controls, juggling power requirements as the ship loped away from her pursuers. *Hornet* was struggling, but the new power plant was keeping pace for now. If he could he keep working with it, he could continue to squeeze out that extra amount of power needed to keep the ship out of harm's way.

That the ships coming after them could pull three to four times *Hornet's* acceleration didn't figure into his thoughts. He couldn't let it. If there was the slightest chance of getting away, Coeur would pull it off. He knew she would.

"The old girl still has some coal for the fire, Red," Crowbar responded. "I'll hold the pace. You just keep us ahead of the pack."

"Do whatever you have to."

"Roger that."

Crowbar cut the link and threw himself into his work with abandon. He knew this ship like no one else, and now that intimate understanding was worth its weight. Minutes flew by in what seemed the space of only a few heartbeats, delivering every demand the Captain placed on her ship. Sweat trickled down the back of his neck and back, but his focus was unshakeable.

The compartment door whirred open behind him. Turning his head, he saw the slim form of Raven's vac suit standing there.

"Just in time. I could use an extra set of hands over here," he said while finishing up his work. "Monitor the reactor while I coax the secondaries."

Seconds passed and she didn't move from where she stood.

"Didn't you hear me? The reactor will..."

He stopped short as he looked down at the matte black object in her hand, leveled in his direction.

"Whoa, what are you doing?"

"What I was ordered," she answered and the normally veiled lilt in her voice seemed immediately more prominent, lending an odd accent to her words. She gestured toward the engines with the barrel of her gauss pistol. "Scram the reactor."

"Raven," there was an unspoken question.

She stepped closer, keeping the pistol tucked in closely beside her. "I have no wish to discuss this with you. I *will* put a spike through your brain and do it myself if I have to."

He stared at her, jaw muscles moving like he was grinding broken glass. The normal aura of calm, deadpan confidence he kept evaporated into a hard planes that seemed to shoot and infinite number of daggers in her direction.

"Fine, do it," he said and went back his work. "I wouldn't have pegged you for a traitor, Lauren." He sighed heavily. "You think you know someone..."

"I didn't want it to end this way, Glaive," she said sadly, "but I had to gain your trust. I played you. I'm not proud of it, but it had to be done. For what it's worth, I will regret turning you in."

Keeping the pistol aimed at him, Raven's hand passed over the life support controls. Fans began pumping atmosphere into the sealed compartment from the environmental plant. "Then *don't*," he said with uncharacteristic gravity. "I don't know what your game is, but it can wait. Put down that gun, before one of us does something we regret."

Her helmeted head shook.

"It's too late for that," she said, firm. "You can't run, you can't Jump and you can't fight, you know that's true."

He grimaced, and she didn't need her extra senses to know that she had cut him deeply.

"If you have any illusions about saving your shipmates from being erased from space, you'll shut down the reactor," she said as the blue-white dot of her laser sights painted him.

"Now."

* * *

"What the..."

Coeur came close to uttering a variety of colorful obscenities as *Hornet's* energy levels fell away to nearly nothing.

Were we hit?

Her hand came down on the comm channel to the engine room. An empty screen filled her display.

"Crowbar, report!"

Silence.

"Crowbar!" she said loudly.

"He isn't available, Captain." an unfamiliar female voice said from out of frame. "I'm afraid Glaive has become *Hornet's* first casualty. It is my hope that further casualties can be avoided."

"Who's speaking?" Coeur demanded.

The camera panned over to a young woman's face that might have once belonged to her friend, Lauren Porfira. The face that looked back at her now, however, was cold, with only a cruel smirk to keep it from being blank. The eyes too, were like flint and stabbed into Coeur through the holoscreen.

"This is the Hand of Flame," the woman said. "You will surrender to the pursuing forces immediately, Captain, or reap the consequences."

"Like hell."

The cruel smirk widened. "Always the hero, aren't we, Coeur? Death before dishonor and all that? Well this time it's not going to fly – you are going to do what I say, or else."

"You realize that you're piping this conversation to all parts of the ship," Coeur answered coolly, sitting back in her chair and folding her arms. "Drop Kick is already on his way with his Marines."

The mocking face pursed her lips in mock surprise. "Well then, I guess you'd better them that I've managed to wire enough explosives to the reactor core to quarter the ship if it goes off." She reached up and moved the pickup to a device that was blinking ominously behind her.

"It will be most unfortunate if that explosion goes off while the engine room is under atmosphere."

Yes, it would be unfortunate, and not just because it would instantly kill her friend and chief engineer. There was reason that ships drained the life support away before going into combat or Jumping.

"Tell the Sergeant Major to stand down, and open me a comm channel to the lead ship in pursuit."

Coeur stopped dead. The reactor was offline, and even if they could start it back up, their chances of escape were now astronomical. She had neatly stripped all that away with surgical precision. The Captain's cheeks reddened with anger as she looked at the one-time friend that had single-handedly defeated the RCS *Hornet*.

"Why are you doing this?" the Captain said, chomping back on her ire.

"Does it really matter?" The woman replied. "Even if I explained it, you would find no solace, I'm afraid. Now open that comm channel, before they the new management out there does something rash."

"Standby," she said, nodding to Deep Six, and simultaneously opening a link to Drop Kick. "You are monitoring?"

"Give the word, Red, and we'll burn her out."

Closing her eyes for the space of two heartbeats, she opened them and faced her armored friend.

"Not this time." She said clearly and distinctly as to head off any misunderstanding. "Stand down."

"You can't be serious, Coeur!" The Marine growled. "We can't just roll over and let them...."

"Blow us out of the sky without a second thought?" she finished for him, "because that's exactly what's about to happen." She shook her head, tasting defeat. "I can't allow that to happen."

She looked at the Marine with the eyes of a dead woman.

"It's over Vin, stand down."

* * *

"Your channel is open," Coeur said and her holographically rendered image mirrored the rage and humiliation that must be burning her in real life. A part of the traitor deeply regretted that as she met her former commander's gaze.

"Glad to see that you listen to reason, Captain," she glanced at her chronometer, "and just in time to save all the souls aboard your ship. You are a truly a hero to them after all."

The Captain's eyes narrowed into hateful slits.

"Save it," Coeur said. "At some point, the tables will turn. When they do, you and I will be having a *very* different conversation."

Raven made a dismissing gesture

"Something to look forward to," she said. "Now if you don't mind, those ships are eagerly waiting to hear from me, whether they realize it or not."

"Channel open," Coeur said with disgust.

Raven cleared her voice and spoke through the filter to the lead ship of the picket.

"To the Keeper of the Standard of Oriflamme, recognize auth-code Gold 381-Alpha-59. Designation: Backwards Mask."

As she spoke, her eyes went to the inert figure of Crowbar that lay on the ground, his vac suit punctured and bloody. He had resisted and it had left her little choice but to fire. It was difficult to see such a man lying before in such a state, but she shoved all those things aside into a little corner of her mind, hardening herself. The only forward was through.

"Mission accomplished."

Chapter 16

RCS *Hornet* now flew under a different master and commander. The nameless, faceless crew that boarded her had each been dressed in relic Imperial battle dress. They identified themselves not at all, and went about the business of taking the ship from those that loved her with emotionless, mechanical detachment.

Now the former commander was bound hand and foot, along with the Majority of her former crew and made to lay face down on the cargo bay floor. It had been made plain to her, but more specifically to her Marines, that any attempt to resist would result in punitive actions of a dire nature. If that weren't enough a deterrent, the three ships towing *Hornet* had orders to fire and erase the ship from the stars should she suddenly revert back to her previous handlers.

The only holdout on the crew at the moment, had been, ironically the Hiver. It had been the only member aboard who had steadfastly refused to come out of its workshop, having barricaded itself to the point where the invaders couldn't easily break down his erected defenses. While such brazen acts of defiance in dangerous situations were virtually unknown among its kind, it was more likely that it was motivated by self-preservation. Having also leaped ahead in its analysis of the situation, it had obviously come to the conclusion that it would likely be shot on sight in the best case, and tortured to death like Erasmus in the worst.

The boarders had tried to cut off the life-support, but the Hiver had already been in his vac suit. They had tried cutting through the door, but found that it had been modified with a sandwich layer of heat-absorbing polymer. They tried a dozen different tactics to dislodge it, but for each one the Hiver was already a step ahead like a masterful chess player. Ultimately, the boarders were content to cut the power lines to the room and contain the alien that way, forcing its stronghold to become its prison until such time as broader facilities could be brought to bear.

The rest of the crew had not fared as well. As the boarding party came to relieve the mutinous intelligence officer in the engine room, they had found that the entirety of *Hornet's* memory banks had been rigorously scrubbed. Hardcopies had been burned. Internal systems had been shut down with enough layered and interlocking security protocols to make bringing her back to readiness a Gordian Knot that even Alexander's sword would have trouble cutting through.

Coeur had made sure that what the enemy would inherit was a lifeless husk that would be more trouble than she was worth. There was no small amount of grim satisfaction she felt as the automatons went about futilely trying to undo her work. Whoever they were or represented, the boarding party was the enemy, and she would rather see *Hornet* crippled and scrapped than flying under an enemy flag. It was unfortunate truth that if the opposition wanted to know their missions specs, they wouldn't even have to interrogate crew. All they would have to do was ask the resident traitor. Raven had all access to all the mission materials and had, no doubt, made multiple copies of the information for such an occasion. It was the bitterest pill to Coeur's mind to know that she had been fooled so completely.

Hours crawled by like millennia in the silence of the bay. Next to her Drop Kick lay unconscious. Though he had complied with her orders to stand down, as had, to everyone's surprise, the Ithklur, the boarding party had deemed him too dangerous to remain conscious for their trip. In Coeur's mind, it was probably the smartest thing they could've done. If there was anyone aboard that had the know-how and backbone to go up against armor, unarmed, and have a chance of pulling it off, it was the Marines.

So, in front of the crew, they had injected him and the other Marines with strong sedatives. As Drop Kick's eyes had grown heavier, he had still mustered up enough energy to spit soundly into red visor in front of him before the drugs took him. Vin Escher was normally not taken to such holo-drama histrionics, but it had been the only act of defiance he could reasonably get away with that wouldn't endanger his shipmates.

Crowbar had been another story, however. Raven had shot him in the abdomen and, as a result, had lost a lot of blood. Instead of allowing Physic to treat him more closely, they had only allowed her to patch him up before tossing him in the *Hornet's* only low berth, the same one that Coeur had ridden in when Vega Zorn had dropped her off in the Ra system on her return from Sauler.

That left Gyro, Snapshot, Physic and Deep Six. Of the three women, only Physic had been left on her feet to watch over the frozen engineer, but there were two guards that watched over them like hawks on the hunt. Gyro and Snapshot were similarly bound and laid out on the cargo bay floor. The Schalli had been unceremoniously dumped out of his roller chair with the nourishing water. His tentacles had been clipped behind him even though out his chair he could barely move himself.

On the edge of her peripheral vision Coeur could see that her navigator's bullet smooth skin had begun to dry and crack, it's normal silvery luster giving way to a flat, dull grey. Physic had been quite insistent on keeping the Schalli hydrated, but their captors had refused her plea.

In the halls of Coeur's mind there were pools of reflection. Not twelve hours before they had been a crew with a purpose and a mission, a force. Now her crew had been dismembered when the wounds of Kruyter were just beginning to mend. Now she was prisoner on her own ship, powerless to stop mechanical men from ripping away from her that which she held most dear, her ship and crew. How easily had it all been taken from her, like a baby being torn from its mother's arms. How fragile had that vision been that she carried in her heart and mind.

And she had led them straight into it, like she always, always did...

No.

The familiar dark road of self-blame and agony was opening up before her again, but she turned away from it. It would be so easy to slip back into the deeps of sorrow and let the world do as it may. It was tempting, so *very* tempting. Yet if anything could be said about Coeur D'Esprit, it was that she was a woman who had never taken the easy way out.

That was why she had surrendered her ship. The easiest way would have been to storm the Engine room, arm all weapons and fire on the Opposition before ending in a brilliant blaze in that would, for a moment, burn brighter than the stars.

She could've done that. No, she had *wanted* to do that, if they all fell here, there would be no chance to getting the word back to Aubaine, none whatsoever. If there was even the slightest chance that they could warn high command of what they knew, then she had to take that risk. *Where there's life, there's hope.* It was a gamble, ever bit as risky as the one she had chanced aboard *Altinak* at Carlyle VII, with the lives of all those around her riding on it, but one she had to take. The only other choice had been extinction.

She would find a way. She would find a...

Metallic boots tromped with a purpose across the deck behind. Pain shot through her shoulders and pack as cold hands reached down and hauled her up by the scruff of the neck.

"On your feet," a cold voice said from behind the helmet.

"What is happening?"

"Move," the hands prodded her towards the hatchway. Two more armored figures fell into line with their leader and marched her forward and into the port-side prong of *Hornet's* tuning fork prow. Two more of the men waited beside the door which led into Newton's workshop.

"Report," the terse voice said.

"It is threatening to space itself by blowing the explosive bolts it placed on the viewport. It seems to become adamant about it as we approach the fleet."

The leader seemed to consider this for a moment before turning to Coeur.

"Our orders are to take all prisoners alive," he said over the external speaker. "We have no wish to damage the ship or personnel within it unnecessarily," he said as he untied her hands from behind her, as if to illustrate his point.

"I see."

"Those are our standing orders," the man said. "It has expressed an interest in speaking with you to ensure that you and the rest of the crew are still alive. Speak to it. Tell it that it will not be harmed if it complies."

He motioned in the direction of the door and Coeur stepped forward, battle dress seemingly crowding all around her.

"Don't touch the door," one of the guards said. "It is electrified."

Pressing the intercom, she peered through the small viewport in the door and the status of the room inside. The compartment that had once been littered with tools and devices had been neatly straightened up, everything was in its place. The lights were all off, and the only illumination came from starlight that spilled in from the viewport that made up the compartment's starboard wall, cutting an angle across the room. Somewhere in the crux of shadow and light sat a dark mass of tentacles and half-seen shapes.

"Newton, it's Red Sun," she said. "What are you doing?"

"Captain," the artificial voiced replied. "It is agreeable to me to see that you are still alive."

"Thanks, Newt. I'm told that if you come out, you will not be harmed."

The mass of tentacles writhed almost invisibly.

"And do you believe them, Captain?"

"I'm not sure what to believe. I think it's preferable to hard vacuum, whatever it is."

Newton moved its flower-like head from the shadows enough to for her to see that the Hiver was no longer wearing his vac suit, then snaked back into the dark.

"I'm not sure I can agree with that assessment," it said. "If our captors utilize the same methods of interrogation on Hivers as those we witnessed on Lamba-3, and nothing has conclusively proven that they don't, I would estimate that the two, three, or perhaps five minutes it will take me to expire in space, may, in fact, be preferable to weeks, even months of intentional torture and abuse."

Images of the Erasmus played across Coeur's mind. Though there was a part of Coeur that would never condone suicide, the Hiver had a point. Being an experienced spacer, it seemed the number one fear was dying in cold void of space, and that was to be avoided all costs. Obviously the Hiver didn't see it that way.

"To borrow a human phrase, 'all roads lead to Rome.' My choice is either to die quick, or die slow, but either way the result is the same," Newton said slowly. "In the end, which would you choose?"

A cold lump of ice had begun to form in her stomach. She had believed up until now that this entire situation was merely a bluff, a manipulation of some kind, but as Newton uncoiled himself from his bed, she saw the tubular device in one of its six-fingered hands that flashed a soulful blue at one end.

"Wait! Newt, don't do it," she yelled. "*Don't do it!*"

It was then that she felt the barrel of a flechette rifle come to rest lightly on the nape of her neck, accompanied by the distinctive sound of it priming.

"Tell it to comply, or you die." The rough voice from behind her said. "Tell it now." Apparently, there was no need to relay the message as the alien's eyestalks all trained on the door in understanding.

"It seems that my choice is even clearer, then, Captain," It said, the eyestalks moving to the device it held. "If I remove myself from the equation, then the danger to you is likewise removed. It's so seldom that one simple act may accomplish so much all at once. It's precisely the kind of synergy that Hivers strive to achieve."

A tentacle moved in the dark and the blue light winked out with a *bleep, bleep*.

"Good-bye, Captain. May health and happiness follow you all the days of your life."

"*No!*" Coeur slammed her hands against the door. Screams of pain as electricity coursed through her body joined the chorus of cries in her heart. The ship shuddered as the explosive bolts fired, allowing the trapped atmosphere to forcefully escape. Tools and loose articles were the first to fly end-over-end towards the stars. For an instant, Newton stood there unmoved until the stars claimed it too. Coeur caught a final glimpse of the six limbs reflexively curling protectively in around the central body.

Then it was gone.

There was silence as she hung her head, her arms supporting her on either side of the door, and wept.

Now two Hivers had died aboard her ship, not only in the same room, but on the very same spot. Try as she might, in her mind's eye, she found it hard now to distinguish the two apart.

* * *

RCS *Hornet* was nudged gently into place inside the landing bay aboard *Golden Flame*. It was no easy task considering she was not under her own power due to the commander's diligence. The landing struts had to be lowered manually, even as gravity tugs surrounded her to set her in the proper place on the deck.

Once the ship was in place, the technicians began slowing increasing the gravity into the chamber. *Hornet* thudded into her assigned berth as the monstrous bay doors began to retract.

As the technicians in the control booth labored to make the chamber habitable once more, the door opened behind them. One of the techs casually looked over his shoulder at the tall

form that stepped through and his eyes went wide. He tapped his companion on the arm who likewise turned with a start. The man waved them off, bidding them to return to their duties. They did so, crisply, aware of the towering presence that stood in their proximity.

The man's eyes were not on them. No, they were fixed on the seafoam green *Jayhawk*-class trader that now occupied the landing bay. Like many in his line of work, he knew of *Hornet* by reputation only. He had never seen her before with his own eyes, but he knew of her exploits. It was somewhat ironic how such a small ship bore such a larger-than-life name. Yet she bore up under the weight and expectation of that name with surprising grace for a vessel that was not even a proper warship.

The man who gazed at her knew the heritage of excellence that had preceded her. From the ocean going ships of wood and iron that sailed the oceans of Terra with gallantry and distinction, to the spacebourne ships of the Terran Confederation and Imperium that would continue her legacy in the stars, he knew them all.

And now the latest incarnation of that revered name sat inert in front of him, and he felt a stab of pain at being responsible, however indirectly, for bringing such a proud spirit to heel.

He took in the missing viewport that was conspicuously absent on the port prow, making a mental note to ask about the circumstances of its disappearance.

A light on the control panel turned from red to green and immediately a team of techs on the deck swarmed out to receive their guest. The main boarding ramp began to lower slowly in increments as it, too, had to be operated manually.

In single-file, a stream of Marines in battle dress descended the ramp far enough away from their vantage point as to look like toy soldiers or chess pieces being moved about the board. Several of them were carrying prisoners, each fitted with personal binders.

"The Marines report that everything aboard is secure, sir," the technician said, turning over his shoulder.

"Sir?"

The man was already gone.

* * *

Coeur stifled a wince as her captor half-drag down the ramp into the brightly lit boat bay, hands bound in front of her. Aside from the bruises she would carry from the rough handling, there was a new set of injuries she sported now.

Distraught as she was, her captors had tried to remove her from Newton's door and she had resisted, even going so far as to spit boldly into one of those ineffable red visors. That's when one of them had cuffed her across the face.

She had no doubts that the man could have snapped her neck like a brittle matchstick if he had wanted. As it was, he had delivered a checking blow that had nearly fractured her jaw. That whole side of her face had swollen up and turned an ugly purple. Her lips had split in two places at the corner of her mouth and her left eye was a bloody red as a result of the man's restraint.

Coeur was the first down the ramp followed by Gyro, Snapshot and Physic. Technicians buzzed around her ship in the huge compartment as well as those in a red and olive drab uniform she didn't recognize. Who were these people who were so obviously well-equipped and organized? The questions rolled around in her pain-tinged head like marbles until a shape caught her good eye.

Off to her right in the next berth, parked snugly next to *Hornet* was the sleek form of a performance yacht. It was the ship that had appeared the day that Coeur's world had been turned upside down; the same ship that had *disappeared* right under the nose of *Kukulcan*, one of the mightiest ships still in service. August Delpero's ship.

Lord Ryan.

Seeing the craft was like a puzzle piece falling into place, revealing the larger picture as a result. Whatever force or entity was responsible for the actions on Aubaine that day were the very same as those operating here. She reminded herself through the haze of pain that they had been perfectly willing to down Eight Ball and his fighter wing to escape with their prize.

If she had entertained any doubts that she was truly in enemy hands, the sight of *Lord Ryan* erased them utterly. Her moment of revelation, however, was not without its price.

Turning her quickly had opened the door to vertigo, enough to stumble and collapse hard on her knees. The hand that grasped the back of her collar tightened.

"Get up." The voice said coldly and she felt herself lifted from the deck.

Aware that her crew was watching, Coeur shook slightly and faced her captor. "I can walk on my own," she said calmly, but with little veiled defiance.

She saw the armored fist draw back, ready to punish her. Bracing herself for what was to come. The hammer was falling....

"Hold." a commanding voice boomed from somewhere near.

The armored man released her and she sank back to the deck. The fist that was about the strike her reversed and came up to the red visor in a salute.

"Yes, sir!"

Coeur turned towards the voice that had saved her from disaster. A strong hand was presented to her at eye-level that extended from a dark red sleeve. Following the lines of the arm upward, she found that it was connected to a broad-shouldered man whose eyes bade her to accept his help.

"Commodore Hayward?" she said incredulously. *What is he doing here of all places? Wait...*

The insignia and devices of his uniform provided the answer. On the sleeve he presented was a golden star trailing four stripes and a larger stripe at the cuff. The five platinum stars on either side of his collar, themselves arranged in a five-point pattern shone like a brilliant constellation. If she was slow in recognizing the rank the man above her bore, it was only because the rank of Fleet Admiral was something she hadn't seen since the days of the old Imperium.

"In a manner of speaking," he said softly. "Here, let me help you up."

He saw the realization dawn in her eyes as she processed the uniform he wore, and the changes that must imply. She withdrew from his offered hand.

"I can stand on my own," she said acidly and struggled to regain her footing.

"Very well, Captain," Hayward said. "I respect that."

Coeur was about to respond when the sound of clapping came from behind her.

"Oh, bravo, Coeur. Bravo," Raven's mocking voice said. "I knew you had a temper buried somewhere behind that calm mask. I find it an ironic choice that you chose now of all times to let it out of the bottle."

Hayward's face only took a half-second to transform from gentle to grave as he looked at *Hornet's* resident traitor.

"Sergeant," he said evenly as he stared at Raven. Coeur's captor straightened again.

"Sir?"

"Why is this person not bound like her shipmates?"

Raven answered for him.

"Because, my dear Admiral," Raven said smoothly, "because I am guest of his Excellency aboard this ship. He'll want to see me straight away, so you'll need to convey me to him with all due haste. Best not to keep him waiting."

Her smile quirked at one side of her mouth.

"Shackles tend to impede all of that, I'd say."

Coeur noted the disdainful look Hayward bestowed upon her former intelligence officer. It wasn't too removed from the baleful glare she offered up herself.

"Officer of the watch," Hayward spoke and a young woman materialized from the crowd of techs that had gathered to see this display.

"Sir?" she said.

"Call the flag bridge and confirm this person's story. Until then, she remains here, under guard."

"Aye, sir."

He turned that basilisk gaze on the Marines. "Convey the prisoners to the brig. You will treat them with the respect they are due or you will answer to me, understood?"

A chorus of assents echoed in the bay.

"Carry on," he said and the Marines went about their duties. The crew members of *Hornet* were taken away. Coeur gave Hayward one last look that was angry and filled with bile. Perhaps she was grateful for the Admiral's intervention, but she couldn't have said that he was a traitor any louder if she had screamed it at the top of her lungs.

Get used to it, old boy. It's just the first of many, he told himself.

"Not you, Sergeant. You're with me," Hayward said as the Marine he stopped was about to move away.

Taking him off to one side, the Admiral made sure that everyone was out of earshot.

"Are you responsible for Captain D'Esprit's injuries?"

"Yes, sir." The Marine said without emotion.

"Explain."

"She was resisting our authority, sir. It was necessary to remind her that her actions had consequences."

"Resisting?" Hayward said, eyes narrowing. "*Resisting?*"

Anyone that knew Shannon Hayward could've seen the slight flaring of the nostrils, the tightening of his mouth at the corners, the hardening around his eyes, as signs of danger and taken heed. Unfortunately, the Sergeant did not have such first-hand knowledge.

"Yes, sir. That is what I said." There was the slightest bit of insubordination to his voice. It was enough.

"Allow me to make certain realities clear to you, *Sergeant,*" he said, nearly gritting his teeth. "If you ever so much as breathe wrong around a prisoner within a hundred parsecs of me, I will *personally* erase your sorry ass from this thing we call the universe, do you understand?"

Considering that the other man, a trained killer, was wearing a suit of armor that increased his killing potential a hundredfold, it was a bold thing for an unprotected naval officer to make such a threat. For the unfortunate Sergeant, it was lucky that he realized the genuinely thin ice he was on and snapped to attention, saluting once more.

"Yes, sir. I'm sorry, sir."

"Now," the Admiral said. "Get out of my sight."

* * *

What had once been a grand mess hall reserved for an Imperial Admiral to entertain brother and sister officers, dignitaries and even nobles had become the personal dining chamber of Vitali Mestrovic. Once again, the High Technarch had chosen to liberally apply the colors of the Revolution to the room, from the red and ore bunting that framed the cathedral-like viewports, to the golden plates and matching crimson goblets, right down to the rich high-backed chairs that bore the flaming symbol of the Oriflamme itself.

It was an ostentatious display, but one designed to impress upon the senses the grand and noble scope of the Revolution. The opulence of the décor tickled at the back of the mind, subtly whispering that these were the rewards the faithful had in store for them. It was an understated, but seductive message that played quietly between the clink of crystal and clang of dinnerware.

The man himself sat at the head of the long rectangular table, a flash of brilliant color amid a snowy tablecloth. It was his own personal stage, and he never let those who joined him here forget that he was the main player upon it, and all others were merely his chorus.

The current chorus, as he saw things, consisted of August Delpero, who sat at Mestrovic's right hand, Vega Zorn, and Admiral Hayward. Conspicuously absent were any officers of the ISN, who were often noted to dine with the Technarch.

Only hours before August had been on the flag bridge when the old man's cryptic message had come through. Without explanation, the newest Technarch had been hastily escorted back to his quarters where he was joined by Zorn. They had been instructed to wait quietly until summoned, which, considering the High Technarch's fluctuating mood swings, they had no choice but to obey.

Then an invitation had come down inviting the both of them to dress for “a private, yet formal affair.” Those words saw Delpero dressed in a classically styled tuxedo and Zorn in a green formal dress when the stewards escorted the two into the dining chamber.

Here they waited, exchanging small talk with a polite, yet somewhat distant Hayward all the while under Mestrovic’s gaze. After the first glass of wine had come and gone, the High Technarch raised a golden fork and lightly tapped his wine glass.

“My dearest friends, thank you for coming to this modest get-together tonight,” he said. “As it turns out, a great ally has returned to us at the very turning point of our fortunes. I hope that you will see the sure hand of Providence as I do. She is our honored guest tonight, and newest addition to our little family.”

He nodded to the steward and the man in white gloves opened the double doors to admit the guest. They all rose to their feet as the lady in question stepped forward.

August raised an eyebrow as he caught sight of the smartly dressed woman. She had chosen a black dress that was greatly flattering to her trim form. It neatly revealed what she wished, and only hinted at other truths, much like the lady herself, Delpero thought. Her distinctive white hair had been neatly arranged into a flowing mane that looked like a glamour shot straight out of a holo-magazine. Those light, nearly iridescent green eyes flashed like a tiger’s as they took in everything with a certain confident mirth, giving back very little in return.

“May I present to you, The Backwards Mask,” Mestrovic said with pride.

A variety of reactions greeted this pronouncement, as evidenced by the looks around the table. Delpero was puzzled, Hayward was neutral, but Zorn looked on the newcomer with something like curiosity and caution. Delpero caught sight of his date’s slight change and knew the look. He was quite sure that, had she been dressed in her regular attire, she would be surreptitiously unfastening the safety guard on her gauss pistol.

The young woman clasped Mestrovic’s hand warmly before taking her seat next to the Admiral. Without ever moving, it seemed that Hayward built an invisible wall between them. No one would have ever mistaken to the two for a couple.

“Please, call me Eos. I find the whole ‘Backwards Mask’ business to be terribly cumbersome in the course of regular conversation.” She bestowed a slightly embarrassed smile upon her colleagues.

“The goddess of dawn, no less,” Zorn said. “Fitting, I suppose, for a living legend, if the stories are to be believed.”

“Ah, you *have* heard of me,” she said with an unfading smile. “Well, you have to call me something, I suppose, and it seemed appropriate considering the sun that is now coming into its ascendancy,” she said with a nod towards Mestrovic. “Besides, I can’t very well give you my real name, now can I?”

“No, I suppose not.”

“If I may interject,” Delpero said, cleaning stepping in. “It’s obvious that his Excellency holds you in the highest esteem, my lady. Though I must plead ignorance as to who, or what, the Backwards Mask is. As you are a guest aboard this ship, it would hardly do to continue under such awkward conditions. To remedy this, would someone be so kind as to enlighten me?”

“Tactful as ever,” Mestrovic said, folding his hands together. “The charming young lady here is my greatest agent and the Sword of Oriflamme. Surely the Revolution could not have come so far had she been absent from its architecture.”

“Shall I die of embarrassment tonight?” Eos said. “His Excellency does me too much credit, I believe.”

“Not at all,” Mestrovic returned warmly, “though I am gladdened by your company, I am a bit surprised that you wished to finally meet face-to-face. It has long been our arrangement to work from a distance, for both our sakes.”

Glances were exchanged around the table.

“Would that we could’ve continued along those same lines indefinitely,” she said. “Unfortunately, time and circumstances forced my hand to do otherwise.”

She took a sip of her wine and held the glass up to candlelight.

“I should think that when our current enterprise is successful, however, there will no longer be the need for the secrecy we’ve maintained these past few years.”

“Point taken.” Mestrovic said.

"So," Hayward spoke with caution, "are we to understand that this is the first time that his Excellency has actually met, her Grace?"

"We've met," Eos said turning openly toward the Admiral, driving an inviting wedge into the ice he had erected. "But at that the time, he didn't know it was me." She followed with a peal of laughter.

Mestrovic raised his wineglass to her. "I figured as much, my dear. Your work is far too involved to be bothered with our normal, albeit cumbersome, modes of communication. I salute your initiative, though I'd like to think that a woman of your loveliness would be obvious to me, given that there are so few people that have access to me directly."

Eos smirked. "Who says I was a woman, when we met, Excellency?" she laughed again, and Mestrovic joined her, like two people who share in a secret joke. "But, I thank you for the compliment, none-the-less."

"Still," Zorn said, speaking directly to the old man, "If this is the first time your Excellency has met her, in the flesh, how can you be sure she is really who she claims to be?"

"Really, my lady, professional jealousy does not suit you," Mestrovic said with the barest hint of a parental rebuke. "Your own role has not diminished just because the Mask is here among us. You are as dear to me as my own family, else you would not be sitting in that seat."

Delpero felt Zorn's body go taunt next to his. Knowing her dangerous temper, and feeling it about to flare, he placed a hand gently on her knee under the table.

"To satisfy your curiosity, however, Eos and I spoke at some length once she came aboard. Truthfully, I was just as skeptical as you. After all, it's one thing to *claim* that you are the Mask, but quite another to know every detail of every operation where we've cooperated from the beginning. Only the Mask herself could have such knowledge, thus she has my full confidence of persona."

"As your Excellency says," Zorn said. "I will defer to you."

"I'm glad we got that little business out of the way," Eos said. "It was bound to come up sooner or later. Then again, I would expect no less suspicion from Captain Vega Zorn herself." She held her hand up. "You would not be half the pirate you are if you merely took things at face value."

"True enough," Zorn said with a forced grin. "Force of habit, you understand."

"Of course."

The Admiral cleared his throat just audibly enough to turn the attention towards him.

"If his Excellency believes that you are indeed the Mask, then who am I to question it?" Hayward said, looking directly at the woman on his left for the first time, "So might we hear more about what brought you here along with *Hornet*?"

There was a sharp scrape of dinnerware across porcelain as August Delpero sat bolt-upright in his plush chair. This time it was Zorn's turn to place a restraining hand on his leg under the table.

"*Hornet*?" Delpero said. "Do you mean the RCS *Hornet*? D'Esprit's ship?"

"Yes, that's the one," Eos said. "That was the ship I used to get here."

"She was captured, then?" Delpero said, feeling Zorn's hand tightened ever so slightly on its resting place. She would know where he was heading, and foreseen the disaster that might result.

"Our long-range pickets intercepted them," Mestrovic said toying with his napkin. "The ship was brought aboard intact, with all hands, thanks to the swift actions of my lady Eos here."

"All hands, but one, Excellency," Eos politely amended.

"Ah, yes, the Hiver," Mestrovic said with a dismissing gesture. "Chose to blow itself out into space rather than surrender, but I hardly consider such a parasite part of the ship's crew anyway."

Delpero felt his pulse thunder in his ears as he asked the critical question.

"Was Dr. Takagawa among the crew?"

"Yes," Mestrovic said, those grey eyes seeming to probe Delpero's soul. "She is in custody and being interrogated along with her shipmates. So far they have shown considerable loyalty to the former Reformation Coalition. A pity, really, a waste of such rare potential."

"What is to be done with them?"

Mestrovic placed his napkin on the table. "I haven't decided yet, but their fate needn't concern you, my friend, not matter your past affiliations with them. You would do well to remember that," the old man said and a flash of red seemed to creep into his gaze.

"Of course, Excellency." Delpero said with utmost respect. He knew he had just let slip his concern for his ex-wife and that had been a mistake. Mestrovic had picked up on it immediately. Knowing how pro-Aubaine and pro-Reformation Coalition Orit was, it was possible, even likely, that he had linked himself to a known member of the enemy faction in the old man's mind.

But how could he not? Orit had been the one woman that had loved him not for his wealth, not for the lifestyle he could provide her, but had simply loved him for who he was. He knew now just how unworthy he had been of that love. He had thrown it away like so much refuse. The part of him that realized what she had meant to him, only after she was gone grew cold as space. The thought of such an extraordinary woman in the clutches of man like Mestrovic made him writhe in the dark possibilities that unfolded in his imagination.

"If I might steer us back on course here," Hayward said. "I'd like to know where we stand on *Hornet* and her mission. How much of an idea does the former RC have on our operations here?" He turned calmly to Mestrovic, "The information has been tagged 'in process' since *Hornet* put in to the landing bay."

The delay had been intolerable to Hayward. From the few hints that Mestrovic had dropped, *Hornet* had been unraveling things to spinward and had at least a peripheral view of their operations, all of which could easily turn his battle plans, which relied on secrecy and speed, all on its ear. Until he could get a clearer picture of what *Hornet* had found out, he could not go on with business as usual.

"I would love to enlighten the Admiral, if I may," Eos said to Mestrovic, laying a hand lightly on Hayward's golden epaulet.

"By all means, my lady, do so." The High Technarch said.

"Very well," she looked around the table to see if you she had the attention of her audience. "*Hornet's* original mission was a pipe dream, cooked up by the Hivers, and FleetCom bought into it lock, stock and barrel. We were to find a data device that I have no doubts was a part of a manipulation to see how far the banana-heads could exert their influence over the senior officers of the former RC. It's both sad and serendipitous that FleetCom danced to the Hivers tune. It made it much easier to direct things from behind the Captain's curtain."

On Zorn and Delpero's side of the table, it was a like a high-tension game of astrobball as they passed the apprehension back and forth like the center's ball. Now it was Zorn's turn to seize the need for self control. She knew Coeur D'Esprit was no fool. While they weren't friends, per se, they had once been allies, finding, to their mutual surprise that they worked extremely well together. Even though *Hornet* had been the ship to deliver Zorn into the very authorities that would've executed her for her crimes, Coeur had only been doing what she thought was right, like she always did. Even if they often found themselves on opposite sides of the law, Zorn respected *Hornet's* commander. To know that, right now, Coeur was a prisoner was hard, but having to sit down to dinner with the traitor that had betrayed her, who sat their smugly talking about how she had manipulated her, was nigh-intolerable. Aware of Mestrovic's ever perceptive gaze, she forced herself to relax and show interest in what was being said.

"Unfortunately for the cause, we caught the attention of our agents on Phoebus and, not knowing who I was, they decided to eliminate us. They almost succeeded." She said. "Almost."

"I feared as much," Mestrovic said. "I doubt that would've occurred had not Delvin Garrett's faith in our glorious work begun falter. I'm sure what you experienced there was a punitive measure for his increasingly unfortunate behavior."

"A possibility, I suppose, Excellency." Eos said.

"Though Garrett has been a faithful ally in times past, it may be necessary to remove him from his post once we reach Phoebus. As distasteful as it may be to alienate a friend, we can ill afford a lack of faith at this late date." There seemed like genuine regret in Mestrovic's voices. "Again, a pity."

He motioned for Eos to continue.

"The real damage came a Kruyter, however. While searching for the proverbial wild goose, the search led directly into Knight Commander's domain, which, due to the necessary

compartmentalization of information, I had no real working knowledge of. I'm sorry to report that the entire Lamda-3 operation was lost, along with the *Charlemagne* and all souls board, every member of the station personnel, including Knight Commander, and a sizeable chunk of the war materiale that was present at the time."

"An unfortunate, though ultimately trivial loss," Mestrovic said.

Hayward was thankful he was not facing towards the old man as he spoke. While Seitzmann had collaborated with Mr. Halafast and Mr. Kim on the internal specifics of the Lamda-3 operation, Hayward had been the one to personally cut orders for Captain Kaldara to take *Charlemagne*, formerly the *RCS Orion*, to the Kruyter system to stand guard. Michelle had truly lived up to her moniker of "Spitfire", and though ambitious, and at times, perhaps overly aggressive, Hayward had judged her to be the perfect officer for that kind of detached duty. It was less than ideal circumstances for an officer of his rank to learn of the loss of one of his most able ships, and that an officer of Kaldara's caliber was dead, second-hand at a dinner party of all things. *A dinner party*. But then, to have the civilian head of the Revolution dismiss the twenty-four members of *Charlemagne's* brave crew, all martyr's for the cause, with such casual disregard was far worse than if Mestrovic had reached over and physically struck him. It was a blow that would linger, and Hayward felt that slide dangerously under his well-worn armor.

"The good news is that the Majority of the equipment is still there, it just needs to be reclaimed for operations to resume. The only thing that Kruytercorp can spare to guard the station is a single SDB. Unfortunately for her, I got a good look at *Integrity's* hiding place. When the time comes, it will be a small matter to remove her from the equation."

"Excellent. Once again you do not disappoint." Mestrovic said.

"If Lamda-3 was discovered, what of Kruyter's reaction to it?" Hayward said calmly. "Have they been able send dispatches to the other spinward systems?"

Eos' eyes sparkled as though she had been waiting for someone to ask that. "That is the best part, my dear Admiral! Because of the knowledge that something was rotten in the state of Phoebus, they couldn't send a courier directly to Aubaine. Thus, they had no choice but to send it on a circuitous route that will take weeks to complete, or it would if they ever arrived at their destination."

"Meaning?" Hayward said, aware the woman was feeding them information at the pace she seemed appropriate, something he found increasingly annoying.

"Meaning that I placed a bomb aboard the one courier they *could* dispatch. The detonator was rigged to start the countdown as soon as a stable bubble of Jump Space was established. About six hours later she would've been a debris field in Jump. No wreckage, no evidence, no fuss - just the complete erasure of a potential problem. Since I had unlimited access to the courier, no one ever suspected a thing." Her smug aura stepped up a few notches, much to the collective nausea of her audience, minus Mestrovic.

"Without a means to communicate what they know, or rather, the view of events I led them to believe, they are isolated and alone, a threat to no one." She sipped her wine, beaming. "All that remained was to take care of the one ship that was in a position to aggravate things." Her delicate smile widened, taking on a seemingly wolfish character.

"And with it, the fortunes of our campaign," Mestrovic said.

"If I may be so bold, my lady," Hayward spoke flatly, "Are you entirely sure that word of our advance has not leaked to enemy? On this point, it is imperative that I be absolutely clear."

Eos started to speak, but the Technarch interjected. "My dear Admiral, I realize that you are eager to get underway, but let's not harangue our guest with questions she has already answered so candidly, yes?"

Hayward regarded his civilian leader unflinchingly, and nodded.

"Besides," the old man said, "I believe our dinner is ready, and if I'm not mistaken, my personal chef has whipped up something special for us this evening."

The doors to the chamber opened and a procession of liveried stewards wheeled in a series of silver-domed carts.

The five people at the table began to dine in earnest, making only small talk. While there was there was cordial atmosphere, it was only paper thin. Three of the guests had not come to appreciate the presence of the fourth, for vastly different personal reasons.

It was not lost on the newcomer. She knew that the Admiral despised her presence as an impediment between himself and the real master of the Revolution. Something was gnawing at Delpero, and the former tycoon was afraid, and wisely so, that his position was comprised with her around. As for Zorn, she was a star about to go supernova and Eos had been the catalyst.

What the resentful dinner guests didn't know was that she had deliberately baited each of them, and without fail they had each taken it. She had seen their hand at cards, or at least most it, and they been most obliging in showing her.

"To friends," she said raising her wine glass in a toast she knew they were obligated to return.

* * *

Through the viewport of *Royal Vengeance's* briefing room, the planet Spires dominated the view like flawless cabochon of sapphire, its jewel-like face accented in shadow. There was something ephemeral about a view such as this that stirred the inner reaches of the soul. For all its beauty, the planet itself seemed small, insignificant, next to boundless reaches of the space that embraced it. Its majesty could either make a thoughtful viewer more aware of how even smaller, and more minute, they were in comparison, or make them feel unimaginably large and omniscient, like God himself looking down upon a mere speck of paint on the broader canvas of the universe.

As Gaylon Fox stared down upon the planet he had helped to conquer, he felt a mix of both, and neither. A host of images played themselves in his mind's eye in a disjointed montage that his memory seemed to conjure forth seemingly at random. His ice blue eyes caught his reflection in the viewport, and gave a mental nod of approval. His stance, the set of his jaw and square of his shoulders, even the relaxed way he put his hands behind his back all radiated the status that he had attained as master and commander of *Royal Vengeance*. His eyes tracked up slowly to the space-black of his left lapel and the golden crown that hung above a column of three long swords that denoted his rank. The emblem of his authority seemed to hang in empty space. Refocusing his gaze on the azure disk in front of him, the image reminded him of how that small pin could come to carry so much weight.

He stepped back from the viewport and took in the rest of the rather austere briefing room. It was spotless, of course, he would have never settled for anything less, but its very perfection underscored how different it had been *then*. Its lines had been charred black and warped with the single door to the adjacent bridge smashed completely open. Even now he could still smell the acrid odor of heated metal coupled with blood and smoke, could still hear the wail of alarms and the moans of the wounded, could feel the heat of a crackling of fire on his skin.

Circling around the oblong black table, Fox seated himself in his customary place, still retaining the view that held his rapt attention. Resting his chin on his interlaced fingers, he made note of the silver needle shape of the patrol cruiser, *St. Austin*, sliding past his view with the deadly grace of shark. It passed over the face of Spires and then was gone again like a wisp of smoke, presenting him once again with an image that corresponded to another planet that resonated in his memory.

Its name had been Opaco IV, or so the outdated survey data had stated, a ringed gas giant in the backwater system of Mexit. There was nothing particularly extraordinary about the system itself, save for the potential plunder it contained. And yet, it was the system that had nearly been the death of him. Twice.

His mind wandered back to how it all started, and made a mental sigh. The Division of Naval Intelligence had caught wind of a rumor at Kmak Downport. It was very little to go on, really, just a picture of some salvagers gloating over their latest find. For most, the odd spherical shape in the picture would have meant nothing, just a few yokels gathered around a piece of equipment like a group of deep sea fisherman hovering around a prize marlin. But, to the *right* set of eyes, the find was of immeasurably valuable. Through recovered Imperial records, Intelligence had been able to piece together that the odd technological knick-knack was, in fact, a black globe generator. Not only could it potentially give a starship a protective force field, but it could

completely mask a ship's presence to sensors. If the Navy had been able to equip one of their capital ships with such a device it would have given them a terror weapon to bring the lesser systems like Hindahl and Marcena to heel at a last. After all, a ship that couldn't be detected was a ship that could be *anywhere*, lurking in any system ready to deliver nuclear annihilation at the whim of the Empress.

What's more, DNI had discovered in their research that the Mexit system had once been the site of a Pre-Collapse Solomani base. During all the Navy's recovery operations, the Mexit system had been deemed a tertiary priority compared to the comparatively richer yields of systems closer at hand. If the black globe generator had somehow survived, however, what other relic technology might also remain there? The Mexit system jumped to the first of the list with the added hope that the generator was just the tip of the iceberg.

Within a day of receiving the picture, orders had been cut for the *Kinunir*-class cruiser, *Royal Vengeance* to travel with all haste to Mexit, there to confirm the validity of the bold claim made by the picture. At that time, *Vengeance* had not been guided under Gaylon's steady hand. No, the rank he bore at the time was the solitary pair of crossed swords of a Commander, serving as the second in command to Captain Norbert Estanzo.

Fox made a mental sneer as he remembered the old man. Estanzo had been an idiot with no business in the uniform of a naval officer. Tapped more for his ability to toady and walk the political line, he had been from a privileged family that, in turn, had known the Empress' favor when she came to power. That had won him command of the cruiser, even though he had never seen combat. A good portion of the fleet had been tied up in Marcena, and the DNI had needed a ship right then. *Royal Vengeance* had fit the bill. Orders had been dispatched immediately to send her to Mexit, regardless of how ill-suited her Captain was to the challenge, how under strength their Marine contingent had been, or the appalling lack of support ships to truly carry through.

In retrospect, it had been a recipe for disaster.

The ship's long, Jump-4 legs had taken them quickly from Kmak to the lonely expanses of Dothan and Ropram, and from there straight on to Mexit without incident. Morale was high, and Estanzo had taken the smooth sailing as a sure sign of his own competence. If only he had kept in mind the old adage, *pride cometh before a fall*.

It had been devoid of any space-faring traffic. So, they had boldly made their way through the system to refuel at a magnificent azure gas giant that possessed an equally stunning halo of rings at its equator, like a highway of glittering gems.

Opaco IV.

Fox stirred in his the briefing room chair. He stood and leaned on the edge of the black table, as his theatre of the mind brought it all back to him in needle-sharp clarity.

They had finished refueling when sensors detected a distant contact. From its course, position, and demeanor, the ship was emerging from refueling operations of its own. That's when Captain Estanzo truly showed his incompetence.

He immediately went to active sensors, which instantaneously pegged the contact as a *Sagittarius*-class patrol cruiser. Doing so also announced their presence as loudly a bull horn in an elevator, not just to the ship on their screen, but to all the ships they *couldn't* see immediately. It went against Gaylon's every instinct to intentionally give away their position, when you could just as easily run silent with your adversary none-the-wiser. *Vengeance* had even been equipped with an impressive ECM package early in her refit, but Norbert Estanzo would have none of that kind of sophisticated chicanery.

It was, he reflected, its own kind of hell to be the XO to a commanding officer that unashamedly proclaimed his idiocy. Much of his crew didn't realize the difference because they themselves shared the same wavelength of mediocrity, but Gaylon couldn't bring himself to hate the Captain.

For all his weaknesses and flaws, Estanzo had been a decent sort of fellow; what Gaylon really hated was what the Captain had *represented*. From the outside looking in, it would seem that the ISN was a solid, professional group of star sailors, made all the more powerful by the addition of relic ships, when the reality was much different.

The truth was the Majority of the ISN were either inept to begin with, severely inexperienced, or both. Many commanders made the mistake of assuming the power of a relic

ship was enough to guarantee them victory against the pitiful rags of fleets they faced in the modern day.

The sharp learning curve of spaceborne combat was enough to weed out many that displayed this type of hubris, and those green recruits that lived from their commander's mistakes would come to learn from their own, becoming better and sharper than before as a result. For the ISN, space was a crucible that continually tested their mettle, refining the abilities and burning off impurities. Slowly but surely an elite officer corps was emerging to force back the layers of apathy and ignorance and set the course for the rest of the Navy to follow, but around Opaco IV, none of that helped him.

The patrol cruiser immediately began to pull away. Whether or not it occurred to Estanzo to try and ascertain why the ship was there to begin with, or where it was going became immaterial as he opened fire at an extreme range. The gunner's were merrily providing the other ship with a fireworks display as they shot their bolt almost everywhere *but* the patrol cruiser. Then, miraculously, one of them scored a hit and the other ship bucked under the strain.

A cheer had gone up at their success, but they had initiated action at too far out, and the patrol was still nimble despite its damage. She immediately killed emissions as she drifted around the gas giant's horizon, and when *Vengeance* caught up, their prey had vanished like a ghost. Estanzo had been lividly furious at failing to bring their target down and immediately put them on an inefficient search pattern, all the while still banging away with active sensors.

Fox had tried to talk sense into his Captain, but no avail. Estanzo had seen red and wanted the *Sagittarius* slagged before he would even consider moving on. While Fox could respect not wanting to leave an enemy at your back, he had tried to get the Captain to understand that their objective was the *planet*. Even if the other ship had been trying to get to the planet, *Vengeance* could have easily interdicted them while in orbit. Like most of Fox's suggestions to his Captain, they were categorically ignored.

And so, *Vengeance* had kept banging away at the gas giant with active sensors, trying to find the elusive ship. Even today, Fox was not sure what had happened next. Perhaps the patrol cruiser had come back to lay an ambush, or maybe she had been part of a convoy and signaled for reinforcements, it was unknown.

One moment everything was status quo, the next six missiles appeared out of thin air and came slashing in. Later, Fox was to find out that at that moment, the point defense gunners had been engaged in a heated game of cards, despite their supposed combat-ready status. All six missiles disgorged their deadly x-ray lasers, and all of them were direct hits on critical stations. Whoever had directed fire had been some sort of vengeful demon. Just like that, the ship went from pristine to a shuddering wreck. The reactor almost went into emergency shutdown, the maneuver drive was badly mangled, half the sensor array was blown away, and even with active sensors they were nearly blind. They had taken heavy casualties on all decks, including the bridge.

A direct hit a deck below the bridge had boiled up on to the command deck in a shower of white hot needles. The helmsman, the tactical officer and the comm officer had died instantly. Those same fragments carried though and literally tore the Captain apart in front of him in a horrifying display. As sharp as he was, Gaylon had been shocked by the sudden gore all around him – his mind reeling from the grisly scene. Yet, he had been largely spared extinction, even though arrows of searing metal had found his left shoulder and thigh. He hadn't even felt it at the time. The discovery of his own injuries was less shocking than that he had been drenched with his Captain's blood.

He had wanted to command *Vengeance*, had dreamed about it every minute since he had been on the recovery team that found her nearly intact on a moon in the Slandow system. Right then, he was in command of the ship he loved, though she was nearly gutted, and drifting towards the oblivion Opaco IV's gravitational pull. It would be his job to salvage the situation, if indeed it could be salvaged at all.

Damage reports came blaring from all stations, as he had pushed the helmsman's torn body out of the way to take his station. The maneuver drive sputtered and died from her damage and crippled reactor. And worse, they couldn't even clearly see who had broken them. A faint blip showed up on their plot, and he had ordered fire upon it, but the lasers' MFD connections had been severed, and their return fire was weak and uncoordinated.

His muddled sensors had registered two more missiles streaking in from a different vector to finish them off. At her best, Fox would have guessed that *Royal Vengeance* could have soaked up the incoming fire, but to say that *Vengeance* had been *not* at her best would have been a gross understatement. If the hand responsible for these two missiles was anywhere near the skill of the initial six, it could very well be the end.

With their maneuver drive all but inoperable, Gaylon had to bring the dying cruiser about to present an aspect more able to receive incoming fire. He had made the hard call to do it too. Without hesitation, he had flushed four of the cruiser's port airlocks in succession from front to back to bring them around, even though he *knew* without a shadow of doubt that at least seven crewmembers were in there at the time, and none of them had had time to evacuate.

The maneuver worked as well as he had hoped, the ship turned ponderously on its vertical axis to meet the threat. Someone had been waiting for them to expose their flank by turning into the missile fire, and immediately a laser slashed into them from behind from yet a *third* source they couldn't even see. Fox had choked on the bait he'd willingly taken. The enemy had *wanted* him to turn at that angle, so they could get a clear shot from behind, and he cursed himself for playing directly into their hand. Though the laser that hit them had been a comparatively small one, it seemed guided by the same demon accuracy that had nearly killed them outright. The beam struck a nexus bundle of weapon relays, and with the resulting power surge, every fire control system they had promptly winked out.

Fox had been nearly mad with anger. Whoever they were, they had smashed a 1250-ton relic cruiser into a blind, impotent wreck within moments. They had never seen them coming, and once they had been brought to action, his beloved ship *hadn't even been able to return fire*. Their confrontation had been an execution, not a battle, and Fox had given a silent vow of approval to the commanders he faced, even as he cursed them bitterly.

With two missiles still streaking in, and his ship unable to stop them, Fox had run down the mental list of options he had left. The option to fight had been taken from them with surgical skill, as had their ability to run, or even really move. They couldn't see their enemies, but their enemies *could* see them.

That left only...

He remembered looking down at one of the few functioning workstations and seeing a schematic of his ship. The Jump drives were wreathed in bright green, when almost everything else was in the amber or red...and, by some miracle, their full fuel tanks had yet to be ruptured. The idea he had entertained just then had been madness, tantamount to suicide really, but his hand had been steady when he brought up the navigator's last plot, turned off the safeties and the insistent warnings, and slammed home the "commit" command. Those surviving members of the command crew, including the sobbing navigator on the ground, had been horrified as he had worked, but none of them had interfered.

The demolished ship of the ISN found itself in Jump Space. Fox had half-expected the act of Jumping within half a diameter of heavy gravity well to be last thing he ever did, but the instruments showed a stable Jump bubble around them, even though they had almost certainly Misjumped. Under those conditions, it wasn't getting *in* to Jump Space that was the real problem, it was getting *out* again. If they got out, there was the matter of *where* they would emerge into real space. There was simply no way to know.

For the moment, at least, they had escaped with their lives. Nearly two-thirds of his crew had perished during that attack, and while the damage to the ship had been severe, the very precision in which it was administered now worked to their advantage. The armored hull and much of their hardware had somehow remained intact. Damage to the affected areas was actually less than at first glance. Running bypasses around some of the damage had proven easier than expected for the surviving engineers, and by ninety hours into the Jump the power plant churned back to 62% of normal. By 122 hours, the maneuver drive had been jury-rigged to give them about half output, and at the 140 mark, one of their 700-mj and a smaller 150-mj rumbled back to life with at least a semblance of a fire control. They had cannibalized every sensor drone they had to give the ship back its eyes and ears. Fox had cracked the whip on all his people just to keep them going, himself included, but in that case his remaining crew had been *very* motivated already.

The survivors held their breath as the ship finally signaled an emergence from Jump 209 hours after the deadly encounter around Opaco IV, nearly two days longer than the norm. Their sensors, still seeing the world through battle-damaged cataracts, discovered that *Royal Vengeance* had emerged back into the stark loneliness of the Ropram system from whence she came.

That was all it took to break down the emotional dam the 26 survivors had built up. Some cried the built up tears, some laughed, some stared at the bulkheads in light-headed amazement. Only a few kept their discipline, and Fox had been one of them. Order broke down, but he allowed them their moment of release. They had played a cosmic game of roulette with a near infinite amount of slots to fall in with a horrible fate not just possible, but *probable*, and they had emerged with one of best of all possible outcomes.

Though he had retained his calm outwardly, he had leapt for joy on the inside. Only the need to preserve his authority kept him from joining in the party atmosphere himself. They had cheated death – *he* had cheated death, and saved his ship and crew from a nigh impossible situation – which was not lost upon the remainder of those aboard *Royal Vengeance*.

It was when he had restored order and got them underway that he began to note the near god-like reverence in the eyes of his subordinates. It had annoyed him at first, and then as the general feeling swelled, made him uncomfortable. They had been lucky, anyone could see that, and his actions could've very well been the death of them all. But, he decided, if their puppy dog adoration for him made them more efficient, then he would play the hero they needed him to be. Throughout it all, he had to constantly remind himself not to buy into his own press and become another Norbert Estanzo.

Remember, thou art mortal... he had reminded himself.

They had limped back to Kmak on a direct reciprocal of their course, and little-by-little the ship was recovering, though the crew was near exhaustion by the time they finally made port.

The repair crews descended on the wounded ship as he made his after action report. There was no shortage of glaring stares directed at him for the failure of the mission, but then Gaylon Fox had not been in charge of it. Even under the scrutiny of a board of inquiry, he had held firm. He didn't shy away from questions about Captain Estanzo's competence, but neither did he dwell on them either. The man poor man was dead, and though the deaths of fifty crewmembers made his insides feel as though they were made of broken glass, Gaylon couldn't bring himself to truly rail his deceased commander. It would have accomplished nothing to speak ill of the dead, so he had refrained when possible.

Estanzo's mistakes spoke for themselves, especially when one of the officers sitting in judgment shared his mindset of what a naval officer should be. Admiral Monique Alcantara had not cast aspersions upon Fox's character, nor grilled him for failing when it was plain to see that his situation had been untenable at the moment he had inherited it. If anything, he was to be commended for his quick actions, she had said. She had been the one that had put him up for a fistful of commendations, not just for being wounded in action, but for bringing his ship home when, by rights, he should be part of a floating debris wreck around Opaco IV.

She had even been the one to pin his Captain's crown and swords in their present location, and given him command of *Royal Vengeance*, while requisitioning spares and engineers to get his ship back into fighting form in record time. He had used the measure of credibility she granted him to leverage crew replacements of his choosing. While the pickings were slim in Kmak at that point, but it was not so much a matter of finding new blood that worried him, but rather divesting himself of the surviving losers and hangers-on that Estanzo had tapped for service aboard his ship. His Major coup had been securing Commander Kendall Jamar as his XO from *Starblade*, and strong-arming the Captain of *Queen's Sceptre* for his Tactical Officer, Jennifer Darmane – both as their respective ships were headed elsewhere.

Together the three of them formed a solid core on which to hone *Vengeance* to a razor's edge. Not one minute too soon, as it were, for as soon as the Majority of Major repairs had been addressed, Admiral Alcantara had informed him of her intentions to send *Vengeance* on a return to Mexit, only this time they would have a full strength contingent of Marines, and *quite* a bit of back up tonnage to assist them.

Acting on her authority, the Admiral had outright stolen two passing *Midu Agashaam*-class destroyers as they made way to the Marcena front. While Commodore Yari Sindahl had

been less than happy about his sudden change of orders, he had taken *Vengeance* under his wing to guide the way to Mexit. Their return trip was a flurry of activity, but they made the requisite three Jumps in under thirty days.

So, once again, *Vengeance* found herself back in the Mexit system, making a least-time course for the planet, flanked by two ships, each 3,000-tons of killing machine.

It should've been enough.

There was a sickly sense of déjà vu when the Commodore had ordered all ships to active sensors as they approached the planet, and somewhere inside him, Gaylon had known that was a mistake. Sindahl was hardly the hopeless incompetent that Estanzo had been, but he had fallen victim to the same hubris of believing that the presence of his relic ships were enough to ensure a victorious outcome.

And when the three ships came within a light-second of the planet, Sindahl found out how wrong he was.

The only contact on their screen at the time had been a single *Jayhawk*-class far trader in a tight parking orbit around the planet, no doubt an independent trader like the one that had waved the photo of the black globe generator in their faces in the first place. It was *nothing*, a mere egg-shell of a hull waiting to be contemptuously tossed aside if it resisted the weight of metal bearing down upon it. It was even largely powered down, but that had been *it*. There were no other contacts, and if there *had* been other ships in the area, their active sensors would've seen them...which made what happened next that much more shocking.

Without warning, without any trace of impending danger on their scope, *Arazael Kol*, went up like supernova. Its destruction was as complete as it was sudden, and even at a glance it had been painfully obvious that there had been no survivors.

Sindahl had ordered evasive maneuvers, but a moment later his own ship, *Siv Rajkant*, followed its sister. It was as though the hand of God had reached out and crushed it like a child's toy.

He remembered ordering a rough course change and then for all systems to go dark, engaging the ECM. Even now, the truly vivid memory was the feeling that whatever invisible force of nature that had erased the other ships out of existence was about to claim *them* with considerably less effort. He had waited for the hammer to fall, long agonizing minutes of staring at a blank repeater plot, but the killing blow never came.

It had taken all the ship handling skill he and his officers could muster to get out of the lethal space of the Mexit system without incident. The cursed star had proven to be a black hole for men and women in the ISN uniform, and Fox had had no illusions that his name could be added to the list of fallen at any moment. There could be no calm in system where death had proven it could come, literally, at any time. Once they were safely away in Jump space did the dam of pent up emotion come tumbling down once again.

He had expected his crew to look on him with disgust and loathing – after all he had turned tail and run, accomplishing nothing. Though some accused Gaylon Fox of having ice water flowing through his veins, his inability to show *anything* from the Mexit mission, aside from a long list wrecked equipment and names of dead servicemen, had cut him to the core. Perhaps in some way, he felt he deserved the contempt that his shocked crew would show him now that the patina of his previous deeds had worn thin.

But they hadn't done that. Quite the opposite, in fact. Their respect and admiration for him had actually deepened immeasurably. So far as he could tell, in their eyes, he had once again snatched them away from certain death. He had pulled off another miracle and delivered his ship and crew from the fire. This time, they hadn't taken so much as a single casualty... while the destruction of the accompanying ships had been total.

He was sure that their testimony on his behalf, along with those of his officers, had salvaged his career, and possibly even his life, once they reached Solee – and the inevitable court of inquiry that followed. Most navies were prone to beach a CO with a record of failure, and the ISN was less forgiving than most. He knew pointedly what had happened to some officers that fell out of favor with the high command, and he had amassed not one, but two spectacular failures to his name.

At least now Fox had a much clearer idea of what had claimed the two destroyers along with more than two-hundred and fifty souls. DNI had declared Mexit off-limits for regular ISN units

until more information could be obtained. A disguised free trader, a few cases of fine liquor and some technical knick-knacks later, DNI agents had found that Mexit possessed a still functional planetary defense system. While the defenses included a handful of relic planetary defense missiles, the main threat was a titanic Meson Cannon that should have rightly belonged as a spinal mount on an Imperial dreadnought. With the kind of power it possessed, it could have holed ships ten times larger than Sindahl's ill-fated destroyers with sickening ease, all of which made the escape of *Royal Vengeance* that much more miraculous.

DNI agents had even brought back proof that it had been Reformation Coalition goons behind the trigger - their first acts in setting up an advance operations base in the area. The RCN was far from having the supply lines or the fleet strength to make it a staging area against them, and reports cited that the much-vaunted black globe generator that had started it all had been inoperable. There had been a Solomani depot, but the RC had nuked it into so much metal slag. Whether it just wasn't useful to them or they just didn't want it falling into hostile hands became largely academic at that point.

Thus, to fleet planners, if the bootstrap base wasn't a direct threat to the Empire, and the technological prize they sought was a bust, not to mention the direct danger the Meson installation posed any units, the choice to make Mexit a permanent no-fly zone couldn't come soon enough for Gaylon Fox. He had been the first to wash his hands of that horrible little system.

But that knowledge had not been his to know when he had reported to fleet headquarters, hat in hand. To his great fortune Admiral Alcantara had been one of his superiors to sit in judgment. That, along with the private testimony from members of his crew, had culminated in a verdict that had once again surprised him. The board found that Fox had acted justly in the second Mexit expedition just as he had with the first. In both cases he had not been in direct command of the mission, but command had been unceremoniously dumped on him twice when the situation disintegrated, wherein he had taken decisive action to escape an unmanageable position.

Based on those findings, the court-martial concluded that Fox would retain both his current rank of Captain and command of the *Royal Vengeance* with the personal blessing of the Empress herself for meritorious service to the Crown.

That last part had certainly taken him by surprise almost as much as keeping his ship, rank, and life, intact. Despite all her quirks and pretensions, the Empress had once been a naval officer herself. Steadily, her vision was bringing about an Imperial Navy that leaned more towards Admiral Alcantara's way of thinking - and by extension, Fox's own. They were still a long way towards the snap and polish one would expect when one heard the words "Imperial Navy," but change, and change for the better, was coming.

Fox was canny enough to know after the proceedings that he had gained the most important tool in his advancement within the ISN - a patron. Admiral Alcantara had put her name and her reputation behind him, and so, over the next few months he made sure that she remained pleased with her endorsement of his abilities. Looking back, she surely had no idea the caliber of officer she was about to unleash.

Now that he was fully in command of the *Kinunir*, and not committed to the killing fields of Mexit, Fox had leapt from fire to fire, showing what he could accomplish without clumsy restraints placed upon him. For several months it seemed like every time Fleet Headquarters turned around, they were hearing of his latest exploits and reaping the fruit of his labor.

In short order, he had racked up an impressive combat record from his daring raid on the Hindahl depot, to his calculating massacre of yet another nascent faction of Marcenaean TED scum. It became clear Gaylon Fox and his hand-picked team produced results on the battlefield. *Royal Vengeance* had even been responsible for destroying a raiding party in Mueller and thereby helping to further cement an overdue alliance, bringing the planet and its resources closer to their camp and farther away from the greedy grasp of The Guild.

More than his ability to duel in space, Fox had continually shown an aptitude for recovering the relic technology so vital to the success of the ISN. He seemed to have the instincts and the intuition to discover where Imperials and Solomani alike would have stashed their long-lost gear. Between the occasional flares of hostility, *Royal Vengeance* was constantly trolling Pre-Collapse sites for functioning tech. While the Majority of the venues that yielded the richest rewards were largely uninhabited, under his command it became painfully clear to many a' would-

be TED that the Reformation Coalition was not the only ones skilled at smash-and-grab operations.

The ISN's order of battle grew tremendously as he probed the depths of Dothan, Herbe, Sovtor and even a return trip to Slandow where *Vengeance* herself had been recovered. The prize money offered up by the Empress for recovered ships, particularly warships, swelled his coffers and that of his crew. Even times when whole ships had not been present, he still brought back an impressive number of spares and replacement parts for the ships already in service. He had also found a key prize to their operations in RC space that even now resided in a completely cordoned off chamber aboard *Royal Vengeance* as she orbited Spires.

One of his crowning achievements had been the discovery of a small but intact naval station in the smashed remains of Barnett's once spectacular starport. Not only had over five hundred suits of advanced Imperial battle dress been unearthed, but the priceless equipment and manuals to keep them in working service. The find had been enough to secure the loyalty of the greater part of Imperial Marines whose own operations would be improved thanks to his actions. After the Navy had painstakingly dismantled the facilities and transported them back to Solee, the site remained usable for naval operations. Fleet Planning already had their sights on making it a Major installation with which to create a stronger foothold in the Shenk Rimward Main, a cluster of worlds within easy striking distance from Barnett.

With every victory and recovery, he further justified the faith that Admiral Alcantara had placed in him. While his meteoric successes heaped medals and accolades upon his name, he remained "only" a senior-grade Captain. While it was understood that he would one day attain a flag rank of his own, for now he was immeasurably valuable to the ISN in the field.

It was with no small amount of lamentation on the part of Fleet Acquisitions when Fox and *Vengeance* had been tapped to follow Admiral Alcantara for operations with Oriflamme. It had taken years of skillful maneuvering and manipulation to finally find and secure contacts within the Oriflammen government with the proper...disposition and power to further the Solee agenda. Thus far, the partnership had worked out stupendously – in fact, the quiet changes it had brought about in more than a standard year had far surpassed even DNI's most liberal projections.

Now open action had been initiated. There was no going back now. The die was cast. While many might feel a sickly unease in the pit of their stomach, Gaylon Fox found the thought of finally bringing Aubaine to task exhilarating. The inevitable conflict that had been looming on the horizon for years was now at hand, and their ultimate goal was only a few weeks away.

It would be glorious.

Fox found that he made the mental transition from thoughts of the past to those of the future without fully realizing it. His thoughts were ordered, but they seemed to overlap in a mosaic of what was, what is and what would be. Despite the lingering shadow of remembered pain that the blue sphere of Spires conjured up, greater still was the satisfaction of seeing the conquered planet for what it was – and the stepping stone it represented for the future. He watched as a cruel smile crept upon the features of his seated reflection against the stunning backdrop of the planet below.

A shaft of yellow light overlaid his reflection, silhouetting the figure of a tall man as at the briefing room door opened behind him. Fox swiveled in his seat to find his XO standing there with a glowing data display under his arm.

"Sorry to disturb you, sir," Commander Jamar said. The level look in his eyes immediately told Fox that his presence here was important.

"What is it?"

"One of our comp techs aboard *Golden Flame* found this on that far trader we captured a few hours ago. I...thought you would want to see it for yourself, sir." He handed the display over and watched as his Captain's eyes narrowed dangerously at what he found there.

"Who else knows about this?" he asked icily.

"Just us for now, sir. The tech in question served with me before on *Starblade*, and so he passed it to me immediately. I doubt it has had a chance to work its way up the chain in detail."

Fox nodded and Jamar could see the wheels turning.

"Very well, ready my transport and log a flight plan with *Golden Flame*," he nearly growled. "I'm going aboard."

Chapter 17

Captain Gaylon Fox lingered in the boat bay aboard *Golden Flame*, his eyes fixed on the seafoam shape before him with cold fire. Even after his pilot and aide had disembarked, he had chosen to remain in the bay, circling the ship that had proven to be one of his greatest adversaries.

To the casual observer, it would seem that the Captain was just milling about, watching the teams of technicians and boat crews going about their business. For those that knew the Captain, they would note that he was scanning the ship in front of him, letting no detail, however small, escape his notice. At times, he even extended a hand up at intervals to run it along the smooth hull, adding a tactile component to his total experience of the event.

This was the ship that had beaten him around Opaco IV. All this time, he never believed he would find her, or come to know the real story, but here she was, literally at arm's length.

His eyes went to her nameplate, drinking it in hungrily. It read:

RCS Hornet
10161
Cave Aculem

The crest art depicted a hornet in flight. To Fox's mind, the irony was not lost. Compared to *Royal Vengeance*, this vessel was an insect. Though she was a beautiful ship, and noticeably well-maintained for her obvious age, she was merely a rabbit to his lion.

Logic would seem to demand that it would take six ships this size to even remotely match the tonnage of his ship, and perhaps double six that to approach the combat capability. Somewhere in the realm of rational thought that should make a difference.

The report Jamar had handed him, however, painted a different picture. Unlike what he had told himself all this time, there was only one ship that had ambushed him on the deadly day in Mexit; one ship that had nearly been the death of him, and was the death of many ISN servicemen and women. *This ship. RCS Hornet.*

A strange amalgam of emotions suffused him, and experiencing them all first-hand did little to help him sort them all out. There was anger, of course, that came with the knowledge of what this ship had done to him. Sadness and loss mingled in there too, but were secondary to a needle-sharp sense of fascination that bordered on obsession. Above it all, there was even a strong admiration that was seemingly out of place – for the ship, for her crew, and most of all, for her commander.

The report listed *Hornet's* CO as one Coeur D'Esprit, but the name itself was flat without the all important details that went with it. The devil was in the details. The service photo and profile that Mestrovic had provided the ISN painted an interesting picture for him, but again it must surely fall flat to the presence of the woman herself.

As he made turns around her, the ship seemed to fall in on itself in the halls of his mind. The image of the far trader began to coalesce into the face of woman.

Gaylon Fox was one who knew first-hand the *animo* that ships possessed, the living spirit that was somehow there among her corridors and compartments. No one could ever explain how it had arrived there, but it was the soul of the ship that could propel her into the vaunted heights of legendry. It was what made those that served aboard her love her.

He knew all of this from his time aboard *Royal Vengeance*, enough to recognize it in another ship when saw it. Even the greatest ship was nothing without a capable commander driving her on, and so even as his hawk-eye gaze was fixed upon the ship in the boat bay, he no longer truly saw her. He saw instead Coeur D'Esprit, the extraordinary woman that had crushed him.

A darkness seemed to fall over his face. He turned on his heel towards the exit of the boat bay. His aide, sensing that the visit was at end, made his way up to his Captain.

"Sir?" He said, falling into step beside the other man.

"Take me to the Brig."

* * *

Coeur had been hastily ushered from her stark cell after being roused from a troubled sleep, and placed in the interrogation room that had become all too familiar to her by now. Three times she had been forced to sit in a chair where metal cuffs encircled her wrists and ankles, locking her place.

Each time she had done her best to test the resolve of her interrogator, a sleek featured Asian man that identified himself only as "Mr. Kim." If she didn't refuse to answer his questions outright, she answered them with questions of her own. Her crew, which she had not been allowed to see since her arrival, was foremost on her mind. It was unclear if Crowbar was being given proper treatment, or if Deep Six was being allowed the salt water submersion that was vital to his health, and the all other details of those she was responsible for keeping safe. Like a mother whose children had been forcibly taken from her, that was where her mind dwelled when she was left alone in her small, bare cell.

So, far Mr. Kim had shown infinite patience with her, but Coeur was canny enough to know that the velvet glove might well be replaced with the iron fist at any time.

The door clanged open as someone entered the room. With tired eyes, she lifted her chin, summoning up the energy to test Mr. Kim's limits yet again.

The man that stood there, however, was not Mr. Kim. Instead of a tailored business suit, he wore a black and silver uniform, whose cut and detail bore a striking resemblance to the uniform of the old Imperium. Even some of the devices and insignia on the man's label were only a step removed from the ones she'd seen before her long sleep to the future. As close to the genuine article as it was, the Empire this represented was not that of Cleon, Porfiria and Strephon. No, as he moved closer, it was apparent that this man was part of the Empire of Solee. More puzzle pieces clicked immediately into place, speaking volumes about an alliance that was a match made in hell.

From what she'd heard, the Imperial Solee Navy was little more than a bunch of raw, green recruits trying ineffectually to use the relic ships they happened to find laying around. The uniform of an officer told a lot about them, and this one was immaculate, as was the man who wore it. If the man before her was any indication, the Reformation Coalition was facing a deadly adversary whose competence and determination were self-evident, a mirror of the man himself.

Coldly handsome, the dark-haired naval officer stood before her for several seconds, fixing her with an intense stare that might have been more at home on a Terran King Cobra. His eyes seemed to soak up everything about her, even the injured side of her face. Something like anger flickered in those icy depths at seeing that she was not whole, which gave her only puzzlement.

"It troubles me to see that you have been...mistreated." He said in a whiskey smooth voice. "I should think someone of your status should be given a stateroom, at the very least, Captain." There was strange emphasis he placed on her title that Coeur couldn't quite place.

"I take it you're my new interrogator?" She responded.

"Far from it," he said. "This is an unofficial visit. Besides, I know everything I need to know about you already, Captain. Everything that interests me, I should say."

Coeur tilted her head. It seemed as though the man expected something from her, but what it was she couldn't say. Had Mr. Kim tired of her contrariness to resort to a 'good cop, bad cop' routine, or was there something more at work here? Her instincts warned her that the situation was not all that it seemed.

"Well then, it seems you have me at a disadvantage, sir."

The corners of his mouth drew up into a tight smile.

"Heavens, where *are* my manners?" he said. "Allow me to introduce myself, Captain. My name is Captain Gaylon Fox of Her Majesty's Imperial Navy of Solee. I am master and commander of the *Royal Vengeance*."

Despite herself, Coeur took in a sharp breath. Did this explain the strange reverence he showed her, or the edge of danger with which he presented it?

"I see by your response that you recognize her name. I suppose I should be flattered. Then again, it's not every day that you get hand down judgment on that sort of grand scale...is it?"

She looked him in the eye, but made no response. There was something wrong though, she thought, and the disturbance rippled in her mind like a stone thrown into placid water. Unless this man was all looks and no substance, which Coeur very much doubted, there was no way this man had been the clueless CO during her attack.

"You were aboard her during the attack, weren't you?" Coeur said and Gaylon slowly nodded. "But you weren't in command at the time."

"Very good, Captain, very good," His eyes flashed brightly. "You are quite correct, I was there the day you sent forty-three of my brothers and sisters straight to Hell - and again the day your Meson cannon annihilated another two hundred and sixty more." Coeur felt the man's internal pendulum swing from respect to barely-contained hatred.

"Tell me...Captain," he said with cold ferocity, "What did you do once you had carried out our execution? Did you gloat, did you celebrate? Or did you perhaps feel nothing at what you'd done, a true professional?"

"I prayed," Coeur said, reliving that moment in history.

"I prayed to God, that you and your crew would survive the Misjump I forced you to make. I was happy to know you had made it back, but my heart sank to know that *Vengeance* had only come back to die."

"I'm touched at your concern for our well-being," he said with bone-dry sarcasm, "but God has nothing to do with war. He never has, despite all talk of providence, destiny, or divine will. The opposing commanders are the true gods of war, each deciding who lives and who dies."

His smile grew wider, but there was no aspect of humor about him.

"It must make you feel nearly a goddess to have been the cause of so much death, so many lives snuffed out in an instant, and so many more ending slowly, in agonizing pain." As he spoke he was edging ever closer to her, and his fire and ice seemed to swirl in the air around him.

"Feels good...doesn't it?"

Those eyes were too much, too filled with cold anger, and she had no choice, but to turn away. She chose instead to look at the devices and decorations of his uniform. She found no comfort there either. Emblazoned upon his left arm was the symbol of Soleean Navy, which bore the symbol of stylized Greek helmet surmounting a four-pointed star. Below the helmet was a heraldic banner that merely said: 1, 6.

16.

"I've been responsible for many deaths in my lifetime," She closed her eyes, images of Darien, Spitfire, and now Newton playing before them. "Not all of them were enemies."

Even with her eyes closed, she could feel that he was close to her. When she opened them again, he was within arm's reach.

"Regret...Captain?" He seemed a little taken aback. "I would expect you to proudly display your achievements, even...*especially* in the face of an enemy. Someone of your gifts could easily think herself Athena reborn."

In a moment of clarity, she saw it in that dread gaze. She had soundly bested him twice, and he was desperately hoping in his mind that she was the kind of indomitable commander worthy of defeating him. To lose to a paragon was fate, like Hector to Achilles, was one thing, but to lose to someone that was merely human, was eating him up inside, whether he knew it or not.

"For what it's worth, I am sorry for the pain and loss that I've personally caused you, though I make no apologies for doing my duty." She said, burning from his heat. "But understand me, I will never be the kind of person you hoped I would be, that you *need* me to be."

His eyes narrowed as he leaned closer. "Sorry? *Sorry?*" he nearly hissed. "If not for you, I would still be shackled by my incompetent superiors, forced to forever play second fiddle to those who are not fit to lick my boots. You brought the scourging fire, but in doing so, you cast me in your mold. Don't you understand...you've given me *everything* I love and hate. You made me...and for that you're *sorry?*"

His words stung like hornet's venom. She felt her eyes grow wet, her normal steely control broken and beaten down. Even her voice seemed to falter.

"Yes, I'm sorry. If I have created a monster that will bring more death into this world, then, yes, I can think of no greater shame in these times."

"What do you mean, 'in these times'?" he said, the pendulum retreating back. "Humor me with an explanation...if you please."

"All right," she said shakily. "It's all one big game of King of the Hill, isn't it? You kill me, I kill you. It doesn't matter. We can't wait to knock to the other guy off their pinnacle, so we can claim it for ourselves. The fire of Humaniti has come close to going out forever. Instead of uniting and driving back the night, we continue to kill each other over empty ideologies and lines on a map. In the end, we're still dead. We still keep playing King of the Hill, no matter how small the hill gets, no matter much closer to extinction that brings us. We fall upon ourselves like the snake eating its own tail, consuming ourselves until there is nothing left."

He considered her for long seconds, until he gave a head tilt of his own.

"Come now, Captain. Is that truly what you feel, or is that merely a case of worn nerves from your imprisonment?" He said, almost gently. "You of all people should know that conflict is how we define ourselves as a people, regardless of nation or philosophy. War, Captain, is the elemental force that serves to elevate people like you and I from the burden of the irrelevant masses."

He made a sweep of his hand encompassing the ship and all around it. "And the Ouroboros you speak of has long been seen as a symbol of unity, not division. Unity, I might add, is only achieved through adversity. Unity, is what Humaniti needs 'in these times' as you put it, but that will only come at the point of a sword. To pretend otherwise is folly."

"The kind that only an Empire - *your* Empire - can provide..." Coeur almost spat back.

"Indeed, Captain. Indeed." He said as Coeur slowly shook her head.

"Empires are built upon deceit and tyranny, Captain Fox. Even the noblest of Empires are merely dark ages waiting to happen. Three times Humaniti has put its trust in the hands of an Empire, and three times chaos, anarchy and death have followed when the walls fell. Clearly, that's not the way."

"Ah, but it is, Coeur," he said, addressing her familiarly by her first name. "The Empire has been the redemption of mankind, the great phoenix, two of those three times, just as it will be a third time, I can assure you."

"Then that's where we part ways, you and I," Coeur said, forcing out the words. "You see, unlike you, I know what it's like to work for the Empire that you only imitate, and wear the uniform you only pretend to. No amount of carbon-copied service metals, relic Imperial warships, or ancient naval mottos," she said indicating the '1,6' banner on his shoulder, "will ever change that."

"Beware the sting, indeed," Fox said, acknowledging her point. "That is the motto of your intrepid ship, is it not?"

Coeur nodded, a ripple of pain coursing through at the mention of her lost ship. He moved closer until his face hovered in front of hers, burning her, as the hate came surging up like an inferno.

"You see, *Royal Vengeance* also carries a Latin motto," he brushed back a lock of brown hair over her ear, running his hand lightly over the bruised part of her face and down to her jaw line, gently, like a lover. "Her motto is: *Nemo me impune lacessit*. No one assails me with impunity."

Oh, God. He's going to kill me, she thought. *No one probably knows he's in here. They will find me dead in this room.* She had faced her death any number of times before, but never like this, bound and helpless. This was not the way she wanted to leave this life. Possibilities of all the roads not taken, all the opportunities missed or ignored in her lifetime performed in bitter chapters in her mind.

"You *have* assailed me, Captain, and with the greatest impunity," Fox said dangerously. "But that time is quickly coming to a close. It's a pity, Coeur D'Esprit, that it has to be this way," he said with no small trace of regret. "Such a pity."

His strong hand started to move from her jaw to her throat as he lightly kissed her forehead...

Just then, the door again rumbled open and Mr. Kim stepped through, briefcase in hand. He stopped dead at the scene before him.

"What are you doing?" he asked sternly.

Fox stood up, and the spell in the room was broken.

"Merely paying my respects to an old friend," he said, absent any malice whatsoever, as though the fiery episode that had played out between them had never happened.

"You are not authorized to speak to the prisoners, Captain," Mr. Kim said moving to the side of the door. "I will have to ask you to leave."

"What timing then," Fox said. "I was just on my way out." He moved to the door, then turned to face Coeur once more.

"Good-bye, Captain. I'm sorry there wasn't more time for us," he voice was like liquid helium.

"Such a pity," he said, and then was gone.

Mr. Kim closed the door and sealed it shut. Seeing now that his charge seemed distraught, he produced a handkerchief from his pocket and lightly dabbed her eyes dry. It was a thoughtful display from her captor, a gesture no doubt aimed at making her more amicable to his line of questioning. She knew that was why, but was grateful for it all the same.

"I will make sure that he doesn't visit you again, Ms. D'Esprit." He never called her by her rank.

"Thank you."

"Now," he said, getting back to business and opening his briefcase. "Where should we begin?"

* * *

"So you see, Ms. Valencia," the blonde man said with a friendly twinkle in his blue eyes, "The only one keeping you in your cell right now...is you."

He filled her wine glass that sat next to a succulent, yet untouched, Weatherby steak that was rapidly cooling on its plate.

Snapshot could feel the meal they had laid out for her making her empty stomach rumble even more. And the smell...the smell itself was almost overwhelming. They had even gone so far as to lay a red table cloth over the austere metal table in the briefing room. An intricately carved candelabra added a warm touch to the place where she had only a short time before been questioned harshly – and threatened with physical harm if she did not comply.

Mr. Halafast was a gentile and relentless host, which was good for him given the level of stubbornness his charge displayed. Snapshot sat with her arms crossed tightly with the most disapproving stare she could muster up. Drop Kick had used to call it her 'demon librarian' face. It was annoyance, acid and heated steel all rolled into one, focused, and pointed in one direction like a laser. Her fiancée had described it as akin to looking down the barrel of a loaded gauss rifle.

Vin Escher. The Marine with the boyish face was now proving the old adage to her to you don't know how much you miss something until it's gone. As much of a terror he could be to his troops and enemies, the big lug was a trouble she wished she had. They kept her cell like a freezer and his arms were always so warm, like a big teddy bear – that was one trait she could never fault him for.

Mr. Halafast motioned towards her, beckoning her to speak.

"I'd prefer it if you call me Snapshot," she said.

"I can certainly understand that," he said. "To some degree, I even agree with it, but right now is not the most ideal time to hang on the old modes of speech. It may seem trivial, but for your own well-being, I would strongly advise against it."

"Well then, that really limits the conversation, doesn't it?"

Mr. Halafast took a sip of his wine, held her steely gaze and sat back in chair with a slight sigh. "There are certain things that, perhaps, I'm failing to make clear you, Ms. Valencia. First, I wasn't sent here to interrogate you. There is no need. Your patriotic crewmember has provided us with all the information we would ever want or need."

Her glare deepened, and he knew he had got past her guard.

"Second, to apologize with all sincerity for your less-than-stellar treatment up until now. We were unaware that you were of Oriflammen heritage until after your information was

processed. I feel I should point out that those responsible for any mistreatment you might have experienced have been severely reprimanded.”

She made a slight yawning motion that was obviously forced.

“Third, to impress upon you a very important fact,” he said leaning on an elbow and resting his chin on his closed fist. “The Reformation Coalition no longer exists. It’s already dead, it just doesn’t fully know it yet. Neither I, nor any of my employers started its slow decline, but for the sake of maintaining stability, Oriflamme put it out of its misery. The old has to be swept away in favor of the new. That’s the *only* way we can ensure a brighter tomorrow.”

He paused.

“That sounded a little on the melodramatic side, didn’t it?”

“Yeah,” she said sourly. “Just a bit.”

“Well,” he shrugged with a smooth smile, “It makes it no less true. The current government’s days are numbered. The Revolution is on, and nothing will be the same once it has run its course. Inevitable as it may be, however, the Great Endeavor still needs friends,” he said pointedly. “Friends like you.”

She slowly shook her head at the last part.

“So let me get this straight,” she began. “You capture my ship, manhandle me, do Gaia-knows-what to my friends and plan to take over the government at gunpoint, possibly killing hundreds, even thousands, of people to get what you want. *But*, if I decide to play nice and walk in lock step with the rest my jackbooted countrymen during this glorious uprising, betraying everyone and everything I care about, then all is well. Is *that* what you’re telling me?”

Mr. Halafast raised an eyebrow. “Now who is being melodramatic?” he said dryly. “I take it from that display, that your answer is no?”

“No, here’s my answer,” she said, seizing her wineglass and throwing the crimson contents into his face. He moved quickly, much more quickly than Snapper would’ve guessed, but it didn’t save him from being utterly soaked all about the face and chest.

He sat there with little red rivulets running down his hair and face with only a mild look of exasperation. Sighing, he raised his napkin with a flourish and wiped his eyes. Looking down at his perfectly-knotted double Windsor tie. He shook his head.

“This was silk,” he said slowing dabbing away wine from his person.

Snapper’s hand lingered near the base of the candelabra, eyeing the open flame. “You know, it’s too bad those astroblend suits aren’t more flammable on their own. Alcohol is a good enough catalyst to make up for it, I guess.”

His reaction slightly puzzled her – he laughed.

“Well, no one will ever question *your* heritage. ‘Fiery’ tempered indeed!” he smiled over his perfect teeth. Slowly he stood with another pass over his face with the napkin.

“But, they may have cause to question your judgment.” The humor drained from his voice. “When I said that the Revolution needs friends that was only a polite way of saying that *you* want be the Revolution’s friend,” he dropped the napkin back on the table. “You certainly don’t want to be its enemy.”

Her hand curled around the base of the candle holder.

“One traitor per ship is quite sufficient, thank you. We’ll all be making snow angels in Hell before I betray my shipmates, to you or anyone,” she said with steel. “If what I’ve seen so far is the new face of Oriflamme, then it can go fikk itself for all I care.”

Mr. Halafast was wringing the last of the wine off his hands.

“I’m sorry to hear that, truly sorry. You and your friends are in a very precarious situation, given the circumstances. Events are moving rapidly towards their zenith, Ms. Valencia, of that you can be certain, and the outcome is not stellar for those who aren’t onboard. I had hoped that one of you might come forward to act as an advocate for the others, to give the higher-ups a reason for your continued well-being. You were the ideal choice for both sides involved,” he straightened the lines of his blotchy suit to as close to his regular standard.

“If you can’t do that who knows what will become of you all.”

* * *

It was with no small amount of trepidation that August Delpero stepped through the causeway and into *Golden Flame's* main Infirmary. His heart thundered in his chest and in his ears. He would not have been the least bit surprised if his face was flushed to match his jittery hands.

The expansive compartment was largely empty, consisting of rows and row of empty beds. The only occupants were either the med-techs or the occasional victim of circumstance.

Victim of circumstance. Yeah, he mused sourly, that's a good one.

He had known from the start just how strapped for manpower Mestrovic's endeavor had been. Loyal citizens had been tapped for duty that had never before served aboard a starship. To ensure that all their needs were met, quietly, Mestrovic was willing to pay enormous sums for those that could provide the much-needed services in the fleet.

That was why the one prisoner that was being held here in the Infirmary was a boon that even the staunchest Revolutionary could not ignore. One of the sharpest medical minds in Reformation Coalition space was here practicing her Apollonian art. Her oath to do no harm, as Delpero reckoned, had vastly outshined her growing status as one of the Enemies of the People.

At least for now.

Quietly, Delpero crept through the partitioned and curtained interior, his every sense rapt on seeing her before she saw him. Somewhere in his head that meant he could cut and run if a sudden reunion proved to be too problematic. It was silly for someone in his position, however tenuous, to act like a love-sick adolescent. That was what this woman brought out in him, especially now.

He halted at a cart of medical equipment and peered slowly around the corner.

And there she stood. Clipboard in hand, she was surrounded by med-techs, giving them each their marching orders. The one resident doctor that was on loan from the ISN could only stand aside as his natural superior assumed command of the facility. He could only see her in profile, but even that sight was enough to conjure forth untapped wells of regret.

The med-techs dispersed like a school of fish, but she remained unmoved, bright eyes fixed on her charts and darting back and forth from her watch.

That's when Delpero stepped out and forced himself to walk up over to her. It was perhaps only a half-dozen strides, but seemed to stretch endlessly until he was within arms reach.

"Hello, Orit," he said softly.

She turned at the sound of her name, eyes lighting on the suited figure before her. At first, there was nothing until recognition burned in the dark depths. Nearly angelic, she smiled bright as the sun at the familiar face. It had been so long since he had seen her smile like that, in some other life.

Caught up he swept her into his arms. She was such a petite little thing, nearly weightless against him. He tightened his embrace, smelling the sweet smell of her hair. It was a single perfect moment, one that was duly noted by Dr. Symon of the ISN.

Then he felt her stiffen in his arms, pushing away from him. She regarded him coldly.

"Don't do that again," she warned. "I hate being played on my sentimental side."

He nodded. "I suppose I deserve that."

She glanced again at her watch. "I'm afraid visiting hours are over, Mr. Delpero. If you want to visit the prisoner, you'll have to come back another time."

The last time they spoke, he had been the one that was the prisoner. Now their fortunes were reversed.

"Stop it," he nearly pleaded. "Please...just let me talk to you, Orit. Don't push me away, not now, of all times."

He could see her visibly cage her anger as he held her gaze. She led him off into an empty medical space, pulling the curtain closed.

"Five minutes," she said with finality. "Go."

He grimaced. He had rehearsed this a thousand times in his mind, but all of it was gone now.

"I wanted to make sure that you were okay with my own eyes." Delpero said. "Can you really fault me for that?"

"All right, since you came all the way down here I'll tell you how I am. At the end of my shift I get to be locked in a cell no bigger than this space and sleep on a metal shelf until I wake up to do it all over again," she said coolly. "I suppose it passes the time until my sentence gets handed down."

"And your shipmates?"

She took in a deep breath and let it out.

"Those that I'm allowed to see are in varying states of health. They finally allowed me to place Sixer in a saltwater tank. I've removed the bullet from Crowbar's stomach that our traitor put there. The Marines are still in a drug-induced coma, but are otherwise stable. What do you care anyway?"

"I know how much *Hornet's* crew means to you, Orit. If they are important to you, they are important to me."

"I'm touched," she said with little humor, "perhaps they will allow you the honor of personally throwing the switch on the airlock when they finally get around to executing us."

"You don't know that it will end like that."

"And you don't know that it won't." she fired back with a verbal riposte.

Truth be told, he *didn't* know how it would end. Mestrovic had become too unpredictable for Delpero to foresee what the old man might do. Considering the outright execution of *Fougade*, he might as well look at tea-leaves or pig entrails to see what was coming.

"Is this the way we're always going to be? At each other's throats?" he said seeing her fierce glare. "Can you ever actually forgive me for the things I've done to you?"

Expecting more verbal sparring, she looked puzzled, tilting her head thoughtfully to the side.

"Is that what this is all about, August?" she said. "Absolution?"

He swept forward and gripped her shoulders.

"We both know I'm not sorry for the Majority of what I did," he said, "but when it comes to you, Orit, that's a different story. The truth is you are what I regret the most. Every day I was in Trantown I cursed myself for ever letting you slip away from me, of how I took the love you gave to me unconditionally and ruined it. I was so blind...and I let my arrogance, my pride, destroy the single greatest thing that ever happened to me," he squeezed her arms. "You, Orit."

Unlike so many times before, it was now sadness that replaced her burning anger, not the reverse. He could see the change in those liquid depths. "It must be nice to be able to compartmentalize me so easily."

"What do you mean?"

"You meant to tell me you are sorry for wronging me, but unapologetic for the thousands of lives you ended? You are sorry for one symptom of the disease, but not the disease itself?" She said. "I could forgive you for using me, for all the other women and the lifestyle you can't seem to live without. Hell, I might be able to forgive you for being a traitor, but not for calculated genocide, however justified you felt it was. Never for that."

She twisted away from his grasp.

"Had I known what you were capable of in the first place, I would have never loved you like I did."

"Do you see me as that much of a monster?" his voice fluttered like a bird was caught in his throat. "Can you dismiss what we had so easily?"

"*Had*," She replied. "That's the operative word, August, *had*. Now you are well on your way to being a traitor for the second time, with an accompanying blood-bath of *human* blood that may not be so easy to wash off your conscience, assuming you had one in the first place."

Delpero clenched his jaw in pain.

"Wait, this is coming out all wrong, I never meant for any of this to happen, Orit, you've got to believe that."

She regarded him in silence.

"It doesn't matter what I believe anymore." She wasn't hot or cold as she said it, but somehow empty. "Your time's up."

"Then I guess we have nothing more to say to each other."

"It certainly looks that way." She said, turning back to her work and drawing the curtain.

Across the room, Dr. Symon dutifully took note of the exchange and filed it in his mail queue for his next report.

* * *

"So, my dear lady, it is your considered opinion that there is no other way to proceed with respect to our guests, yes?" Mestrovic said languidly to his companion as they sat alone in his immense cabin suite.

Alcantara peered at the old man and slowly nodded her assent.

"I can see no other alternative, Excellency."

The old man made a throwing away gesture. "Please, we are in chambers, lady. It would be pleasing to me if you would address me simply as Vitali. It is a rarity these days to hear my name uttered by the lips of a friend."

Now this is a bit of a departure, she thought.

"Very well, Vitali," she said with an emphasis of unfamiliarity. "Then I will simply be Monique, if it please you."

"It does," he said. "You see, we share the company of true friendship – also a vanishing commodity in these times, wouldn't you say?"

"Quite so."

Alcantara knew what point of interest had spurred that response. As odd and seemingly detached as the High Technarch could seem, there was still a vein in him that could be shrewd and prudent. Each of the visitors had their own watchdogs of varying kinds set upon them. The good doctor Takagawa was no exception. Alcantara had been in discussion with him about the prisoners when Symon's report had come to her, and, in so doing, gave her the kind of inroad she had been looking to exploit.

All she had to do was push just a tiny bit and he would give her what she wanted. This initiative had come in no small part from several vociferously exchanged messages with Gaylon Fox after he had returned to *Royal Vengeance*.

Fox was most definitely one of the finest officers in the ISN, but this time he had gotten too close to the matter, allowed a situation to get under his skin. It was understandable to some degree – coming face-to-face with one's arch-nemesis could certainly have that effect.

So here she was. Perhaps with Mestrovic's word she could simultaneously remove a source of distraction to one of her favored subordinates, as well as find a bit of vengeance for the personnel she had inadvertently handed a death sentence.

Funny how what goes around, comes around, eh?

Mestrovic's servant came to attention at a discreet distance and lightly cleared his throat.

"Yes, Orlo, what is it?"

"Excellency, Technarch Delpero is here, and requests an audience."

Mestrovic looked mildly annoyed and sighed.

"Speak of the devil."

"Shall I admit him, Excellency?"

Mestrovic turned to the Admiral and nodded towards the door.

"What do you think? Shall we let the man account for himself?"

They were reaching a critical juncture in the game, Alcantara knew. The last thing she needed or wanted was Delpero's presence throwing off the dynamic she had painstakingly built up.

"I believe Symon's report speaks for itself."

Mestrovic idly drummed his hands on the sofa, mulling it over.

"Very well. Orlo, send him away. Tell him I'm... indisposed."

"Of course, Excellency." The tall servant nodded and went away to do his master's bidding.

"Now then, please forgive the memory of an old man, where were we?"

"The prisoners."

"Ah, yes," Mestrovic replied. "I take it as a sign that Delpero came here, no doubt to ask for clemency for his former wife. He seems, regrettably, unable to part with his past on his own

terms. Perhaps in some way this will allow him sever all ties with what was, and embrace what will be.”

“So we are in agreement then?”

Mestrovic’s grey eyes seemed to dance as he spoke.

“We are,” he said with a note of finality. “Once our mighty fleet is assembled and in place, we will, in a symbolic gesture, name crew of the *Hornet* – minus the Lady Eos, of course – Enemies of the People, and execute them.”

* * *

“Just what in Gaia’s name did you think you were *doing*?” Vega Zorn thundered, her mouth up against Delpero’s ear, the shower drowning out their voices. “You went to see her, out in the open? What could you be *thinking*?”

Zorn’s hand tightened around his arm enough that he winced. He started to speak, but thought the better of it.

“Your slip at the dinner party was bad enough, but this,” she nearly snarled, “this could be the death of us all.”

“I had to see her,” Delpero said. “I don’t expect you to understand, considering I don’t even know why I did it. I just had too.”

“I understand all too well why you went, even if you can’t admit to yourself.”

“And why is that?” Delpero said testily.

“Because some part of you is still in love with her, August,” she watched her words sink in like daggers in his heart. “Somehow you’ve built her up in your mind as the one mistake you can’t explain away so neatly. Never mind your lost fortunes, your complicity, or that you listened to me and now your life is in danger.”

His shocked look confirmed much of what she had said. She had cut deep into the heart of the matter, and he was beginning realize what hidden secret she had laid bare.

“Tell me I’m wrong.” She demanded.

His mouth moved, but no words came out. He looked down at the deck.

“Then your silence tells me all I need to know.”

“We’ve got to help her, Zorn. We’ve got to help them all.”

The grip on his arm slackened. *This is more like it. Finally he is coming around*, she thought.

“I know.” She said softly. “I could no more abandon Coeur to the hands of madman than you could Orit, no matter what has gone before.”

“So what can we do?”

“Right then,” she said thankful to get down to business. “We still need to keep Mestrovic occupied while we work. Now that you have fallen from grace, I doubt either of us can do that since he doesn’t want you, and by extension me, around. But, I’ve been going over the passenger manifest, I think there may be someone onboard that can. As dark as things may seem, I think we have a few hidden allies here in the dragon’s lair after all.”

“Really?”

“We better hope so, August, or else Mestrovic will wind up doing to us what he did to *Fougade*.” She said in earnest. “Only this time he may not be as nice about it.”

* * *

With just a touch of electronic sleight-of-hand, the door to the cabin obediently opened, permitting the stranger to its darkened interior. A cursory scan revealed that the primary occupant was absent. It was just as the intruder wished and why she had chosen this time and place to act.

The woman had gone by many names in her time, each of them a seeming half-truth whether a convenient deflection or an intentional fabrication. It was academic now, the woman

that made her way to the officer's desk was none her persona's, though acting in the stead of one of her favorites.

The computer terminal came to life immediately and she began to work. Her own quarters would never do for the kind of legerdemain she intended. It would be monitored too well, watched like a hawk in flight. Only here, in the home of a stranger, could she be free of such strictures. If her actions were discovered, it would be the minor Lieutenant that would bear the brunt of it.

A few deft turns and commands later, information began to scroll across the monitor. It was working. It was working *much* better than she had ever hoped or dreamed it might. The stranger smiled inwardly as her instincts once again proved to be dead on.

If anything it was as though a giant had been bitten by a poisonous snake. It was too large to feel the sting immediately, but the venom was in its veins and continuing to undermine it from within.

In their haste, the enemy had believed that memory banks of their latest prize had been truly empty. Once there was a hard connection, the fangs had bit deep.

And now, they were largely at her mercy. With no small difficulty she had directed the fatal bite at their Achilles' Heel. No matter how many relic ships the enemy could claim in their order of battle, even the highest technology could only perform at the level of its utilization. If the user was ignorant of how to make the fullest use of the system's potential, such as in the case of their security systems, then the largest margin of superiority was lost.

All of which, made her job that much easier. She brought up her latest subroutines and made the necessary modifications. All it would take to activate her virtual chaos would be a short sequence input from a hand-held data display. The beauty of her plan is that she would be able to compel regular duty personnel to do the legwork for her, all the while thinking they were acting under orders that came all the way from High Command.

It was perfect in planning – now all she had to do was ensure that it was equally perfect in execution.

Chapter 18

Though there were none that knew it directly, there was a ghost aboard the dreadnought *Golden Flame* - a shade that kept itself confined to a dark place, whose ephemeral hands were unseen and unfelt as it worked its will within the flagship.

Though its spectral presence went unnoticed by the thousands of people going about their daily lives, the power it wielded invisibly over the ship was staggering. So many lives could be snuffed out so easily in the depths of space if certain equipment happened to malfunction at the wrong time.

Fortunately for the people in question, the presence was not a malevolent one. It did not wish the harm or the life of any being aboard ship or in the fleet. For now, it was merely curious about the goings and comings of warships of the Spires system.

For now it was content to watch and wait, all the while tweaking the environment around it to produce favorable conditions for future circumstances, should the need arise.

Silent and alone, with the patience of a wolf, it waited until the time came to act.

That time, it knew, would arrive very soon.

* * *

Liu An-wing busied herself, as she often did these past weeks, by immersing her thoughts and imagination in her latest book. That form of distraction had, at least, not been denied and the library she had to draw from aboard ship was quite extensive.

Her latest excursion into that elsewhere came with the words of Plutarch in his opus, *Parallel Lives*. She was no more than few pages into Alcibiades, when the door chime roused her from the life of the Peloponnesian War's most colorful figure.

The servant that attended her floated like a cloud to the door and, exchanged a few muted words she couldn't hear.

"Who is it?" She said, putting her reader on pause.

"This is highly irregular, my Lady." Her servant said, obviously flustered at something.

"Well? Let's have it."

"You have visitors, my Lady, but they are not sanctioned to meet with you."

"I believe I will be the judge of that within these quarters," she said imperiously. "Have they identified themselves?"

"Yes, Lady." The servant said nervously, "It is Technarch August Delpero and the Lady Vega Zorn come to seek and audience with you."

"Zorn's *here*?" the revelation hit her as though it were a physical blow. She was supposed to be *dead*.

"Show them in at once," she said looking herself over in a nearby mirror, adjusting her appearance to receive her guests. "Speak to no one of this, do you understand?" It was the voice of a Lady speaking to a servant; it didn't quite crack like a whip, but left no room for disobedience.

"Yes, Lady." The servant bowed and opened the door.

The guards that had been near omnipotent since her arrival were no longer there, having been recalled to Mestrovic's side. Ever since the crushing news of her uncle's fate, the High Technarch had relaxed such measure, but told her, without saying it in so many words, that she was not leave her quarters unless he sent for her. He had been somewhat vague, however, on visitors coming to see her, a loophole she was quick to exploit now.

A man and woman entered her chambers from the brightly lit corridor outside. The face of the man was well-known to her, as it would be with anyone that walked in the circles she did. August Delpero, before his fall from grace, had been something of a celebrity. Last she heard, though, he had been convicted of treason and sentenced to a life without the possibility of parole. Yet, here he was seemingly in good health, wearing his signature olive suit with an artfully tied golden tie.

Next to him was a tall, athletic woman wearing a strange military uniform. The dark red tunic seemed to carry several devices of Oriflamme on it, including the sun standard itself, but was otherwise foreign to her senses. The face was oddly familiar, though removed from their last

encounter. The red hair that was worked into a ponytail was also at odds with her memories, but those eyes still held the calm self-confidence that she remember so well from Mexit.

"Zorn, is that you?"

The woman in uniform nodded with a half-smile that was unmistakable. "The rumors of my death have been greatly exaggerated."

Normally one to greet guests with a polite, reserved mien, she chose instead to take a few quick steps through the room and throw her arms around the woman that she thought fate had claimed and placed a kiss lightly on each of her cheeks.

"I'm glad you remember me fondly," Zorn said returning the embrace. "There are few that are so open-minded these days."

They parted and Zorn turned to Delpero.

"Liu, this is August Delpero."

"Yes, I have heard of you, of course," Liu said offering her hand. "I'm honored." With practiced civility, August took her hand and kissed it lightly.

"The honor is all mine, my Lady."

"Well, this is a strange day," Liu said motioning for them to sit. "A great man has thrown off his binding chains and a friend has come back from the dead. I can't tell you how exciting it is to see a few familiar faces after weeks of boredom. Did you just come aboard?"

The two exchanged glances and Liu caught a ripple of awkwardness.

"No, we've been aboard since *Golden Flame* embarked from Oriflamme," Zorn said.

"Really? Then I am doubly pleased that you escaped from the pandemonium that necessitated our leaving. Not everyone was so fortunate." A shadow passed across her face, but was soon gone. "I wish you had come to visit me sooner then. I find the tedium of space travel even more tiresome than before."

"If you'll forgive us in that," Delpero said, "we were not aware that you were on this ship until a short time ago. Lord Mestrovic, apparently sees fit to keep your company entirely to himself."

"Well, I suppose that's understandable given the precarious situation we find ourselves in now," she paused looking again to Zorn's uniform, "I'm curious to know what uniform that is that you're wearing, as well as why my chamber servant referred to you, Mr. Delpero, as a Technarch."

Liu could discern a bit of surprise from the former tycoon, but Zorn seemed still as water. Her surprise didn't seem to take the space pirate at all by surprise.

"Just as I am curious to know what 'pandemonium' occurred at Oriflamme," Zorn replied. "Liu, we were there and nothing was amiss when we left."

"That can't be right." Liu said, shaking her head. "What of the rebel attacks? What of the Aubani-backed attempts to destabilize us, or the attempt on the Council of Technarchs? Surely you can't discount all those."

Zorn put her hands out in calming gesture. "Hold on there. Who told you about all that?"

"Lord Mestrovic, of course," Liu said. She reached into her pocket and pulled out the holocrystal. "He gave me the last will and testament of my uncle after the Aubani murdered him as he tried to escape." She could feel tears threatening to well up, but she blinked them back. How could Zorn not know of these things?

"Please, be at peace, Lady An-Wing," Delpero inserted himself quickly. "We mean no harm or offense. We don't know what you've been told these past weeks or what you've been led to believe."

"Explain yourself, sir." Liu said with an unsaid warning.

"A moment," Zorn said and pulled a silver hand-held device from her tunic. She stood and made a round of the cabin. A few moments later the screen flashed a reassuring shade of green.

"We're clear," she announced. "Apologies, Liu, this is one conversation we definitely *don't* want overhead."

"What are you talking about?"

"It's just a precaution, my Lady," Delpero said smoothly. "Now suppose we start with the events as told to you by Lord Mestrovic first. Perhaps we will be in a better position to answer your questions. Is that agreeable to you?"

Liu composed herself, but her heart was racing fast in her chest. It wasn't from anger at their ignorance, but rather that even her uncle's testament hadn't quite dissuaded her from thinking Mestrovic had been coloring the facts to his favor.

She drew a ragged breath, "Very well."

In as much detail and memory as she could muster, she told them everything, starting from when she had entered Mestrovic's office. The news he had told her of the rebellion and ultimately Leon An-Wing's death. At that point in the story, she had even played for them the contents of the holocrystal. She thought that seeing it again, she would be prepared for the emotional onslaught. She wasn't. Throughout her yarn, she again noticed the quick looks flashed between her guests. The greatest part of her wanted to leap ahead to their version of events, but instead she made herself meticulously recite ever detail until her tale was played out, ending with their sudden appearance at her door.

"Now, if you please," Liu said, motioning to Zorn. "You have my fullest and undivided attention."

Zorn nodded and began weaving a tale of her own, slowly at first to give Liu a moment to recover when something shocking was revealed. To her credit, Liu sat there like a stone statue while she heard the catalogue of lies that had been told to her. Her only reaction was to cross her arms as she heard that the Reformation Coalition was in the midst of Revolution, largely by the hand of Mestrovic himself. Even now a fleet of ships, the new Navy of the Technocracy, had advanced to the Spires system on their bloody road to Aubaine. Along with their 'allies' from Solee, they constituted a nearly unstoppable force. At first, Zorn had praised the ideas of the Revolution, even going so far as to recount how August was set free and the need for change that must, at times, be forced. It was only when she began recount the beginning of their campaign that her timbre changed. The telling of Mestrovic's sudden descent into megalomania seemed particularly difficult for the space pirate, who, on some level, still regarded the old man as a friend and not a tyrant. When she finally finished, Liu closed her eyes and sat still as though in meditation.

"So, it was all a lie," she said at last. "It was a calculated move designed to manipulate me, but to what end?"

"I think I can answer that," Delpero answered. "As Technarch An-Wing's will states, he wishes you to marry Mestrovic to bind your two houses together. Perhaps by doing that, Mestrovic seeks to add legitimacy to an action that is wholly illegal, even according to the laws of his own world. From what we gather, the Majority of the people on Oriflamme have been told the same story as you about the current state of events. That keeps people in place, while stoking the fires of anti-Aubani sentiment. I'm inclined to believe that's just a delaying tactic. If he can keep a state of emergency until Aubaine falls, he can justify the counterattack, and subsequent Aubani defeat, as though he were acting in defense of his planet – even when the truth is that is just a smokescreen. If he can reorganize the government and the Reformation Coalition to the people's satisfaction, then he'll be virtually unopposed as a dictator."

"Surely, there will be some with a differing account of events from the official party line, what of those?"

"Ultimately, it won't matter, my Lady," Delpero said gravely, "He will be in a position to bully or silence any dissenting opinions, but even if contradictory accounts leak in the public sector, he will have given the people of Oriflamme something they've wanted since the beginning – complete mastery over Reformation Coalition space."

"And history is often shaped from victor's point of view." She said.

"Oftentimes, yes, my Lady."

"I had no idea you were such a Machiavellian, Mr. Delpero."

"I wonder about that myself sometimes, my Lady," he replied.

Liu uncrossed her arms, folding her hands in her lap.

"Do you suppose that my uncle has been similarly silenced, then?"

"There's no way to know," Zorn said. "Given how prone he has been lately to pass sentence on people..." her voice trailed off leadingly.

"I'll take that as a yes, until I know otherwise."

"I'm sorry, Liu," Zorn said reaching out and taking the young Technarch's hand warmly. "I had no idea what he was doing to you down here. I'm sorry."

Liu squeezed Zorn's hand lightly, "I can find no fault with your conduct, my friend. Under the worst of circumstances, I always believed that you act in good conscience, even when others in our company did not share my opinion."

"That is the other thing, Liu," Zorn said, picking up on her reference. "The *Hornet* is here. She's been captured and her crew has been imprisoned."

"You mean Captain D'Esprit is *here*?"

"Yes, Liu, she's here," Zorn placed the same handheld device on the table where Liu could see the screen. A small image of *Hornet's* Captain, bruised and bound to a chair filled it. An unseen male voice asked her questions in a polite voice, but Coeur ignored them. "And we just found out that she is scheduled to be executed, along with all her shipmates."

Silence reigned. Liu sat back in her chair and crossed her legs, her face looking elsewhere. Zorn could see the wheels turning in her head. Despite her overbearing demeanor, Liu was nobody's fool. If there were any lingering vestiges of the brash young woman she'd met at Mexit, all traces of her had been obliterated.

No, this was a woman that was very much in control of herself at that moment. Zorn had seen that look among seasoned troops as they stayed calm while under enemy fire.

"We cannot let that stand," she said after a moment. "Captain D'Esprit and I may have had our differences, but she was a faithful ally to Bela and I. We can't sit idly by and watch the Lord of Lies hand down judgment from on high."

"You're right, Liu," Zorn said. "We can't."

"What must I do?"

"Understand me, Liu, if you side with us and we are discovered," Zorn shrugged. "We really don't know what he will do, but whatever it is..."

Liu silenced her gently with an upraised hand.

"He may have already killed or injured members of my family," she said, visions of Bela and uncle passing before her. "I am resolved to whatever course of action is needed. So, I ask again, what must I do?"

"Okay then," Zorn said. "Mestrovic is becoming more and more paranoid. He has all but banished us from his company, so our access to him is limited. What we need is someone he believes is unspoiled by these events to get close to him."

"To what end?"

"He must be removed. Permanently." Zorn said with a space-cold voice. "Once he is gone, someone will need to be able step into his place. That someone needs to be you."

"So," Liu looked at the other woman levelly, "You want me to distract him while you and the others escape, is that it?"

Delpero showed traces of embarrassment as Liu leapt ahead to where the conversation was leading. Zorn, however, did not flinch.

"Yes, that is what I'm asking." She said. "By the time all is said and done, neither of us," she motioned back forth between herself and Delpero, "will be able to remain. Too many have reason to believe that we would be involved. You, however, are a different story entirely."

"It wasn't an accusation, Zorn," Liu said. "It was merely a statement of position. You are the last person I would ever accuse of cowardice in matters such as this."

"Don't make a sinner a saint, Liu."

"Far from it," the Technarch said. "I had already resigned myself to putting things to right here."

Delpero shifted in his chair uncomfortably. "Are you sure this is the right way to go about this?" He asked both of the women. "Wouldn't it be better to try get everyone off the she ship that we can?"

Liu focused on him directly. "I cannot leave, Mr. Delpero, even if I wanted to, which I don't. If his crimes are indeed as diabolical as you say, then I am duty bound by ancient oath to cull the traitor from our ranks. No other course is available to me according to the law the Pretender wishes to usurp."

"From time to time the tree of liberty must be watered with the blood of patriots," Zorn said, pausing to look at Delpero, "and tyrants." Liu nodded gravely at her words.

"I believe you left that last part out when I heard you say that before," Delpero replied. "I suppose it makes more sense coming at me now rather than then in any case. Like so many things."

"Mind like a steel trap," Zorn said as Delpero gave a grim grin.

Liu stood from her perch and rose up to her full, impressive height. "If you two will excuse me, there are some preparations my chambermaid and I need to make."

Both of her guests looked up at her in silent question.

"Well, isn't it obvious?" she said. "There's only one way to get that close to a paranoid dictator. Best of all, Mestrovic was the one that suggested it," she said with a nod towards the holocrystal. "However, I flatly refuse to marry a bloody-minded tyrant, as a prelude to a counterrevolution, unless I can look heart-breakingly fabulous in the process."

* * *

The Vegan Revolution, as Delpero had coined it, had begun. It had been slowly gaining momentum since the night of Mestrovic's uncomfortable dinner party. It wasn't ready to spring just yet. No, there were a few key details and conspirators that had yet to join the others on the stage. Liu had been one of the first recruits to Zorn's silent crusade. That she was willing to employ that oldest tool of statecraft to move into position just proved to Zorn how strong an ally she had made. It galled the former space pirate to have to intentionally leave someone behind while she shepherded the others, including herself, to a safe haven. If it was going to work, someone had be there to pick up the pieces.

And yet, Zorn's thoughts strayed from the Junior Technarch to the last recruit she had to muster. It was fitting, she thought, that this meeting was to take place in a dimly-lit, secluded location – the womb in which many revolutions had developed.

The only real light was the muted green glow of the sleek gauss pistol she held. Checking the magazine, the numbers told her that all rounds were present and accounted for. She flipped the safety to the off position and placed the weapon across her lap, cupping her hand over the readout to douse the light.

She didn't have to wait long.

The doors to the quarters opened a few moments later, outlining the figure of a woman against the darkness. Zorn was silent as the grave, but the silhouette froze there and cocked her head to the side as if somehow alert to the danger. A hand began to reach towards her belt.

"I wouldn't," Zorn said sharply. "Close the door and sit down."

The hand came away from the belt and moved to the door panel. The faint light from the corridor was snuffed out. That's when Zorn reached over and flipped on the table lamp.

Facing across from her was the young woman called Eos. For having a gauss pistol pointed at her at close range, she was surprisingly calm.

"Have a seat," Zorn invited and the other woman complied, sliding smoothly into a chair. "Now, I want you to understand something, 'Lady Eos', you are going to want to deal straight with me. Your responses will determine whether you leave this room alive or not, do you understand?"

"Yes."

"Good," Zorn said. "Now let's get down to brass tacks, shall we? You have been pretending to be something you are not. You managed to fool the old man, and perhaps even the friends you betrayed, but not me. You see, I know for a fact that you are not the Backwards Mask."

Eos tried to play it off that her cover had just been blown, but a slight widening of her eyes told the tale. "How did you know?"

"Simple," Zorn gave a predatory smile. "I am the Backwards Mask. I have been since the previous bearer of that title died aboard *Taylor the Bruce*, giving it to me, literally, with his last breath."

"Oh my," the woman said with surprise. "Now that does make things awkward, doesn't it?"

The predatory smile widened in reply. "I even chose the name 'Eos' as an operational name after that. I thought it fitting considering the Dawn League and all. Dawn, goddess of dawn, that kind of thing, you know. I suppose I've always been a sentimentalist at heart."

"Then I suppose the inevitable question is – what happens now?"

"You tell me, you're the one with at least some measure of mind reading ability. That's the only way you could've picked the details out of Mestrovic's brain about our history together. It's also the way that you knew I was in here, when I had gone to great lengths to make sure you wouldn't."

Raven threw up her hands. "Well, so much for that! That particular gift is not really a boon at present, is it?"

"I've been told I'm hard to read by others that have tried that same trick."

"Indeed, you are. So, going back to the question of my survival, what are you going to do with this newfound knowledge?"

"I'm going to tell you a story, as it was told to me by my predecessor, and then we will move on to other important matters."

"Will this story be told at gunpoint?" Raven said eyeing the barrel of the weapon trained on her.

"Ye. I think that will make sure that I have your undivided attention."

"I'm all ears, then." Raven said.

"You might think of the Backwards Mask as a kind of office, or appointed position. Back in the day, and I'm talking before the Third Imperium here, this area of space was a pirate haven. It wasn't too terribly far away from the rich prizes of the Solomani Rim, at least as they measured things in those days. Can you imagine that many raiders, cutthroats and buccaneers within easy striking distances of Terra's old trade lanes? Can you imagine that many characters of such dangerous and bloody temperament occupying a few subsectors in close proximity, all heavily laden with ill-gotten booty?"

"Must've been right up your alley," Raven said.

"Not really. With that many foul characters in one area, the violence reached indescribable levels as they fell upon each other. The local populations were ravished, and I used that term deliberately, on a continual basis. Slavery abounded, blood flowed in the streets. That is, until one of the more gentlemanly pirates stepped forward to stem the tide. Unfortunately, his name has been sadly lost to us over time, but his story endures. Appalled at what he saw, he set about trying to work behind the scenes to avert the bloodshed, even going so far as to hunt down the worst of the offenders and ensure that they would not longer be threat, ever again."

"And who says there is no honor among thieves?"

"Something like that, I suppose. While his efforts were effective, he knew that too much direct action against these "pirate families" would only make sure that he himself was hunted down. He had to find a way to hide his identity while creating a threat in the minds of his enemies. That would be the only way to deter the abuses he saw on a large scale. In a stroke of brilliance, he managed to do both at the same time – he created a character that was equal parts Robin Hood, The Scarlet Pimpernel, Zorro, The Highwayman, Errol Flynn and d'Artagnan – a persona he chose to simply call The Mask."

"And did it work?"

"It did, perhaps more so than what he probably thought. Once the common folk bought off on the 'Hero of the People' bit, then word spread like wildfire. Anytime there was a mishap, or one of the raiders came to a bad end, it became attributed to The Mask. Chances are there were several folks that called themselves The Mask at anyone time, as I said he did such a good job of burying his identity that we're not sure who he really was, or even if he was a 'he' at all. Years passed and times changed, but legends of the Mask still remained, even after the original had surely died of old age. In time, even those stories faded out as The Long Night came and the Third Imperium expanded into the area to banish the dark age."

"But the Mask still remained, being handed down from generation to generation, right?" Raven said.

"Yes, The Mask endured, but the purpose of its successors changed over time. Instead of just trying to curb pirates, it became a matter of making sure that the Old Expanses sector as a whole was safe from outside threats, wherever those threats may come from. It was at this time

that the Mask became known as the Backwards Mask, since the current incarnation started to work behind the scenes instead of relying on folk tales and reputation to get the job done. The intent was to 'swim amongst the people', many of whom would never fathom the great extents that the Mask had extended on their behalf. Obviously Mestrovic didn't know that I wasn't The Mask, since I have worked furiously to differentiate the personalities of Vega Zorn and the Backwards Mask in his mind."

"I must applaud your tradecraft," Raven said. "You kept your identity a secret by hiding in plain sight, as one of his other agents. Brilliant, truly brilliant."

"Yeah well, from there, the line of Masks has continued on, ending up with me holding the position. Perhaps it's my hubris acting up, but I believe that one of the reasons this area of space has survived the collapse of the Third Imperium when many others have been smashed flat is because of generations upon generations of Masks working toward its future."

"So, at what point did pre-meditated genocide, tyranny and subversion make its way into the duties of the Mask?" Raven asked sweetly.

Zorn threw her a tart look. "This from the *Hornet's* traitor."

"Touché."

"If you are referring to the Hivers I helped destroy, then I think I covered that pretty thoroughly under 'external threats'. Ultimately, Hivers and their designs are probably the biggest threat to humanity, and I'm not the only one that thinks that."

"Well then, I'm glad that you are around to look after our interests," Raven said, deadpan. "A fleet of relic warships commanded by an insane despot seems much more palatable than, say, a bunch of technically-minded aliens that have shared their technology with us willingly, and are largely responsible for the stability of the Reformation Coalition."

"But at what cost?" Zorn countered. "In many ways we have become dependant on them and the 'stability' they bring. If that continues, we will become slaves in all but name. We will be the best kind of slave to the Hivers, the ones that don't even know they've been enslaved."

Raven, ignoring the weapon still steadily leveled at her, continued on. "I find your actions with the Hivers contemptible enough, but that situation came to resolution, though at great cost. Not content with that, you have actively encouraged a revolution against the RC that will install a supreme dictator in the highest executive position, one that I can assure you is quite mad. You have opened the people of my nation up to the same abuses that you say The Mask was created to counter. You haven't just been complicit in these affairs, you've been *instrumental* in bringing this situation to head. So, with that much blood, and potential blood, on your hands, what do you have to say for yourself, Mask?" There the no mistaking the sneer placed on that last word.

"Mestrovic was a good man, once." Zorn fired back. "If he wasn't, I would never have helped as much as I did. Something in him changed, and I never noticed." She looked on, her eyes haunted.

"Heavy is the head that wears the crown."

"Yeah, that's what they say." Zorn said. "You'll be happy to know that I've ficked things up so much that I intend to pass the mantle of the Mask to someone else, assuming any of us get out of here alive."

"Then that leads us to our immediate concern, getting out of here. Preferably alive." Raven said.

"I'm working on a plan. Certain elements of it are already in motion."

"Well, it's true," the young man said. "Great minds think alike. I've been working on an escape plan that is ready to go at a practically moment's notice. Now I wish you had come to me sooner, perhaps we could've collaborated more closely."

"I doubt we could've escaped detection long enough to do that, do you?"

"Perhaps not."

"Then I suggest we combine our operations as quickly, and quietly, as we can. Agreed?"

Raven nodded towards the gauss pistol.

"Well, now that we are officially in cahoots, can we dispense with the gunplay? Gunpoint is hardly a friendly position to conduct business."

"I suppose it is," Zorn said flipping the safety on and holstering the weapon. "Besides, I've heard all I need to hear from you in any case."

"Much better," Raven said with an unspoken *whew*, smoothing out the folds on her suit. "Shall we see what our devious minds have managed to cook up?"

* * *

It started with a muted chime, innocuous and commonplace as any day spent in the tedium of the brig. This particular chime was meant to alert the officer on deck that new orders had been posted to their command queue.

The officer in question had been perusing a magazine with his boots up on the console. The bored mind behind those eyes was that of a warden whose charges occupied very little of his attention. The sheep had been pacified, which made his job one of the least interesting next to guard duty, especially during the quiet watches of the graveyard shift. And really, that's what he was when it came down to it, a glorified baby-sitter.

With a trace of annoyance, he tore himself away from the magazine and righted himself in his chair to look at the order that had just come through.

He blinked three or four times, re-reading the terse, yet carefully-worded text that came from, by the looks of the authentication code, the highest levels of command. It might as well have been handed down by God, which considering the serious nature of what it was meant to convey, was perfectly in character.

Well, it looks someone upstairs has grown a pair at last, he thought. Maybe today won't be so ho-hum after all.

"Corporal," he said to the man in the office adjacent to his, "come take a look at this."

The burly Oriflammen Marine looked over his shoulder and made a grimace that could only be charitably described as a smile. "About time."

"Well, let's not keep them waiting," the officer said. "Call down to Dr. Symon and tell him to wake his guests, then detail three men to dump the finhead. We'll need to swing by the Armory to get the necessary tools of the trade. That should keep them out of sight until we can get them to the airlocks."

"You got it, boss," the man, a hard-core revolutionary, said just a little too gleefully.

The officer sent him on his way with a wave of his hand. It was the least he could do to rouse the senior enemy officer himself, brother and sister officers in the service and all that stuff, blah, blah, blah. Really, he wanted to see the look on her face. She would know her time had come, and that look would be priceless.

With two other MP's in tow, he threw open the door to her cell and moved in quickly. The woman inside the dark room lay on her side on the cot, facing towards the door. As the harsh light spilled in, her eyes came open with the instant alertness to her surroundings usually found in commanding officers that were worth their salt. The two MP's seized her roughly, nearly dragging her out of her rack. Even surprised and somewhat bedraggled by her captivity, there was still an odd dignity and beauty to her.

He passed his gaze over her. *Such a waste.*

"Gather your gear, Captain, you're being transferred." It wasn't quite a lie. She was being transferred; he just didn't say it would be to the cold void of space after being cycled through an airlock. At least her crewmates would already be dead before space claimed her.

"Transferred to where?" she demanded as she put on her boots.

"I'm not at liberty to say." He said, noting her expression which was not nearly as satisfying as he had hoped.

Moments later, Coeur was fitted with manacles and unceremoniously hauled out into the corridor. She squinted a bit as the white light assaulted her eyes, yet as they adjusted, they were filled with the familiar faces of Snapshot, Gyro and Physic.

"Captain," Gyro said with obvious relief. "Glad to see you are okay."

"Likewise," Coeur replied before a small electric jolt from her restraints wracked her.

"Prisoners will not talk," the officer said. "Prisoners will obey." It was the mantra he, and others in charge, had stated since day one.

Hiding her hand movements under a feigned stretch, Coeur moved her fingers, signing in Anslan.

I'm okay, Gyro.

Gyro similarly hid her response with a cough.

Is this as bad as I think?

Just keep your eyes peeled. We may only get one shot at this. Sign off that you understand.

The four women each did so as surreptitiously as they could manage given their hand restraints.

Coeur glared at the officer that had come to execute them, which shot a disgustingly polite smile back her way. Whether he realized or not, he had just given her the army she needed. None of the four women might have the combat experience of the Marines, but each of them knew how to work in concert with the others, if by long experience with each than anything else. If Coeur was staring down a death sentence, she could do a lot worse than have her three sisters at her side.

Keep on grinning, she thought. If you think I'm going go to my grave quietly, then you've got another thing coming.

* * *

The combined flag bridge and CIC of the *Golden Flame*, had, in its time, seen many important people grace its upper walk. Back when she was known as ISS *Relentless*, there had been many high-ranking officers who had trod upon its revered decks. Captains, Commodores, Admirals and the occasional Imperial dignitary had stood there before her long sleep and recovery by the ISN. Once, Admiral Sir Thomas Mayfield had stood in the very spot where Mestrovic often entertained his guests while *Empress Porfira* and *Relentless* had berthed next to each other in a long-destroyed high port.

The old dreadnought had seen many battles in her lifetime, but the event of today was new to her. Not once in the entire time that she existed had a state wedding taken place in her CIC. While the Lord High Technarch had already seen fit to decorate the upper deck in a garish shade of gold, much to her Admiral's annoyance, now it was taken one step more with bunting, trim and practically every synthetic flower that could be mustered from the fleet or the planet below.

It was all a very hasty arrangement, and enacted at an unfortunately late hour, but it was still a sight to behold. The flag bridge had been converted into a gallery for hand-picked guests and only those stations absolutely essential were manned at all.

Conspicuously absent among the guests was Admiral Hayward, who had been ordered to keep vigil aboard *Phoenix* while the blessed event took place. Holo-recorders had been strategically placed around the compartment for posterity. From the richness of ritual and ceremony, it was obvious that what was happening here would replayed again and again. Like all holovids, it was being meticulously stage-managed from the sidelines to create just the proper effect.

Of all the ostentatious little fantasies that Mestrovic had decided to play out on her CIC, Monique Alcantara found that this one was not as bad. Those in charge of decorating the 'set' of this production had really come through. Even the flowers had been arranged into a pleasing pattern. Where Mestrovic would've found a suitable florist on such short notice was something of an enigma, but it didn't surprise her. The old man's ability to suit his own ego with little touches like that was legendary.

Originally, the whole business was going to happen in the cathedral-like dining hall that he maintained, which was were large scale events were normally suited to take place. At the last minute, the Technarch's paranoia, which Alcantara herself had been relentlessly stoking, got the better of him. He ordered the event moved to the much smaller CIC and the poor decorators had had to start over from scratch. Displeasing the old man had been a strong motivator, and those brave souls had brought her command center to new heights of inappropriateness.

But, if his new bride would keep him out of the Admiral's hair for a while the fleet was still assembling, it was a welcome break from the almost daily 'justification' sessions she had been

spending with him. Listening to someone prattle on about the righteousness of their own rhetoric wore thin even for a seasoned professional like Alcantara.

The guests were all assembled, the players were in place and the cameras were rolling. In the fashion of Oriflammens weddings, only the groom and his blushing bride stood at the forefront with no groomsmen, bridesmaids, or seconds of any kind. There was, however, normally a priest that made the invocation and blessed the union. In a flagrant departure from that tradition, but in keeping with the egocentricity of the man Alcantara had come to know, Mestrovic had opted to fulfill the role of the priest as well as the groom.

The lucky couple made an odd sight as the bride stood quite a bit taller than her soon-to-be husband. The camera angles had been chosen to conceal this, even though it was patently obvious to those that stood in attendance.

Mestrovic had picked quite the radiant creature with whom to enjoy the bonds of marital bliss. She was young, raven-haired and graceful like a panther. That face of hers would make for awe-inspiring close ups – a grand counterpoint to Mestrovic's striking grey eyes. It was strange to find such a beauty, coming from a planet like Oriflamme, which was known for its rough mode of living. However, he had done it, Mestrovic had found a good match with impeccable family credentials.

It was all so storybook in its grandeur that it gave Alcantara the slightest twinge. If she did her job as it was required, the marriage was going to be short-lived.

The Admiral threw a glance to her silver chronometer.

It wouldn't be long now.

* * *

The grim parade of *Hornet's* crew under guard processed through the empty metal corridor single-file. In the lead, Coeur's eyes absorbed everything as they moved, though she made a conscious effort to make her strides uniform, her movements regular. Let them get used to the pace and rhythm, let them build it up in their mind, and when it was time to strike it might give her the slightest edge of surprise.

It was a boon that they seemed to be alone down here, and even that spoke volumes to Coeur's mind. Unless she missed her guess, this ship was a *Resolute*-class Imperial dreadnought, perhaps even one of the ones she'd visited during her *de facto* service in the Imperial Navy during the Solomani uprising. If that were the case, then her regular crew compliment would sit somewhere around 850 to 1,000, plus any Marines they carried. Here instincts told her that they were probably running with just over a skeleton crew, just enough to make her combat ready with a healthy dose of slaved automation to compensate. If that were the case, there would potentially be a lot of empty space aboard a ship of this size.

The isolation would be advantageous if they could get into a small enough area. From her peripheral vision she examined the officer that walked next to her. At the moment, he seemed intent on a hand-held display that was lit up with the deck plans of the ship, allowing him to navigate to wherever he was taking them.

Probably not used to tromping around down here, so he needs a map. That may be another advantage.

"Halt," the officer said, turning to the hulking Marine next to him. "Go and collect the equipment, Corporal." As the officer brought the display down to his side, Coeur's hawk eyes caught sight of their position. According to the map, they were right around the corner from the Armory.

Yes, she's a Resolute all right. I recognize the mustering room for Marine battle dress right next to it. He's hiding where we are so his prisoners don't realize he's getting the guns with which to execute them.

The Corporal nodded and disappeared around the corner with long, powerful strides. From the distance, the Armory doors hissed open and closed back. The rest of the group milled about.

They are down one. It's now or never.

She gave the signal – a slight toss of her hair.

It was then that something odd happened. The Marine next to Physic stiffened and let out a choking breath. His hand went to something sharp and clear that now protruded from his neck. Nerveless, he tried to claw it out, but consciousness was already melting away from him like shadows at noon. A heartbeat later another Marine in the rear did the same.

There was a moment of confusion that Coeur fully embraced. With all her strength, she braced her left elbow and rammed it upward into the officer's jaw. He hadn't seen it coming and it caught him squarely at the point of the chin. His head snapped back with force enough he sprawled to the deck. Her restraints, however, were keyed to sudden movements. The resulting electric shock nearly floored her.

Behind her, Snapshot turned and delivered a kick right to the inside of her Marine's knee just as Gyro lunged bodily forward, taking full advantage of the instability. With her low-center of gravity and strong limbs, Gyro managed to tackle the surprised Marine with the skill of a gravball player. Following through, Gyro threw herself across the Marine's body, pinning her down as the electric discharge that resulted grounded through her opponent.

Physic had dodged away from her flailing guard and stepped next to the heap that Gyro just had formed, kicking the Marine's weapon away, sliding it across the deck.

The final MP standing, an extremely young man, had hesitated as the scene had played out in front of him, not quite sure what to do. The paltry amount of training he had received hadn't prepared him for what to do in ambush. Those few seconds of confusion had short-circuited his brain. He held his weapon in palsied hands.

Then he felt something round and ice cold touch the skin on the back of his neck. Somehow he knew it was a weapon.

"Drop it," a stern female voice came from behind. He did as instructed. Somehow the waves of patriotic rhetoric that had convinced him to quit the family farm and join up for the Glorious Endeavor seemed light-years away. Perhaps he should've listened to this mother after all.

"Raise your hands and step over against the wall." Again, he did as instructed. As he turned, he found a tall, red-headed woman in roguish attire. On any other day he might've stopped to consider her obvious athleticism, or her perfectly-arched eyebrows that stood above the flashing eyes of tiger. But, today, he was fixated on the weapon that now floated less about a half-meter away from his face.

"New recruit?" she asked and he nodded quickly with a cottonmouth that made it impossible to speak.

"Thought so," the woman said. "Are you gonna give me any trouble?" Again he shook his head. "Good. Keep it that way." Those tiger eyes flicked from him to the others in hallway that were similarly recovering.

"We're clear." She said a bit louder. Another woman, this one with snow-white hair emerged from around the corner with a gun in hand.

Across from them, Coeur's head was in the process of clearing when her eyes locked on Raven. They narrowed dangerously as she stood. Here was the traitor. She could feel herself tense, coiling to strike.

Raven felt the anger boiling off of her Captain and raised her hands.

"Relax, Coeur," she said soothingly. "It's me, Raven."

"You betrayed us," she said, groggy from the shock, and shooting daggers from her eyes.

"No Coeur," Zorn said from behind her. "From the sounds of it she saved you, and your entire crew."

Coeur turned and her viper gaze fell on the space pirate. Somewhere in those depths burned the explosive deaths of Eight Ball and his wingmen, deaths that Zorn indirectly caused.

Raven produced a keycard for the shackles from her belt. Approaching her Captain as though she were a wild animal, Raven passed the card over the restraints. They bleeped twice and clicked open.

Coeur massaged her wrists as she shook off the last effects of her jolt. Raven passed the card over the other captives present and helped them to her feet.

"We've got to hurry," Raven said. "Those darts will wear off in a couple of hours. Help me drag them into the Armory."

Coeur nodded, but it was clear that there were venomous words she was leaving unsaid, to both Raven and Zorn. Perhaps there would be time for them later. In any case, she swallowed them, and it was a bitter pill to take. Zorn turned back to her conscious captive, who was literally shivering with fear.

"I'm going to have to tranq you now. No hard feelings, that's just the way it's gotta be," as if sensing the man's near panic, she added, "Don't worry, we're just going to tie you up. We're not going to toss you out the airlock." With those words, she fired two darts into his thigh. Zorn caught him as he fell and hoisted him into the Armory.

Coeur likewise drug the officer she had struck around the corner by his wrists. As she crossed into the threshold, Raven stood there with a roll of sealant tape, binding the limp, unconscious forms together in a recessed corner. Around her were rows and rows of rifles, small arms ammunition and host of other modern *matériel de guerre*. The most prominent feature of the dark room, however, was the row of relic Imperial battle dress on either side. Each of the silver forms stood behind backlit transparencies, lining the long room like suits of armor standing guard in an ancient castle. The sleek contours and angles spoke volumes about the power they conferred to their wielder. Coeur spared them a glance before she returned to captors turned captives.

"We should take their uniforms," she said as Raven went about her work with methodical precision.

"No need," the white-haired woman said. "In the bay to your left – the one second from the bottom should be your size. I took the liberty of making you a Captain." There was a faint bit of humor there that died stillborn against Coeur's hard state.

"You think of everything, don't you?" There was no mistaking her verbal challenge. Raven saw it for what it was and side-stepped the confrontation she sought. Her peripheral vision told her that Gyro and Snapshot were similarly glaring at her with undisguised hostility. Only Physic, whose attention was fixed on Vega Zorn, was not openly belligerent. All told, the feelings in the room were ugly and raw.

"I did what I had to do, to save each of your lives and keep the mission going." She looked around, looking at each of them in turn. "If you want to hate me, fine, go ahead. I'll take it as a kindness that you are still alive enough to nurture that hate. I got a good look at what they are planning, inside and out, and what they are willing to do to achieve it. Right now, as odd as it may seem, we are the only hope the Reformation Coalition has. Zorn and I have it all worked out. If we stick to the plan, we're as good as gone."

"Well, I'm glad you're around to look after us," Gyro said acidly. "I don't know about the rest of you, but they were delighted that I was Aubani. I became something of their favorite. It's going to take surgery, and therapy, to erase all those scars."

For the first time since anyone had known her, Johanna Solomon had a distinctly dangerous timbre to her voice, replacing the solid professionalism that was her trademark.

"Was that part of the mission?" she said, her hand straying towards one of the weapons on the rack.

"I'm sorry, Gyro," Raven said softly. "I didn't know."

"It wouldn't have mattered." Gyro replied. "You were too busy playing Trojan Horse so you could come to our rescue. Save the day, just in the nick of time, and all that."

"Stow it, all of you," Zorn said in her own Captain's voice. Gyro's hand retreated from the matte black rifle on the stand. Even Coeur stood a little straighter. "She did what she thought she needed to because the situation is bigger than any of us. Much bigger, trust me. So pull it together for Gaia's sake and let's get down to business."

Coeur took in a cleansing breath, the ragged wild of her character evaporating. Once again, the commander of the *Hornet* stood among them.

"Okay, Raven, it's your show. What have you got?"

Raven gave her a silent thank you, spoken only with her eyes. "I sent orders that the Marines be revived and transported down here along with Crowbar. They may be in bad shape when they get here, but I've stowed some viverant that should perk them right up."

"Crowbar should be able to walk," Physic chimed in. "He'll be weak, but he should be mobile, at least."

A stab of pain punctured Raven's chest. The reason Crowbar would be weak was because of the bullet she had put there as part of her grand ruse.

"I've got weapons and uniforms for everyone over there, as well as hand-held map displays. I need you to hold here until the Marine's arrive. When the MP's get here, attempt to assume custody of the prisoners yourselves. I've left orders that that they are to hand them off to you. They may not go for it, in which case, dart them. Do whatever the situation calls for, just do it quietly. Once the Marines are free and properly dressed for the occasion," she nodded towards the battle dress, "make your way to the landing bay. Orders should be waiting for you to assume command of both *Hornet* and *Lord Ryan*, but again force might be the only way. Both ships are being fueled right about now, so we'll be able leave as soon as we've all arrived."

"It sounds like you're not going with us," Snapshot said.

"I'm not, and neither is Red Sun. We've got a side trip we've got to make before we leave."

"I have a feeling I know what that is." Coeur said. "You at least saved me a spot at the party."

Raven nodded. "I wouldn't have it any other way. Now, you've got about twenty-some-odd minutes before everyone else gets here, so let's get to it." With a smooth motion, she stripped off her flight jacket and boots and began re-imaging herself as an Oriflammen Commander.

Everyone else busied themselves doing the same. Coeur gave a mental groan as she realized the disguise Raven had chosen for her. Folded in a neat little pile was the uniform of a Captain of the ISN, a virtual replica of the one Gaylon Fox had worn when had paid her a visit.

In less than five minutes, they were all neat and tidy in enemy colors. Zorn, the only one who hadn't made a transformation, had seen to equipping them with weapons. Coeur took Zorn's dart gun as well as a body pistol, both were concealable and found homes tucked into her belt and up her sleeve. The others were quickly issued advanced combat rifles and a goodly supply of magazines. Gyro and Snapshot glowed as they tested the weight and feel of their weapons. Only Physic raised a doubtful eyebrow as she took charge of hers.

"Gyro," Coeur said to her XO, "You're in command. Hold the line until we get back."

"Yes, sir." She said. "We'll keep the lights burning for you."

"I know you will."

Raven checked her weapons, now identical to Coeur's, and tucked them away. The handheld came up in her hand and the lights blinked a friendly blue.

"Okay, let's move like we've got a purpose."

The two women exited the Armory and made determined tracks away from their comrades toward their destination. There was one thing left that needed to be resolved - one thing that they could not leave without. In the end, it was such a small thing, though one worth even the direst of risk. It was tiny bit of metal and crystal that just happened to hold the key to the future.

The Alpha Bank.

* * *

Doctor Silas Symon eyed the orders on the computer screen before him with a shrewd eye. Everything was in order, down to the last dotted 'I' and crossed 'T', but somehow there was a phantom sliver of doubt that remained. What it was he couldn't say, but there was definitely *something*.

The bizarre thing was that he knew orders similar to this were going to come down the pipe eventually, but something about the timing and secrecy didn't sit right with him. Symon had been one of the key officers that Alcantara had brought along with her on this grand excursion, and his military career had started as a medical interrogator for the Navy. The security clearance he had earned from that time had led to a stint with the DNI where he had overseen the mandatory debriefing of dissidents and activists from Marado, Xyz and other trouble spots in the Solee Empire. Consequently, he could tell when a patient was lying to him, or attempting to evade the truth. It was that self-same ability to detect when things were not completely what they seemed that gnawed at him now.

At the same time, orders were orders. If Alcantara and Mestrovic had signed off on this quiet round of summary executions, then it wasn't his job to be obstructionist about it. He would need to follow the edicts that had been handed down to him from the powers that be to the best of his ability.

There was no reason, however, that he could not go above and beyond what his orders required. That thought rolled around in his thoughts like a loose marble for several moments until he forwarded the commands on to his staff with a priority action tag. It wouldn't take long to get the enemy Marines up and mobile as the orders required. That was another thing that didn't make immediate sense. If they wanted the prisoners quietly executed, why not do it in the Infirmary itself? A few specific injections, administered properly, and the rebels were a non-issue. Symon had never taken the Hippocratic Oath, and was therefore not bound to do no harm. In the service of his Queen, he had taken more lives on purpose than he had ever saved from injury, so why not now? Why not allow him to ply his trade when it was obvious that secrecy was required?

With a few keystrokes on his console he doubled the number of MP's assigned to the job, even going so far as to open up the small arms locker for their immediate use. That alone should more than suffice to the task that was at hand. If that were not enough, he would raise the Admiral directly on her personal communication channel that stood independent from the ship's internal comm system.

Moments later the orderlies began herding the patients in from the holding area in a rough, shambling column. Out of the eight subjects about to be discharged from his care, only the young engineer was fully conscious. Though extremely pale and moving with labored effort, the man was more alert to his surroundings than the near-zombies of his fellows. The orders had stated that Dr. Symon give each of the sedated subjects the antidote so that they be fully awake at the time of their execution. While that was all very theatrical, Dr. Symon had only given them enough of the counteragent to allow them to be on their feet, and barely even that. The MP's would carry the rest and given it to them only moments before the airlock cycled open. It was the best way to ensure that they were all of minimal risk until it was too late to matter.

There was no sense in taking chances. After all, an ounce of prevention was worth a pound of cure, wasn't that the old axiom?

Once the impromptu party was organized, equipped and ready move, Dr. Symon sent them on their way. Retreating back to his office, he began rummaging around his desk drawer for the short-wave transmitter that Alcantara had given him.

He had a call to make.

* * *

Lirien Rosebloom, known to his companions as Raptor, made his way unsteadily along with his companions. It was an odd twist of sensations that played out within him. The drugs in his system were not reacting to his alien physiology the same way as the humans around him. His vision was blurred, his limbs felt leaden and almost impossibly heavy, his head felt as though it were filled with sand that shook with every shambling step.

The oddest effect was that his mind, while slowed, was not nearly so impaired as his captors believed. His sense of smell was as sharp as ever, enough to know that he smelled fear from his captors, and anticipation from the other two Ithklur.

Most importantly, the heat-sensing organ that most humans mistook for a nose was still as sensitive to the fluctuations of temperature around. This adjunct to his vision made a fair compensation to what the drugs had diminished. He was still keen enough to know that his combat effectiveness was a fraction of the norm. The enemy, however, had made a fatal mistake.

The small human in charge had made a point of stowing the antidote in a belt pouch in full view of the Ithklur. Perhaps the man had thought that he was incapacitated enough not to notice, but unfortunately for him, he was wrong. What's more, he could sense from Hunter and Striker that they were in a similar state of being.

Raptor began the mental exercises to center himself. The right breathing, the right state of mind, slowly but surely he was preparing. Long years of training had drilled into him at such a base level, that he knew he could give himself over fully to his combat instincts. The muscle

memory that he had so laboriously built up over time would allow his body to continue the fight even if his mind was not able to follow.

All he would need was the proper opportunity. Until then, he would retreat into himself and wait.

Raptor was aware that sometime later the corridor began to widen considerably, a sign that they were nearing the vicinity of the bays that serviced small craft. That meant that somewhere nearby there was a way off this ship, possibly even a way out of this system. If the universe truly smiled upon him, there might even be a way to exact a blood vengeance upon the scum that had forced a Hiver to commit suicide rather than allow itself to be taken by the enemy. Through the chemical-induced haze, a raging fire burned in the depths of his soul – there would be a reckoning of force that would make the massacre of Lamda-3 look tame by comparison. Had any of his captors possessed an inkling of the murderous intent he harbored towards them, they would've killed him while he slept, no questions asked.

The moment came without warning. The group came to a halt as they rounded a corner into another compartment. It was enough of a pause to give Raptor time enough to muscle freeze and pounce such as Drop Kick had described while sparring.

It took every ounce of self-control not to blindly rip into them. Instead, the huge Ithklur lurched once and then fell bodily onto the man that carried the serum. The man yelped as they both tumbled to the deck with a terrific clatter. At first there was surprise as Raptor feigned unconsciousness and let his dead weight pin the man down. Surprise moved quickly to levity as the man's compatriots laughed at the plight of their shipmate.

"Get this thing off of me!" the man yelled to the uncaring crowd. "I told you we shouldn't have doped them up so much! Now help me up!" More laughter.

Raptor had taken care to fall with his hands under him, near the pouch, which was now seeking a target. That hand closed around the old-fashioned needle syringe and immediately thrust it into the flesh of his other hand, depressing the stopper. His mind cleared as the drug dispelled the mental fog away.

They were still laughing when he rolled off the man, his muscular tail curling around the ankle of the nearest guard with the speed of a cobra. Twisting his body, Raptor pulled the unbalanced man towards him, and, using his body as the fulcrum, planted both of his clawed feet into the man's chest as he fell towards the prone Ithklur. Like a catapult, he launched the unfortunate fellow into the air towards his friends that then themselves fell into an odd heap of flailing limbs and sputtering curses.

Like many of the prisoners, he had been fitted with a set of shocking manacles, but the charge dissipated through his mass, and if anything help him shake off the remaining cobwebs in his head.

His gambit had been a distraction, but it had bought him enough time to roll to his feet and smash the nearest foe into the bulkhead with his shoulder. He heard bones crack. Near him, Striker and Hunter made a dive for the serum on the carrier's belt. Like two whirling dervishes they were a blur of green skin and tails, reaping men off their feet.

Raptor covered his brothers by literally leaping into the fray with a near feline grace. Landing near the middle of the remaining threats, the MP's suddenly found a demon set loose among them. His wrists were bound together, but now they found that they had inadvertently given him a weapon, which he now used to lethal effect.

Shots discharged raggedly from service rifles that were never allowed to be brought to bear. The Ithklur seemed to be nearly precognizant – each blow a preemptive block, each block leading seamlessly to the next devastated strike. Armed men fell to the onslaught as they faced the culmination of millions of years of combat instincts at the effortless command of a quicksilver-fluid mind.

Things grew infinitely worse as the other two Ithklur, now freed from their mental restraints, joined the battle. Mercifully, the violence that followed was short as it was final. Shackles were removed, weapons were harvested and serums were administered to the humans.

Drop Kick had only the most distant, dream-like idea of the loud noises that had been going around him. He remembered hitting the ground hard, but the details were beyond what his addled-mind could process. The sharp feeling in his neck was the cold water in the face, followed

by a lucidity of thought that came quickly into focus. His hands were free. His captors were dead at his feet.

"SitRep," he croaked, looking at the grisly scene.

Raptor stepped forward and handed him a rifle. He accepted the welcome and familiar shape as though welcoming an old friend.

"We are free, sir." He said. "None remain alive."

"Nothing if not consistent," Drop Kick muttered, feeling his voice coming back to him bit by bit. "Everyone okay?"

Mercy, Whiz Bang and Bonzo nodded. Striker and Hunter, likewise saluted an affirmative. Crowbar, who had been fully alert during the massacre, nodded as uneasily as he held his stolen rifle. Only Raptor was marked, as bullets had grazed his side and left arm during his assault. If the Ithklur felt any pain, he showed no outward sign of it.

"Staunch that flow, Marine," Drop Kick said and Raptor nodded and began affixing a makeshift bandage.

"Sarge, over here," Bonzo beckoned, a hand-held ship's locator in his hand. Drop Kick looked down over his subordinates shoulder. "It looks as though we're right here."

The red diamond icon on the small screen dutifully noted their relative position. Drop Kick's eyes lit up like fireworks. They were near an area that was impossibly more welcome than the solid feel of the rifle stock in his arms.

"That's our next stop," he said and a host of wicked smiles beamed back at him. It was not every day that you got to raid an enemy Armory, after all.

"Okay people, let's move out," he said quickly. "Hunter, you're on point. Whiz Bang brings up the rear. We don't stop until we have the Armory, weapons free! Move, move, *move!*"

Those shots had surely been heard. In moments they might be discovered as the ship's alert status geared up to come and kill them. They might even succeed, but if Sergeant Major Vin Escher had anything to say about it, the enemy was going to pay dearly for the privilege.

* * *

He truly loves the sound of his own voice, doesn't he?

The wedding proceedings had been in full swing for a while now, and still Mestrovic had not stopped talking. He hadn't even really got around to the extensive wedding vows that he would have to recite. To Alcantara, it seemed perfectly in keeping with the man's demeanor to use his own wedding as a platform for the rhetoric he was peddling. Utterly typical.

Long-winded as it had been, the Admiral conceded that it was all couched in elegant prose, the likes of which only Mestrovic could deliver. The rise and fall of his voice was almost hypnotic, as was the zealous glow that beamed from his grey eyes like suns. It was truly his moment upon the stage, and he was playing it to the hilt.

She could completely see why his starry-eyed revolutionaries had fallen under his spell like they did. They would do anything for their glorious leader, and that was why he was the perfect center-point to this ISN operation. She gave nothing but full props to Kim and Halafast for finding and cultivating such a man. He was the perfect mix of arrogance and ignorance, and the power he had given himself had amplified both.

Her mini-comm buzzed in her pocket twice in quick bursts followed a tick later by a third. Her perfectly sculpted eyebrows went up.

Now what would the good Doctor have to say to me at a time like this?

The crowd of officers that gathered around the Technarchs on the upper balcony was almost entirely made up of Oriflammens. While the ISN officers, including herself, had been invited, they were kept on the fringes of the camera shots. When it came time to rewrite the first chapters of the Glorious Revolution's history, it would be much easier to edit them out completely, or marginalize their involvement.

So that meant that Alcantara stood at the back of the crowd, which made it all the more easy to fade back so she could answer the call. The ideal spot, she found, was the ornate couch where the handsome groom entertained his guests. Sitting down in Mestrovic's usual spot, she withdrew the comm and opened the private channel.

"Doctor?" she whispered. "I gather this is not just a friendly call?"

"No, Admiral, it is not." The Doctor's voice answered. "I wanted to confirm the execution order that was sent down this evening for the prisoners from *Hornet*."

"*What?*" she hissed into the comm. "Who gave such an order?"

"It's marked with the personal auth code of Lord Mestrovic," he said. "It's specifically detailed about how the execution is to be carried out, to a point that I believed a personal confirmation necessary."

"It's good that you did. Something about that doesn't feel...right."

"My belief as well, Admiral."

Alcantara had been looking at the coffee table as she spoke, but lifted her eyes towards the man at the center of the room's attention. The prisoners from *Hornet* were prime captures. They were well-known sympathizers and agents of the very regime he wished to unseat. It was certain he would execute them, but the secrecy was at odds with the theatrical side he was displaying now at his wedding.

There was far too much revolutionary capital that could be gained from disposing of them and their meddlesome ship with the pomp and circumstance of cameras rolling and patriotic music blaring. Surely he knew *that*. That he would quietly divest himself of such a golden opportunity didn't add up.

"Have you sent them on their way yet?"

"Yes," Symon conceded. "There was a strict timetable. I did, however, double the proscribed guard and keep the subjects under a measure of sedation, just to be sure."

"Good man," Alcantara said, shifting uncomfortably on the couch. *How does he sit here for hours on end, I wonder?* "Send the schedule to our Marines in the area. Have them delay the execution until I can confirm it with His Excellency," there was a sarcastic edge she added to his title, "he's a little busy right now getting married."

"Consider it done."

"Excellent," she said, still shifting on the stiff sofa cushions, "Good catch, Doctor, I owe you one."

"I stopped keeping score a long time ago, Admiral. Symon out."

It was possible he would be furious, frothing-mad furious, that she had interfered with his chosen plans. Those orders had born his authorization, and that would've been extremely difficult to duplicate. But, if he threw a temper tantrum, she could always come back at him with the public execution idea. He would like it, she was sure. If he hadn't thought of it, then she could suggest it herself and score a few more points with him in the long run.

Whatever kept him distracted was well worth encouraging. From the looks of his not-so-blushing bride, being a newlywed would prove to be an ample distraction.

Poor girl.

* * *

Two women hurried down the labyrinthine corridors with as much speed as they could muster without breaking into a full run. There were clusters of personnel on duty, and one thing they could not do was call attention to themselves.

I wish you wouldn't think so loud about me, Coeur, Raven said telepathically. I'm standing right here.

Sorry, Coeur fired back defiantly in her mind. I'm still working through the whole traitor business. You understand, of course.

I know it's about Newton, Coeur, I know. It couldn't be plainer if you were screaming at me with your physical voice.

That among other things, but yes that's the most obvious result of your treachery...you may have been pretending, but Newton is gone because of what you did. I hope you can live with that.

Me too, she answered shortly. Newt made a choice, and I couldn't help that. Some have to be sacrificed, however difficult that may be to swallow, because this situation is bigger than any one of us. I thought you of all people would've understood that.

It's not me you have to worry about understanding, Coeur said. If we get to Aubaine, I'm going to bring you up on charges. They should be the ones you have to worry about.

Do as you feel you must, but we can't go directly to Aubaine.

The hell we can't. With the fuel bladder, Hornet can Jump to...

You're apparently not understanding me. If this fleet makes it to Phoebus, then they are going to execute Delvin Garrett. I read it in Mestrovic's mind, Coeur. He's going to kill him.

Coeur ground her teeth. Garrett had been the one to point them in the direction of Spires in the first place. He had known, on some level, of what was coming, but couldn't speak of it directly. He was a good man. She knew that, and a good leader, but in the balance of worlds losing Phoebus was not nearly as devastating as losing Aubaine.

Then he may have to be sacrificed, too, Raven could feel Coeur's sadness at that admission. That it had occurred to her at all cast Raven's actions in a new light. She had been avoiding that realization, but here it was presented to her in crystal clear clarity. It stung, yes, it definitely stung.

I think you understand me better now, Raven said, switching mental gears. *We're not alone in this now. We've gotten used to thinking of ourselves as the only ship to carry the torch. That's not the case anymore.*

Meaning?

Meaning the Lord Ryan. She's not only going to mask Hornet's escape, but she can make the three parsec span in one week, not two. That will leave Hornet free to pull a planetary leader out of mortal danger, and maybe leave a little something behind to foul up Gold Fleet's arrival.

A full ten seconds passed between them and nothing was said.

I'm beginning to hate it when you're right, Coeur said bitterly.

So am I, Raven said, *I still don't know how I'm going to explain all this to Crowbar. I mean, I shot him...I doubt many of his girlfriends have ever done that to him.*

You might be surprised.

Oh, wait! We're almost there - just up ahead by those sentries.

The hallway terminated at a secured area hatchway, guarded by dour-looking Oriflammen Marines with rifles. That meant Raven would do the talking. Had they been Soleean, that role would've fallen to Coeur. Given the tense situation, Coeur was actually glad to relinquish that duty. That would leave her ready to take action if the wheels fell off.

"Private," Raven acknowledged the Marine in an imperious voice. "We have orders to take possession of the cargo. I trust that it is safely secure?"

"Yes, sir! Everything present and accounted for," the Marine said loudly. He, however, made no move to open the door.

"Well?" Raven let impatience color her voice. "What are we waiting for?"

"I am not allowed to open this door for anyone that is not on the security list, sir!"

"I see," she said. "Those orders are have been countermanded, *Private*. So, unless you'd like to see your career take a spectacular turn for the worst, then I suggest you open this door. Now."

"I'm sorry, sir. I cannot obey that order!"

"Then make your peace with God, *Private*, because you'll find my name on your list. Ergo, your butt is mine in a basket."

A trace of doubt played across his features, and he reached for a clipboard that hung on the wall beside him.

Do it Coeur, he's ignoring you. Now while he's distracted!

Coeur feigned a cough and let the miniaturized dart gun slide into her palm, smoothing firing at the second sentry. The dart caught him in the chest and, by the calm look on his face, he was collapsing before he knew what was happening.

The other Marine, wheeled around, sensing the danger. He never made it. A small fist caught him in the jaw, hitting with a force he wouldn't have attributed to the Commander's compact size. It hurt, but for less than a second. A stabbing pain blossomed in the side of his neck and then there was nothing.

"Works like a charm," Coeur said aloud, admiring the weapon. "No fuss, no muss."

Removing the Marine's bright yellow and red key card, she ran it through the lock, punching in the number combination that she had stolen from Mestrovic's mind. Thankfully, the old man had no idea what a treasure he kept behind this door. The only clues he had were from

the Lambda-3 personnel that had captured it, and that wasn't much. Erasmus had done a fine job of cloaking it on many levels, which is why they weren't didn't have to break into a higher security area, or even Mestrovic's personal quarters.

The security panel turned an angry red. She punched it in again, exactly as she remembered with the same negative result. Had the old man changed his code since yesterday?

"Come on, come on," she whispered. "Third time's the charm."

Taking her time, she entered the code character by character, and was rewarded with welcoming green light and friendly chirp of acceptance.

The armored doors slid open to a room lined with metal shelving. Stepping through, both women saw it at the same time. In the middle of one shelf was a silver cylinder about as long as Coeur's arm from hand to elbow. At either end were two faceted pieces of a purple crystal more vibrant than even amethyst. There was inner glow there that sparkled, playing off the gem-like surface in a hundred points of light. Towards the center of the rod was a Hiveroid keypad backlit in turquoise blue ciphers.

Coeur reached forward and ran a hand over the silken surface, as if to reassure herself that this wasn't all an elaborate dream. She nearly trembled as she pulled it from the rack, as though it were the most sacred of artifacts. It was her Holy Grail, the object that had driven her every action since she had began this quest that day on Aubaine. And now, it was here, nearly weightless in her hand.

The moment of awe held her, as it did Raven who also stood transfixed, but then her pragmatic self reasserted itself.

"We have what we came for," Coeur said stuffing the priceless object into a black velvet bag. "Now let's get the fikk out of here."

* * *

Outside the hangar bay's control booth, August took a moment to straighten the lines of his suit. He reached deep down into his personal past and withdrew the mask he had worn so well in brighter days. The worried lines disappeared, replaced by an unassailable confidence that the world was his do with as he like. It was only mask, one of many he had been forced to wear as of late, but one that, in its day, had moved nations and worlds.

He stepped into the tiny space and found two technicians at work, coordinating the actions of the bay like two orchestral conductors. Beyond the transparency in the silver compartment sat the distinctive form of RCS *Hornet*, its tuning fork prow trained directly at them. From this vantage point, the liquid lines of *Lord Ryan* could be seen peeking over the metal partition that separated the two ships.

A full two seconds passed before one of the techs looked in his direction and tapped his friend on the shoulder. Both swiveled around in their chairs and Delpero noted that both were Oriflammen. If they didn't recognize his face outright, the flame banner pin on his left lapel spoke for him. The men knew they were in the presence of a Technarch. They saluted but did not rise as their were on-duty.

"Status report," he said sharply, his eyes like stone.

"Both ships are fully fueled, sir," one said. "The observation window on *Hornet* has been repaired, per our orders, sir."

Well, it looks as though they've taken the false orders to heart. We'll see how long that lasts.

"Good. Now, give the order to clear the compartment."

They blinked in unison.

"Sir?"

"Order everyone in the compartment to vacate immediately," he glowered. "Don't make me repeat it again."

"Um...yes, sir." The man stammered. "I will need to report this, sir."

"Don't bother, His Excellency personally sent me down here to sort out your mess," he nodded vaguely towards the ships. "When he asks, shall I tell him that you were inattentive to your duty?"

"No, sir. Of course not, sir." The tech was clearly rattled. He moved towards the comm and spoke into the pick-up. "All personnel, clear the compartment immediately. I say again, all personnel, clear the compartment, this is not a drill."

I suppose I can thank Mestrovic for keeping my fall from grace private. I have to thrive on people not knowing what's going on behind closed doors.

"Excellent. The two of you are relieved from duty. Return to your racks at once and wait there for further instructions. Do not speak to anyone or the penalties will be quiet severe, am I understood?"

The two men bolted from their seats and saluted sharply.

"Yes, sir!"

They scrambled out of the booth double-time, leaving August alone, feeling as if he had kicked a dog. Those men didn't deserve the fright he had just given them. The stab of remorse prompted a peal of silent laughter.

You must be going soft, August, in the old days you would've never thought twice about coming down on a subordinate like the Hand of God. Who are you now, really?

Beneath the mask, he had to wonder. He was no longer the self-absorbed tycoon, nor was the revolutionary Technarch, but rather something else that was new. His eyes went to *Hornet's* immobile hull in front of him. That ship had always been the herald of great change in his life. Once, around the planet Ra, she had been his downfall. Perhaps this time she would be his salvation.

May I be worthy.

Had he been standing closer to the transparency during his musings, he might have seen a mixed group of Solee and Oriflammen Marines heading full-bore for the exit to his right, weapons in hand.

They had been moving with a purpose even before the evacuation order had been called.

* * *

Finally, they are letting her recite her vows, Alcantara thought, still seated in Mestrovic's place on the welcoming couch. *It's about time that the old man gave it a rest.*

She had tuned out most of the wedding around her, her thoughts turned inward. Only the young woman's pleasant voice was a break from the monotony. She refrained from drumming her fingers on her knee in contemplation, even if that was the mental gear she was in at the moment.

There could be any number of reasons why things were unfolding as they were, all perfectly legitimate and proper, but the devious side of her mind could think of many more reasons why the situation might not be all that it appears. With the man himself indisposed, there was no way to check and find some kind of confirmation.

She had at least spread the word to the Marines to check it out. Kim and Halafast had also reported in directly to her after Symon had alerted them. Fortuitously, they had been about to make another sweep through *Hornet* when word came down of the situation. If anyone would be able to keep a lid on things until she could get involved personally it was those two.

The situation was in infinitely capable hands, but it gnawed at her to sit here idle.

Rank hath its privileges, but it does, on occasion, really bite.

What was also gnawing at her was this damnable uncomfortable couch. There was something wrong with it that she was sure was not normal. Like the princess and the pea, she could sense that something was not right with it. As the bride began to recite the Litany of Uxorial Fealty, Alcantara thrust her hands between the cushions, fishing around to find the source of her discomfort.

There it was. Something flat, hard and cold was directly underneath her. With a bit of relief, she pulled it free. The saucer-sized octagonal shape she now held wasn't made of metal, she found, though it was dull and silvery in hue. The plastic shell seemed to give a little bit as she touched it.

Turning it over in her hand, she found markings on the reverse side. In military-stenciled letters, the object proclaimed:

SIC SEMPER TYRANNIS.

She hadn't heard the subsonic whine of the primer cap that was too low for human ears to pick as she handled it, nor realized what the object's purpose was until it was too late. All she had time to do was recognize the phrase which was famously uttered by Marcus Junius Brutus, after the killing Gaius Julius Caesar on the senate floor. It was also, she noted, the motto of the Reformation Coalition planet Aurora, homeworld of Vega Zorn.

It was a mercy that she never felt the explosion that took her life, along with the majority of the wedding party.

Chapter 19

The Marines were running hot, safeties off, blazing a path towards the Armory. The only one struggling to keep pace was Crowbar, whose every step was labored. His breath came in hot gasps, but the gravity of the situation made him strong and fast. Truth be told, it was not the first time he had been a situation where he needed to shoot his way out of a bad situation, but this was perhaps the most extreme case of it to date.

Beside him, Drop Kick was in his element, as were the other Marines. The Ithklur were charging ahead like greyhounds let loose from the slip. They had come into contact with only small pockets of technicians and auxiliary personnel that had immediately seen the writing on the wall and gotten out of their way. No one had lifted a hand to stop them, which had probably saved their lives. Given the Ithklur's tendency to shoot first and ask esoteric questions much later, Drop Kick was of the mind that they were showing enormous restraint.

Drop Kick was sure it must've been obvious to the Ithklur as well that the sooner they gained the Armory, the longer they all might live. The bands of support people down here, many of them just plucked from civilian life by the looks of them, were not a threat that required action.

Minutes seemed to stretch out into infinity as Raptor loped ahead, setting a pace they were all pressed to follow. The alien skittered to a halt in front of a vaulted door that sat in an alcove. The others fanned out to guard the corridor.

"This is it," Bonzo said. "I can try to run a bypass if the door's coded."

"Let's try knocking first," Drop Kick said.

Hefting his borrowed rifle in one hand, the senior Marine palmed the door entry pad. Incredibly, it blinked green, accompanying the sound of bolts being drawn back.

It was then that the door was thrown from behind, revealing several figures in enemy uniform with weapons drawn. The rattle and jostle of rifles being brought to bear reigned in the quiet corridor, but no shots were fired.

Drop Kick promptly lowered his rifle, stepped through the hatch and proceeded to the kiss red-headed woman standing there with a fervent passion. Everyone on both sides relaxed, even if some where the slightest bit embarrassed by the circumstances of their reunion.

"Nice to see you, too," Snapshot said as she drew back, and Drop Kick knew she meant it. "Glad to see you haven't lost your touch."

"Hardly," he said with a smile. "Everyone inside. Seal the hatch."

"Where are your guards?" Gyro asked, noting their blood-spattered clothing on after she had spoken. "Oh."

"They're no longer a problem." Drop Kick returned. "You wanna tell me how you got free?"

"Be glad to," Gyro said, "while you're suiting up." She nodded towards the rows of Imperial battle dress, and saw the smile slowly grow upon the Sergeant Major's face.

"You heard the lady," Drop Kick said gleefully. "It's time we were appropriately dressed for the occasion."

* * *

They were moving. Fast.

Their world was the blur of silver corridors whizzing by them as they ran, only broken here and there with connecting passages. These they ignored save a quick glance to make they were clear as they drew down on the ship that had been a haven to some, and a home to others.

They ran. Fast.

In the lead were five Marines in Imperial battle dress, the sight of their inscrutable red of their visors now welcome, though no less wrathful. Drop Kick was on point along with Bonzo. Mercy and Whiz Bang fanned out behind them. The unarmored ladies of the band, now dressed as officers of enemy states, took up the middle while the Ithklur brought up the rear. Of the three, only Hunter had been small enough to fit inside human battle dress, but only barely with his tail being roughly crammed into the small space between the armor and his back. Raptor and Striker, had proved to be too large, so they ran wearing clamshell armor seized from the Armory.

Hearts were beating fast. Exertion colored more than one face a rosy red. They all moved as though wings sprouted from their heels. Legs pumped up and down with mechanical rhythm as they raced, powered by desperation and hope.

It was that zephyr speed which carried them straight into the teeth of the mixed group of Oriflammen and Solee Marines that were hustling every bit as fast in the opposite direction. At first sight, the onrushing Marines took the other group as a relief squadron, or as another group of their brethren trying to make the best of the over-turned anthill the situation was fastly becoming.

It was an unfortunate circumstance that one of the enemy Marines had been there the day *Hornet* was brought to her current resting place. He had been on the boarding party that had forced her crew here aboard *Golden Flame* literally at gunpoint. Presented with a flash of images as the two forces bore down upon one another, the young Marine began to put the puzzle together, each piece insistent in his head.

First and foremost, he recognized his own suit of battle dress running towards him with surprising speed. He would know it anywhere. It could have been reassigned, but that was unlikely.

Second, he recognized one of the Solee officers. Her face was pleasant and nicely tanned. From underneath her cap a trace of white-blond hair could be seen, which was as

characteristic of Aubani heritage as her sparkling eyes. He remembered those eyes, so full of hate when her ship had been captured, and now ugly and filled with something close to madness. He'd seen that look in the eyes of prisoners before, but this was something much more intense.

Finally, the tall reptilian humanoids in the back came into view. That was the thing to lock it all together. He had been on the detail that had carried their unconscious deadweight from the ship and on down to the Infirmary.

He yelled something out to his comrades to alert them to the deceptive appearance. He didn't even know what it was he said. But before he finished the warning, the large flechette rifles the two armored Marines carried spat to life, killing him and three of his brothers.

Shots followed more shots at an appallingly close distance. It was as if a dueling field had become truncated and with many more scores to settle at one time with the same predictably deadly outcome.

Those that managed to return fire lived long enough to see their weapons turned aside by the battle dress as the four armored foes closed ranks to protect their less protected comrades behind them. Then they were moving.

Fast.

* * *

"Sir?"

Gaylon Fox craned his neck around to look at his XO, who stood next to the communications officer.

"Yes, what is it?"

"Sir, we just received a short wave message from Doctor Symon aboard *Golden Flame*. There appears to be a disturbance of an as yet unknown nature."

"Explain."

"Doctor Symon has been monitoring an unusual situation concerning the execution of *Hornet's* crew. He has been in intermittent contact with Admiral Alcantara on her personal comm channel, but now appears unable to raise her."

Fox lifted from his seat and balled his hands into fists at his side. *Hornet's* crew. Execution. These were the first things that registered - and there was a definite elation at knowing they would never again be a thorn in his side.

Well, well, Alcantara must've convinced the old man to see the light after all. Mental note: Thank her heartedly next time I see her, and find something special amongst the spoils of Spires to give to her as a memento and/or war trophy. Something tasteful.

The second wave of his thoughts brought the elation crashing back down. The very reason Alcantara carried a comm that independent of her flagship was solely so that she *could* be reached at any hour or any place. It was the Admiral's emergency line, one which, according to Symon, had fallen silent.

Something tickled that region of his brain where his sharp instincts made berth. This wasn't right, something here was definitely not *right*. At worst he was just maintaining a healthy paranoia, but at best...

"Bring us to alert status," Fox said to the surprise of his cremates, save Jamar, "Now."

The XO leaned over to the comm panel and palmed it for a public address. "Attention, attention, set Condition Two about the ship. All hands to duty stations. Engine room, bring the reactor up to ready status. All decks report in. Standby for further orders."

Royal Vengeance was awakening, like a panther being drawn slowly from her dreams. Systems came on line, crewmen ran frantically to their posts, weapons were primed, but kept in check. She was a blade sliding from its sheath, ready to mete out the retribution of her namesake.

"I want a tethered launch of Gryphons ready to fire immediately. It has MFD priority." He said to Lieutenant Darmane, taking his place once again in the command chair. His hands sought the reassuring ends of the armrests.

Darmane nodded and relayed the orders down to the missile prep room. Gryphons were not the fastest missiles *Royal Vengeance* carried, that honor fell to the short-striking Rattlesnakes, but they possessed the longest reach of any missile in their arsenal. Whatever his

Captain was expecting to happen, it was obvious to Jamar that his intent was that the *RV* got her licks in when the time came.

“Try to raise *Golden Flame* and continue monitoring.”

“Yes, sir,” the comm officer said, leaving Fox to his thoughts.

What in blazes is going on over there?

* * *

Their first sign of trouble was a faint *tink, tink* sound that was nearly inaudible. A small black object came to rest at Whiz Bang’s feet as they neared the intersection.

“*Grenade!*” Drop Kick roared.

The warning had not fully left the Sergeant Major’s lips when the heavy gunner stepped up. With the skill of a gravball player, Whiz Bang kicked the offending object back from whence it came as though he were going for an extra goal in sudden death – which in a way, he was.

The concussion grenade went off in mid-air as it was being returned to the sender. Chaos reigned as the explosion shook the world around them, and, in that moment, the second team opened fire, sparing nothing.

Those not armored, with the exception of the Ithklur, plastered themselves to the side alcoves, seeking cover. All of the Marines, battle dress or no, barreled forward into the fray, their weapons spewing fire like angry dragons.

As their emerald forms surged forward, the enemy fired the first boarding charge at the phalanx advancing upon them. While not purpose-built for cracking battle dress, it was sometimes colloquially known as ‘the can opener.’ Had the quarters been closer, the advance might have stopped cold.

As it was, the charge whistled by Drop Kick’s head, continuing on to detonating well to the rear of their formation. The shockwave spun Hunter around, sending him crashing into Raptor. Mercy’s armor blackened, and Bonzo slid spread-eagled down the corridor. Drop Kick saw the decksole rush towards him. By some strange miracle, only Striker, unarmored as he was, had instinctively side-stepped into an adjoining causeway. Recovering his weapon, he was the first one to regain his footing as the others lay in various states of disrepair.

Peering around the corner, he found two clamshell-clad Marines coming to stand over Bonzo’s inert form. One was in the process of turning the sensor tech over while the other hovered over him, weapon in hand. A gloved hand reached over to unlock Bonzo’s helmet while another flexed over the grip of a rifle.

Without hesitation, Striker stepped out, leveled his weapon and let loose a blood-curdling war cry that seemed to freeze the very soul. The two Marines looked up wide-eyed as the Ithklur pounced. The flechette rifle caught them squarely center mass.

The sudden charge had exposed him to the fields of fire held by the allies of his prey, who had taken up positions down the hall. With his brothers wounded and possibly dead, for a moment only Striker held the field in the name of *Hornet*. He never stopped moving, and never knew regret as he did so. If anything, he had never felt more alive.

Seizing the larger of the two dead men as he fell, The Ithklur lifted the corpse and used it as a shield. Surging forward, he pulled free the chain of grenades he held, adding the dead man’s explosives to his own.

From the far side of the hall they opened fire. Bullets whistled all around him. Some even passed cleanly through the corpse and found their mark in his own flesh. He noted the pain with a detachment that seemed even foreign to him. And still he came on like a force of nature.

His entire life had been leading up to this moment, and he could feel the weighty hand of destiny upon him. Now was the hour of his glory, now was his time to shine brighter than the stars.

With a graceful leap, he threw the tattered dead man towards his doomed comrades, priming the grenades as he did so. They had not divined his intent, nor known that he had utterly committed himself to their destruction.

There was no time for regret; there was only rage tempered by steel as he tore into them. In those few seconds, a few tried to run for cover, but Striker drew them back, screaming.

He was still tearing into them when the grenades exploded in a rippling cascade.

With labored effort the Marines collected themselves as their uniformed friends moved up to help them. With seconds ticking by, where another attack could fall at any time, they surveyed the damage. Raptor had been broken in a dozen ways, but still lived. Drop Kick, Hunter, Bonzo and Whiz Bang staggered uneasily to their feet, their armor scorched and blackened. Mercy appeared largely unhurt. Her battle dress had absorbed the blast meant for her.

"Armor's toast, Sarge," she said over the external speakers. "The whole left side is unresponsive. Right side isn't too much better."

"Let's get you out of it." Drop Kick said, turning to the rest of them. "Gyro, take everyone ahead and secure the ship. Bonzo, you carry Raptor. Whiz Bang and Hunter, you're on point. Don't wait around if you can take off, you hear me?" His visored gaze swept over his friends and many uncomfortable looks followed.

"Go, go, go!" he barked.

They thundered down the hall, pushing past the carnage that was Striker's legacy. Bonzo, his metal hands full with the crushed Ithklur, spared a glance at the smoking ruin in the hallway. The same Ithklur that had abandoned him to death had died for him. Was it enough to balance his previous actions? Bonzo couldn't say, but any lingering grudge he might have harbored vanished like shadows at noon.

Rest now, brother, we will not forget your courage.

Not now, not ever.

* * *

"Captain?" the comm officer said, continuing as Captain Fox turned towards him. "*Golden Flame* isn't responding directly to any of our messages, even those on the priority channel."

"Define...directly?" Fox asked.

"We are getting a response, but it's a canned one. It merely says that ships should maintain their current position until further notice. The message repeats regardless of what information I send."

"Could it be the wedding?" Jamar said quietly, next to Fox. "Demanding a 'stay put' command fleet-wide doesn't seem out of Mestrovic's character."

"True, but it *is* out Admiral Alcantara's." he said. "No flagship should be out of contact for *any* length of time, or it's not much of a flagship. She knows that as well as I. No, there's something else going on here, and I don't like it, Jamar, not one bit."

"What are your orders then?"

"First," he said a little louder so that the sensor officer could hear, "display *Golden Flame*'s position relative to our own."

A tactical representation appeared on the repeater panel on the arm console of his chair, showing the various ships of the fleet encircling Spires like a thorny crown. *Golden Flame* sat in an anchored position on the far outskirts of the formation around Spires. *Royal Vengeance* was still in orbit, currently on the far side of the planet.

On the opposite repeater panel was a schematic of *Royal Vengeance*, telling him that she was at full power and ready to be wielded as he willed.

"Secondly," he turned to the comm officer. "You are to erase any and all recent communication logs with *Golden Flame*. We never heard the order to sit tight, understood?" There was a cold undercurrent to his voice. "If anyone asks were conducting a firing drill."

"Um...yes, sir!"

"Third," he said switching over to the helmsmen and astrogator, "Take us out of orbit and plot an intercept course with *Golden Flame*. Not too fast – we don't want to alarm the sensibilities of our fleet brethren, but a brisk speed."

Fox turned to his XO.

"I think it's high-time we stretched our legs, do you concur?"

"Most definitely, sir."

* * *

August Delpero stood in the landing bay that was now eerily quiet and deserted. After lambasting people to leave with his imaginary title, he sealed as many of the ways in as he could, except the forward entrance, according to Zorn's orders.

There was a certain feeling of being cut off and alone here. Discovery by an armed party would be disastrous, even if they were willing to take into account his status as Technarch. No, now the plan was in someone else's hands. He was torn on that point. A part of him resented the fact that his fate would be decided by others, perhaps even whether he lived or died, but that was the old Delpero talking, the one whose reach had exceeded his grasp. The other part of him, the Majority, was relieved that others bore the responsibility to fruition, people that were infinitely more experienced at this sort of thing that he was.

And now he was alone with *Lord Ryan* and *Hornet*, two ships that had played such a part in his life. In the spot lamps, they were sublimely beautiful - their sleek forms seeming to stare down at him from on high like parental deities.

He had already made a walk through of *Lord Ryan* and found everything pretty much in order. He was not an engineer, by any stretch of the imagination, but he did know his ship well enough. He had spent tons of cash in upgrading her automation over the years in case he needed to fly solo, which was what he was about to do. She was fuelled and ready to go.

Hornet was another matter entirely. He had never been aboard her, and so he didn't know her systems. All he could really do was ensure that her tanks were filled and she was nominally ready to go. Until someone that knew her reactor came along, there wasn't much he could do for her.

"Well, no sense in delaying," he said to himself out loud and set about his work. The belly ramp lowered and he made his way into the ship. Her corridors were empty and dark as he made his way to the engine compartment.

The holographics were in standby mode, but there was something that made him do a mental double-take. The display spoke for itself.

Someone's already worked on the reactor. It isn't cold.

It was a puzzle, but a fortunate turn. That meant that they could launch much faster than he had originally thought. All they would really have to do was pre-launch prep and they should be ready to fly.

Perhaps they were able to do this remotely. Though, it doesn't look like they have the kind of automation I do on Lord Ryan. Strange...

That's when he heard a noise. To his ears it was almost like a thunderbolt in the sepulchral quiet of the ship. He froze, muscles taut. His hand sought the pistol from the concealed holster at the small of his back.

There it was again...a muted thump, coming from prow of the ship. Had he been discovered?

Quiet as he could in his wingtip shoes, he made steps toward the sound, gun primed and ready in his hand. Slowly he crept through the ship, his heart racing in his ears.

The little light that spilled in from the bay revealed that the floor ahead of him was dappled with water droplets that shone like discarded diamonds. They formed a trail that unerringly led to the bridge. Pressing his back to the wall, he continued to slide in the direction of the ships starboard prong.

A faint light flickered though the hatch, as Delpero hovered there. Could he catch them by surprise? How many of them were there? He took in a long breath and held it.

All at once he flung himself around the hatch his weapon tracking ahead of him. The large viewport had been tinted so that the bay could be viewed from the inside, but nothing could be seen looking in.

To his surprise, sitting there on the bridge was a large alien form that turned to greet him as he entered, a tentacle raised in a kind of salute.

"Greetings, Mr. Delpero." it said in an odd voice. "Won't you come in?"

* * *

Whiz Bang was the first to reach the sealed hatch that, according to the deck plans, would lead to *Hornet*, and presumably a shot at freedom. He palmed the control as the others in the group arrived a few strides later.

As the door cycled open, each of them were rewarded with the distinctive shape of *Hornet's* portside prong. A collective sigh of relief worked its way through their assembly.

Whiz Bang and Hunter spread out to secure the area while the others waited for the all's clear. The Marine gunner waved them forward as he took up a position in front of the ship next to the lowered belly ramp.

"Hunter, make a sweep of the ship," Whiz Bang said.

The armored Ithklur gave a nod and disappeared up the ramp, boots echoing in the silence. Bonzo set Raptor's broken form gingerly on the deck and took up a position on the opposite side of the ramp. The rest hunkered down under the landing gear, waiting for the word to move.

"Clear!" came Hunter's sibilant voice.

A moment later, Hunter returned down the ramp with a man in a business suit in tow.

"It's good to see everyone," Delpero said to a silent and mixed response to his sudden appearance. "How can I help?"

"Help me get Raptor to sick bay," Physic said, her own emotions warring within her.

"I will assist you," Hunter said, cradling his injured commander in his armored arms.

The crew raced to their stations within the ship – Crowbar to the engine room, Physic to sick bay, Snapshot to the gunner's station. Gyro passed on her laser turret, opting instead to go to the bridge, Zorn two steps behind.

Both of *Hornet's* pilots were currently away, which left pre-flight instructions in the XO's hands. Gyro had gone through them before, but had no doubt that Coeur or Mercy could run through them in a third of the time it would take her.

"Will you help me get her ready to launch?" she asked Zorn.

"Right there with you."

The two burst into the bridge, only to find Deep Six sitting there in his roller chair, dutifully punching in commands to his console.

"Sixer!" Gyro said. "Are you a sight for sore eyes!"

"Truly?" he said, accepting her embrace, sloshing water around as she did. "Perhaps you need some topical cream applied to them to avoid further irritation. I believe we have some in ship's stores."

"Figure of speech, Sixer," she said. "Oh, forget it – I'm just glad you're here!"

"How did you get down here ahead of us?" Gyro said as she Zorn settled into the pilot's couch.

"I swam," he said. "They decided to dump me in the water system that been heavily salinated. Oddly enough, the way was marked from the inside of the water way for me to swim all the way to the ship. Fortunately the refueling tubes are just large enough for me fit through. I emerged into the fuel tanks and was able to get to the bridge. Quite ingenious really."

"Your idea?" Gyro said to Zorn.

"Don't look at me, that sounds like that was Raven's doing."

"Remind me to thank her when she gets back."

"Oh, I have already thanked my benefactor." Sixer said deadpan.

"And?" the two women said in unison as they worked.

"And the one I'm referring to is standing behind you."

Both turned around to look.

* * *

Their position was about to be overrun, Drop Kick knew. He had heard shouts and orders echoing down the hallway as he had worked to pry Mercy from her armor. It would've been no small feat, given the proper equipment, and with the battle damage it was being belligerent.

"Sarge," she said. "You've got to leave me behind."

"Hush, trooper, I'll have no talk of that."

"I'm serious, sir."

"So am I," he said. "Now be quiet and let me work."

The two of them huddled in a small adjoining corridor that lead to a storage locker. It commanded a view of the way they came. Drop Kick knew that he had perhaps another two or three minutes before they were discovered, if that. It was possible that he could bluff them into thinking that he was one of them, but he had his doubts.

Armor paneling came away in his hands as he worked. He just needed a little more time. The sound of booted and armored feet came clamoring up the hallway as figures began to flash by their hidey hole. He could've sworn that at least two of them wore business suits. In their haste, none spared a glance in their direction.

Hornet's about to have company, and here I am not able to warn them.

The final piece of armor finally came away in Drop Kick's hand. The torso opened up and Mercy slid out of it, the other pieces falling away.

He helped to her feet and she accepted her rifle, checking it as an affirmation. They turned to leave.

"Don't move," a voice said. Two figures shadowed the end of the hall. Looking up, two Solee Marines held them in their sights.

Rearguard. Caught me distracted.

In Drop Kicks mind, he was already stepping in front of Mercy, bringing his flechette rifle to bear on the targets and pulling the trigger.

Both of the men before him stiffened and sank to the ground so quickly, he wondered if his mental exercise had not been entirely confined to his head.

"What *the...*"

Coeur and Raven, dart guns in hand, stepped around the corner.

"Problems, Sergeant Major?" his CO said wryly.

"Not at all, Skipper," he returned with a coy smile concealed behind his helmet. "But thanks for the assist. You saved their lives."

"Looks like a squad got ahead of us."

"Yeah, I count about twenty, with a few of 'em in battle dress. We better try to whittle them down from behind."

"Then what are we waiting for?" Coeur said. "Let's get to it?"

The four of them emerged back into the main corridor and made their way towards the docking bay and the Marine's that stood between them and their ship.

* * *

Mr. Kim and Mr. Halafast raced along the brightly lit hall in the midst of the Marines they commanded. An outside observer might have thought it odd that two men in smartly cut business suits would hold sway over the grizzled and steely Marines around them, or even the inscrutable men in battle dress.

To the men that ran along with them, there was *no* doubt as to who was in charge. The entirety of Marines in this detachment Solee, which meant that they held these two men in particular as little less than the direct emissary of whatever god or gods their beliefs held in esteem.

Mr. Halafast's brought them to a halt.

"What are you thinking?" Mr. Kim said, knowing his comrade had a plan.

"Two-pronged attack," he replied. "Circle around with your team to the main entrance. They've probably sealed it, so you'll probably have to cut through. I'll continue on this way. Call it six minutes to get into position. You take the high road..."

"And you take the low road," Mr. Kim finished. They both looked to their elegant aviator watches. "Synch in three, two, one...hack," they said in unison.

The two teams split off, moving away from each other rapidly. During the time they'd served together, the two men had learned to mirror each other's thoughts when it came to operations. It was perfectly obvious to them both, that they might be able to overtake *Hornet* before she was fully primed to receive visitors. Their start-up time would've been next to nothing at this point, so all they had to do was push hard enough and fast enough. Thanks to an alert to Dr. Symon, many more Marines and security personnel should be getting down here ASAP.

If the prisoners, and they had absolutely no doubt now that that's who they were dealing with, got away on the *Hornet*, things might get dicey considering the communications black-out *Golden Flame* was experiencing. The short-range comm they carried would be spotty if it came to signaling another ship to warn them. Should they decide to haul away using *Lord Ryan*, well, they were in for a very unpleasant surprise.

* * *

Bonzo thought he saw someone up in the control booth, like a moving shadow. It was there and then it wasn't. Before he could warn Whiz Bang or Hunter, orange sparks began to pour out of the door that faced opposite *Hornet's* prow.

The Marines readied themselves to welcome their guests. When the door blew off its hinges they took aim at the billowing cloud of smoke and the barely-seen figures in front of them. That's when *Hornet's* gatling gun opened up, its field of fire almost directly in line with the door.

Crowbar had placed it there before the Mexit outing to protect the boarding ramp, and so it did now. Spinning in a blur the eye could not follow, it roared like a dentist's drill from Hell, a single and continuous tongue of flame at the top the only visible sign of the rapid-fire destruction it was dealing.

Hornet's reprisal took them all by surprise as they checked their fire. Bonzo gave silent thanks to Snapshot for her quick trigger finger and whoever had primed the weapons so quickly. The miniscule breathing room that gave them, was quickly taken up by the second set of Marines that burst from the door to their left, all of whom were taking up positions behind stacks of equipment. Worse yet, at least three of the eight-man team that just come through were also in battle dress.

"Contact left!" Bonzo said over the roar of the gatling gun. "Left! Left!"

Bullets flew back and forth, filling the air in between. Without their armor, they would've surely been killed outright with the volume of bullets stitching across them. Bonzo snapped his rifle up and squeezed off a burst, felling one of the unarmored men. A few meters away Hunter was running sideways, strafing their position. Whiz Bang readied grenades.

Therein was the problem. Even standard grenades might not crack the enemy armor, and the flechette rifles would be nearly useless. They needed something heavier. Much heavier.

Movement above him caught his attention. A wicked smile came over him as Snapshot traversed the 12-mj plasma cannon around to point its stunted muzzle in their direction.

"Down!" Bonzo shouted over the PA, and ducked and covered.

A blinding stab of white plasma consumed the enemy utterly as a bolt that could've punctured a starship's hull was unleashed upon them point-blank range.

Bonzo recovered himself, thankful that his visor had polarized in response to the flash. Otherwise, he might've been blind. Snapshot would've had to dial that cannon way down to avoid smashing the whole compartment, but she had judged it right. Getting to his feet, he found the entire corner of the room slagged and melted like metallic candle wax.

"Beware the Sting," Bonzo said with the PA still on.

"You got that right," Whiz Bang yelled back. "Get some!"

* * *

Mr. Halafast had not followed his men through the door, and consequently had not shared their molten fate. As soon as the turret started to move he had made a dive back down the corridor in time to feel a blast of heat that nearly singed his eyebrows off.

On second thought, it appeared *Hornet* appeared in a greater state of readiness than he would've thought. Either the situation had been going on longer than either he or Mr. Him thought, or it was an inside job. That didn't bode well for Admiral Alcantara's sudden silence.

One fire at a time, he told himself. *Deal with what's in front of you first.*

Dusting himself off as he stood, he straightened the lines of his suit. Spinning on his heel to leave, he found that he was not alone. Standing there as if they had materialized from the ether

were three women and one trooper in battle dress. He let out a bothered sigh...things were just not going his way today.

The Captain of the ship that had nearly killed him stepped forward.

"Mr. Halafast is it?"

"None other," he said, raising his hands and placing them on his head. Honestly, I thought you were in there," he nodded towards the ruined hatchway. "My bad luck I suppose." He turned his blue eyes on Raven.

"Well now, Ms. Eos, this *is* a surprise, though it does tidy up a few loose ends I had harbored. I must thank you for that."

"I wouldn't thank us just yet, pal," Drop Kick said as he stepped forward with the flechette cannon. "Your number's up."

Mr. Halafast waited for the armored mass to come between him and the three women, eclipsing their view of him. The Marine was too close, whether he knew it or not. Being fully rated in their use, Mr. Halafast wagered that he knew the capabilities of the relic battle dress better than the man in front of him.

His instincts proved to be correct.

Mr. Halafast moved like lightning, ducking under and around the bulky suit of armor, coming to be almost back-to-back with it. The view the women had of him had been nullified, so they missed the mark by half. He elbowed Coeur as he came around and delivered a clean strike to Mercy's knee. Only Raven had an inkling of his sudden attack, but it had come so quick, and was born of instinct and training that he hadn't thought about his assault until he was going through the motions.

She brought her body pistol up, but he got there first. His strong hand closed on her wrist like a vise. In a fluid motion he relieved of her weapon, spun around her, twisting her arm behind her as he did. She felt the cold muzzle press into the skin of her neck.

One second he was about to be taken into custody, the next he was behind them with a hostage.

"Now, let's all be very sensible about this," Mr. Halafast said calmly. "It's my guess that you know I'm not bluffing. I will fire."

"Go ahead," Drop Kick growled. "She ain't exactly on our best friend list right now."

"Perhaps, perhaps not," the suited man said as he was backing up. "It really doesn't matter at this point where you go. You'll never get out of the system."

Coeur, on the count of three. I'm going to hit the deck. Get ready, Raven's mind voice injected itself into Coeur's head.

"No, but being shot while trying to escape is far more interesting than whatever you had planned for us," Drop Kick said.

1

"No doubt that's true. You'll excuse me if I don't take that sitting down." Mr. Halafast neared the mouth of an adjoining corridor, veering slowly towards it.

2

"Take it anyway you like, pal. You're the one on thin ice."

3!

"Well, as much as I'd like to stand around all day pla – Hey!"

Raven relaxed her legs, becoming dead weight. The torque painfully dislocated her shoulder as she fell. Mr. Halafast had to shift his weight to keep from following her. It exposed his torso and that's when Coeur fired.

The shots caught him dead center, blowing bloodless holes in his suit and sending him stumbling back. He let go of Raven completely, which immediately exposed him to fire. Mercy and Drop Kick each fired as Mr. Halafast flung himself bodily around the corner.

Drop Kick covered the distance in three thunderous strides, and blazed into the hallway. His sights were empty, his targeting display blank.

Mr. Halafast was gone.

"That slick little bastard," Drop Kick said, noting the drops of blood dotting the deck like a trail of rubies. They led through a sealed and locked hatchway. "We marked him at least."

"They can't call for help," Raven said through gritted teeth as she stood, her shoulder at a grotesque angle. "I planted a bug in their comm system, both internal and external. It'll take them hours to sort out."

"Here, let me get that," Mercy said, grabbing Raven's wrist. "Deep breath and hold it." There was a muted crunch as the shoulder righted itself. Raven's pale face turned red, but she did not cry out. She let out her breath in a gasp.

"It'll be a while before my backhand serve is a hundred percent," she said with tears gathering in her long lashes "but I think I can manage."

"Good," Coeur said turning towards the landing bay. "Let's go home."

* * *

Drop Kick sidled up to the remains of the plasma-distorted entryway and kicked on his armor's external comm speaker.

"*Hornet's* CO on deck," he bellowed. "Hold your fire! Hold your fire! Acknowledge, Alpha-three-Sierra-November!" While Drop Kick knew it was all a little dramatic, he had no wish to be accidentally blown apart by his own ship or troops. The situation code he proclaimed was meant to confer the idea, "All's free, situation normal."

"Copy that!" Bonzo's voice said from the bay. "Welcome back, sir!"

Coeur followed Drop Kick through the slagged doorway, stepping over the charred bits of armor and weapons. The sight of *Hornet* greeted her like an old friend, stirring up emotions that she forced back down. She never broke stride as she moved towards her reclaimed ship, the sense of being here again, even amid such mortal danger, was like a cloud passing in front of the sun on a blistering hot day. She drank it all in as her XO appeared on the ramp.

"What's our status?" Coeur said first, feet carrying her towards the bridge without pause or interruption. Gyro fell beside her, taking as she tried to match her skipper's brisk gait.

"We've almost completed the pre-flight on both ships. Delpero's over in *Lord Ryan*. Zorn's giving Crowbar a hand with the engines since he's moving a little slow. Both reactors are hot to trot, if you'll forgive the expression."

"Gaia, that's got to be record timing."

"Well, you see, Coeur, we had a little help we didn't expect. Got everything jump started well before we arrived..."

"Let me guess, more of Raven's techno-wizardry?"

"Um, I'm pretty sure that wasn't me," Raven said, bringing up the rear with Mercy.

"Getting the ship up and running ahead would've raise suspicions. It was the weak point in my otherwise ingeniously-planned escape."

"So who was it?" Coeur said as Gyro continue to try to catch up.

"Uh, skipper, I think there's something you really need to know about all this. Kind of took us all by storm," Gyro stammered as they passed through the mess hall just aft of the bridge.

"What is Delpero some kind of gearhead genius we didn't know about?"

"Not exactly," her XO replied. "Well, um...I guess what I'm trying to say is...ah..."

"Come on Gyro," Coeur looked over her shoulder as she stepped onto the bridge. "Just spit it out."

She turned her head towards the bridge and she came to a dead stop, nearly colliding with her officers. Her eyes widened, mouth hung open with no sound coming out. *Hornet*, it seemed, was haunted.

"Greetings, Red Sun," a synthesized voice said through a voder, "to coin a human expression, are we ready to blow this proverbial popsicle stand?"

"Newton's alive," Gyro finally finished, as though she, herself, didn't believe the news.

Sitting there on its mushroom-shaped chairs, sat a Hiver in perfect health, all six of its eye stalks regarding them calmly between splayed tentacles

"I saw you die," Coeur croaked. "You were blown out of the viewport. How did you...I...?" her voice trailed off.

"A manipulation," The Hiver said, "though one which I inherited from my predecessor."

"Cicero?"

"Indeed, Captain. A forced perspective, some strategically-placed holographics and few explosives bolts was all that was required to shape perceptions in the necessary way. I will be pleased to share the details of the manipulation with you at a later time when the need for expediency is not as great."

"Something to look forward to," Coeur said recovering from her initial shock. *I bought it hook, line and sinker – and that might just have given us the edge we need.*

"So, you're my silent partner," Raven stepped forward and crossed her arms. "I thought that some of my schemes were working better than I had hoped."

"Quite so," it replied. "I had the advantage of being an outside observer. That allowed me a certain leverage I was able to exploit."

"Well then, may I assume you know that we retrieved the Alpha Bank."

"You may. I was able to bypass the security door for you and clear many of the hallways on your return by redirecting personnel to other decks."

"Then you should probably know that I plan on destroying it."

Everyone turned to look at her.

"Are you serious, Coeur?" Raven was astonished, and Newton froze in place with surprise.

"As can be, yes," she said. "I can't run the risk of us being recaptured or boarded once we leave. If they put it together that we went well out of our way to secure this random piece of junk during a desperate escape attempt, what will *that* tell them?"

She shook her head.

"No, one of our only saving graces here has been that the enemy didn't know what they had. If they put two and two together, we will have handed it to them on a silver platter – a situation infinitely worse than the one we already face. I cannot – will not – allow that to happen."

"Under normal circumstances I would attempt to persuade you to reconsider," Newton said. "However, I have found that those few times when you use that tone of voice there is a 97.4% chance that you will pursue your present course, thus I will refrain if you will so note."

"Yes, well, I'm nothing if not statistically consistent, but nice try." She turned towards the Marine pilot that had been watching the shocking revelations fall like leaves. "Mercy, run a final pilot's checklist, nothing fancy, just get us ready to fly."

"Yes, sir!" The Marine settled into the pilot's couch, hands a blur at the controls.

"Now, if you'll excuse me, I'll be right back." Coeur said, leaving the bridge and her shipmates, velvet bag in hand.

There wasn't much time, she knew, so she would have to work fast. Intuitively, she knew that this one act would probably be the most important thing she ever did. There was no margin for error – she would have to do it right on the first try, under less-than-ideal situations.

Her steps lead her to one of the more secluded parts of the ship, near the ship's internal sensor hardware and the integrated sub-systems. Crowbar often came here to fiddle with the electronics when he wanted a measure of privacy. She could see why, there was something cramped, yet cozy about the small access space.

It was a strange, but fitting place for the future to be decided, she thought. It was the future that she had fought for, bleed for. It was the future whose burden had haunted her since her cryogenic rebirth.

Here it was, finally in her hand. Despite all her efforts, she knew she had ultimately proven to be a poor guardian of that future. With this one act, she would decide the fate of untold multitudes, and that knowledge was dizzying.

Now was not the time to let doubt interfere. Too many times had she let that get in the way. As she looked at the seemingly odd metal rod in her hand, she resolved that, come what may, she would give the future her unflinching hope and devotion.

The future starts now.

* * *

Mr. Kim leaned against the bulkhead, breathing hard from the smoke that floated on the air. His clean-shaven face was blackened with soot. His normally perfect hair was mussed,

smelling of blood and fire. His second-skin business suit was torn and stained crimson in places, yet he himself was unhurt.

The corridor he had left had been a charnel house. *Hornet* had literally made mincemeat of his troops in the narrow space. With nowhere to run, facing down armor piercing rounds, his men were dead before he could call a retreat. Only his proximity from the front had saved his life.

And now, the escapees had sealed the deadly passage with the armor-plated emergency doors. Even if he cracked those too, the insidious weapon was still waiting on the other side, ready for a repeat performance.

His gun arm swung around as his trained response reacted to an unknown stimulus. For a moment, Mr. Halafast looked down the barrel of his friend's weapon before Mr. Kim lowered it.

"I was rather hoping you had a bit more luck than I did," Mr. Halafast said. "Ran straight into their plasma cannon. Not pretty."

"You're bleeding," Mr. Kim observed.

Mr. Halafast looked at the crude bandage he'd fashioned over his left arm.

"Yeah, I had a personal run in with Captain D'Esprit and company. The good Sergeant Major was a bit put out with me by then. The flechette round could've taken my arm completely off."

"Here, let me take a look at that." Mr. Kim said, stowing his weapon and opening the bandages to view the wound. "Looks like a light graze."

"I've had worse." Mr. Halafast said as Mr. Kim tidied up. "So, I take it I wasn't the only one *Hornet* decided to surprise."

"You got it," Mr. Kim said shaking his head. "They were ready for us. How, I don't know, but they had their finger on the trigger as we went in. Sawed most of my detachment in half, literally. Even those in armor, it didn't matter."

Mr. Halafast drew in a sharp breath as the bandage tightened back around the wound. Testing the arm, he found the dressing a step up from what he had been able to fashion on his own.

"Thanks," he said, satisfied. "We've got a bigger problem. That plasma bolt took out the hatchway and probably weakened this whole area. We need to vacate ASAP. If they do manage to clear out, I'd rather not follow them outside into the cold."

"Nor I," Mr. Kim said. "I went up to the control booth, but they have disabled it. Looks like everything's being handled remotely. We'd probably have to physically cut the hard-line umbilical connection to shut it all down."

"Well," Mr. Halafast said with a disappointed sigh, "We better clear out and leave them to the watchdogs outside. You know I hate to quit the field."

"I know, you're preaching the choir. I'll get some techs to shut down the processing node in this part of the ship. That should knock them out if anything can, assuming it comes in time. It's a blunt instrument approach, but that's about all we've got right now."

"Okay, then I'll get Symon on the horn and see if he can scare us up some outside support, preferably one that's flying the right flag."

"Well, let's get to it," Mr. Kim said with a smile from beneath his grimy, bloody mask. "Her Majesty isn't paying us by the hour."

* * *

"Okay, we're as ready as we'll ever be," Coeur said from the pilot's couch into the comm, "Newton crack open the doors."

There was a slight shudder that ran through the deck as the metal jaws retracted back, revealing the star-studded darkness beyond.

"All systems read green. I'm taking us out."

RCS *Hornet* lifted off the deck as gravity drained from the compartment. Her forward thrusters flared, gently coaxing the ship backwards out of the bay. On her starboard side, *Lord Ryan* follows suit, her sleek lines as black as deep space.

"Mr. Delpero signals that he's ready to act as our top hat, sir."

"Acknowledged," Coeur said. "I'm bringing us about."

As the two ships cleared the bay and gained a respectable distance, they began a graceful dance of close-quarter maneuvers. *Lord Ryan* planed 'up' while *Hornet* planed "down" relative to one another. Circling around in a tight arc, *Lord Ryan* hovered above the far trader at as close as they dared.

"Snapper, standby grapnels." Her display lit up with her missileer's affirmative response. The two ships were sliding into place nicely...

"Fire."

Magnetic cables snaked away from *Hornet*, seeking the yacht's metal hull. Each one thudded in place, tethering the two ships together.

"Okay, now reel us in." Coeur said.

Automated winches pulled the *Hornet* even closer to the other ship until the undercarriage of the ship was plainly visible out of the main viewport on the bridge.

"We're secure, Red," Snapper's voice said over the comm. "I'm not sure how much stress these puppies are rated for, but I guess we're about to find out."

The plan had been the brainchild of Raven, who had puzzled over how to get both ships clear of *Golden Flame* without immediately raising suspicions. That was when she had found that *Lord Ryan* had a standing clearance to disembark at any time without prior notice. By lashing the ship's together at such a close distance, they would almost certainly appear to be one sensor contact to anything less than active sensors at close range. With *Lord Ryan's* superior engines, she could drag *Hornet* along with her at a good clip and appear to outside observers to be out for a leisurely stroll.

The yacht's main maneuver drive flared and they were headed away from the planet towards the depths of the system where they could Jump away safely. A violet jerk resounded through the ship as they snapped to the end of the tow cable, then leveled out as *Lord Ryan* began to accelerate.

"Send my compliments to Mr. Delpero," Coeur said to Sixer. "Tell him steady as she goes."

"Yes, sir."

August Delpero had opted to carry this leg of the mission forward alone, much to the ire of Vega Zorn. While *Hornet* would slip away to Phoebus to extract the Regent and seek to hinder the enemy's progress, Delpero's Jump-4 rated yacht would set a course straight for Aubaine, where he would give himself up to the authorities upon arrival.

Zorn had argued against it, but Delpero had argued against her arguments, citing that *Hornet's* errand might require her specialized skills. It also couldn't hurt at her inevitable trial if she played a part in rescuing a planetary leader from enemy custody and execution.

They had argued almost until the last minute before they pulled out, but Coeur was grateful that the pirate had relented. Vega Zorn was a handy person to have around when things got rough, no doubt about. Plus, it gave Coeur the ability to keep tabs on her in the outside chance that Delpero decided to steer a course for a friendlier port and leave them in the lurch. The odds of that happening, Coeur found, were staggering now that she had a chance to see first-hand the man he had become. If nothing else, coming into contact with Newton would've packed quite a punch. It wasn't every day that you got to look your blackest sins squarely in the face.

"Are we being flagged or pinged so far, Sixer?"

"No, sir. I'm not registering any changes in aspect or disposition from any of the fleet elements in our vicinity."

Raven, with Newton's silent help, had systematically tied the dreadnought into knots. They had shattered both the ships internal and external communications, even gumming up their sensors and fire control. They would eventually sort it all out, but that would take hours or days if they were lucky. Of course, the tricks they had pulled would never have worked back in the days of the Empire, but here, where those systems were no better than people who operated them, they had been able to cripple a juggernaut using electronic smoke and mirrors.

The true testament to their craftiness lay in the looming hulk of warship that grew progressively smaller in their wake. There was a cold, uncertain feeling in Coeur's stomach at being this close to a ship as lethal as *Golden Flame*. If they regained their fire control, even for a few moments, death could fall at any time.

That they had not already fired, or called in the rest of the fleet on them spoke well of the over-sized monkey wrench Raven and Razor had thrown into the works.

For now, they had done everything that could be done. They could only watch and wait and be ready to react for whatever was to come.

Now we play the waiting game.

I hate waiting.

* * *

"We've got an incoming message from Dr. Symon, sir," the comm officer announced.

"Patch it through to my station," Fox said, scanning the transcribed text that crawled across his repeater. It was a terse message from Dr. Symon that made Fox's eyes glow.

"Have any ships left *Golden Flame*?" he snapped.

"Updating now, sir," the sensor officer said. A tiny green dot appeared next to the flagship on the overhead tactical display. The IFF code marked it as a friendly. "Yes, sir. It appears that *Lord Ryan* has just exited the port-side docking bay."

Jamar leaned over from his station. "What did the message say, may I ask?" He said quietly.

Fox never took his eyes from the plot, but lowered his voice to match. "Apparently, our old friends from *Hornet* are responsible for what's going on over there, after all. Dr. Symon sent word to destroy any ship that leaves *Golden Flame*, and that is precisely what I intend to do."

"Any word on the Admiral?"

"No."

Jamar, like many ISN officers that Fox respected, was firmly in Admiral Alcantara's camp. The Admiral had a way of instilling her set of operational beliefs into each of the officers she cultivated. Chief among them was the idea that being studiously attentive to one's duty superseded ability to toe the party line. She took only the best and made them better, that was here gift. Jamar knew, just as Fox and the others of her cadre, that if the ISN was going to become the force their country needed, it would require Alcantara's vision and paradigm-shifting philosophy to get them there.

The Admiral's silence from the flag was a dire sign, not just for this campaign, but for the ISN as a whole. Both men felt it churn deep in their stomachs.

Fox raised his voice for the sensor officer, "Is she alone?"

"Yes, sir."

"Very well, take us to full military power, and sound General Quarters. I want a firing solution on that ship at the soonest possible moment."

A chorus of assents followed that pronouncement. Jamar sounded the warning bell to bring the crew of *Royal Vengeance* to battlestations.

Fox leaned back in his seat and crossed his legs.

Do you hear that sound, Coeur D'Esprit? That is the sound of your requiem bell – it tolls for thee.

* * *

"Captain, *Royal Vengeance* just went to full power. She's arming all weapons," Lieutenant Sedonya reported.

Her voice caught the attention of Paige and Hayward, both of whom were poring over the details of *Phoenix*'s latest readiness reports. The sudden information had broken the relative monotony of the work that had occupied them the last several hours.

"Where is she headed?"

"It looks as though they are on a least-time course for *Golden Flame*, sir."

"What the devil is Fox up to this time," Paige said with a hint of exasperation. "All right, ask him if he would kindly tell us what he's doing."

"Yes, sir."

"Any idea what game he's playing?" Paige whispered to Hayward.

"You're asking *me*? I have no idea, but I can bet he's not playing. Fox may be many things, but I can't see him going in full-bore without a reason. Now what that reason is..." Hayward shrugged and an idea blazed to life in his head. "He may be on to something, though."

"Has there been any response from *Golden Flame*?"

"No, sir." Sedonya reported. "None at all."

"That's peculiar in and of itself, don't you think? You don't think Fox would fire on his own flagship, do you?"

"No way to know for sure, but I don't think that's what this is about. I would be willing to bet that Fox is on to something that he feels warrants involving his ship directly," Hayward tilted his head to the side, thoughtfully. "It must be personal too, given his usual *modus operandi* – he's going in solo."

"*Royal Vengeance* reports that they are on an unscheduled, all-hands drill, sir." Sedonya said a moment later.

"And why don't I believe *that* at face value," Paige asked rhetorically, speaking Hayward's own thoughts aloud.

"Signal the *Marat*," Hayward said to Sedonya, "Have them launch a recon squad immediately. Tell them to be prepared to back up *Royal Vengeance*, however they can. Then, advise *Golden Flame* of the situation and request further instructions."

"Yes, sir."

"Back her up doing what?" Paige asked, not as a challenge, but in pure curiosity about the loose cannon out there blazing across the stars.

"That remains to be seen."

* * *

"Looks as though our cover's blown," Delpero's image said on Coeur's viewscreen. "One of their ships is coming our way with a full head of steam and loaded for bear."

"Which one?" Coeur looked to Deep Six, who was already sorting through *Lord Ryan*'s sensor stream and cross-referencing it through their databanks. The yacht's sensor suite was decent for a civilian model, but crude beside the military standard that *Hornet* possessed. Right now, *Hornet*'s energy levels had been reduced to minimal to maintain the ruse.

"From her emissions, it appears to be the *Royal Vengeance*, sir."

Of course, it would be him, wouldn't it?

"Are any other ships powering up?"

"Not at the moment." Sixer said. "*Royal Vengeance* appears to be coming in alone."

Coming after us by yourself, are you? Then it really is a vendetta, not that I had any doubts. You probably didn't warn any of the others. Worried they would steal your thunder. I'll accept hubris when it's offered, Captain Fox, even if you are more than enough to kill us all by your lonesome.

"I have an idea," Delpero said softly. "Though, it's not without a heavy element of risk."

"I think that's pretty much our world right now, Mr. Delpero. I'm all ears, let's hear it."

"They've seen me, but we can be pretty sure they don't know you're there. I'll accelerate as I fast as our connection will allow. When the time is right, you cut the cords and coast forward while I break away on a divergent course and flip on my active sensors. I believe that should distract them away from you long enough to get to a Jump-safe location."

Coeur quirked an eye-brow at what proposed.

"Mr. Delpero, I mean no disrespect, but I know that ship and her Captain is coming in for blood. I don't think either you or *Lord Ryan* can contend with her one-on-one."

"That's true," he said with faint smile. "I don't pretend to be in her league, but I do have at least as much maneuverability and speed as she does if I'm not towing another ship. Plus, our glorious comrades have installed some interesting countermeasures into the old girl. That may just give me the break I need."

He shook his head. "We can't fight, and we can't hide. What does that leave us but to run for all it's worth?"

Coeur sat there for several seconds considering his words, aware that each grain of hourglass sand that fell was another that might be covering their grave if she didn't act. What he was suggesting was tantamount to a suicide run. Each time Coeur had faced *Royal Vengeance* she had always held the advantage. If *Royal Vengeance* became aware of *Hornet's* presence, there was no way to outrun or outgun her out in open space, and here Delpero was offering to play the bull-fighter for her to get away. If something happened to him...

Perhaps sensing Coeur's state of mind, Delpero added:

"I assure you that I am not trying to be altruistic, I'm just stating the facts of the situation as they present themselves. If all else fails, I'll Jump and pray."

"That's not a scenario I would advise," Coeur said sharply, "and I speak from personal experience."

"Very well, do you have a better idea?"

"No," Coeur said. "No, I don't."

"Then I suggest you brace yourself," He said. "It's going to be rough ride."

A moment later, *Lord Ryan's* maneuver drive flared a radiant blue as the yacht veered off, cutting the angle on a course that brought *Golden Flame* between it and the pursuing cruiser. Minutes crawled by as the yacht and far trader alike strained in agony. To *Hornet* and her crew, it felt like the epicenter of an earthquake as the relatively fragile freighter was quickly pulled beyond her normal acceleration threshold and past her ability to compensate. Everyone aboard her felt the crunch as unyielding g-forces pressed down upon them, some cursing silent between gritted teeth, some struggling to breathe and remain alert at their station.

Warning signals blared. Lights pulsed in a rhythmic dance as *Hornet* screamed and bucked. Miraculously, the grapnel cables held as their roots connected directly to the ship's airframe.

Delpero's face reappeared on the screen, his face unmolested by the ravages of their flight.

"What's your status?"

"Almost...to...our...limit," she replied, by contrast her face contorted into a strange rictus. "Must...detach...soon."

"I've got the new course already laid in and ready to go. Get ready to detach in twenty seconds. Steady as she goes." A timer appeared on the screen beside him, counting down.

It was the longest twenty seconds that Coeur could remember. Slowly the time crawled by. Each second felt infinitely long. Her hand hovered over the release controls that Snapshot had transferred to the bridge.

"Detach now, now, *now!*" Delpero said.

Coeur's hand obeyed his instruction numbly. The swept-point of *Lord Ryan's* hull disappeared from sight as *Hornet* was launched like an arrow from Apollo's bow.

Lord Ryan planed "up" and angled off as much as her struggling drives dared. Now relieved of her burden, she soon righted herself and accelerated to a sprint. Her active sensors came up, neatly pulling the attention away from the far trader like a magician's sleight of hand. *Hornet* used those scant moments to fire her braking thrusters, then all systems went dark as she pretended to be a patch of empty space.

From *Lord Ryan's* bridge, August watched them go, the active sensors seeing the ship with improved clarity. The only two people that had ever really meant anything to him were aboard that ship, and now he was alone. Alone with the wolf at his door.

Even if he failed at saving himself, perhaps they would have a chance. Now he turned his concentration to evading his pursuers. It was a gamble that had turned him into the fox to the *Royal Vengeance's* hound.

It is done...

* * *

The yacht's flight was faithfully recreated on the master plot aboard *Royal Vengeance*, which bore the intense gaze of Gaylon Fox.

"It looks as though she's going flat out, sir."

"Thank you."

The movements of the other ship had been puzzling, and he struggled to reconcile it in his mind. Was Coeur D'Esprit over there at all? The amateurish escape vector bore none of her hallmarks. There was no mark of excellence, no confidence outside of a hope-for-the-best maneuvering. Surely *she* could do better than to open up the contest to a mere stern chase.

Perhaps she had been killed in the escape and her subordinates were all that remained. Perhaps she was incapacitated or incapable of exercising command over the situation. Whatever the case, he was coming to believe that his nemesis was not over there.

Somewhere in the back of his mind her words echoed up from the halls of his memory. *I will never be the kind of person you hoped I would be, that you need me to be.*

Another alternative he hadn't considered rolled around in his head. What if his nemesis had been more of a paper tiger than he realized? Surely it had been skill and cunning that had caught him unawares twice...but what if wasn't? What if she had just been able to exploit an advantage, but not able to manufacture them when they weren't provided in advance?

Had she been right in what she'd said? Did he truly need her to be all those things so he remained blameless in defeat, so that his ego could live with itself?

He turned these thoughts over and over in his mind as he watched the *Lord Ryan* try to flee in vain. In a few moments whoever was over there was about to receive a rude awakening. It was doubtful that they knew that *Royal Vengeance* could fire from so far away with any accuracy.

They were about to find out how wrong they were.

"Sir," the comm officer said. "*Phoenix* is signaling again. They want us to clarify our intentions."

"Ignore them," he said flatly, turning towards his tactical officer. "Do we have a firing solution on that ship?"

"They are using our approach plane relative to *Golden Flame* to prevent a direct line of fire. I will be able to recalculate it as soon as we clear the flagship." Her amber eyes flicked towards the display. "They are actually making it easy on us with that vector. Once we get in behind them, it will be a straight shot. The Gryphons won't have any problem finding their mark, sir."

"Very well, I want you to fire as soon as you are able. Don't wait for me to give the order, fire as you bear."

"Yes, sir!"

Darmane attacked her job with an enthusiasm that both appreciated and encouraged. She had been with the ship since second Mexit and had proven to be an efficient and deadly sword arm.

Now she was busily slaving the guidance systems of the upcoming salvo by programming a 'follow the leader' subroutine into the missiles. Every fourth missile would then guide its brothers to the target, allowing the missile MFD's a greater degree of striking power. If any of the team 'leaders' lost their lock, the subroutine would dissolve allowing each to shoot independently.

It was a smart piece of code Darmane had created for her ship, but it had never been field-tested. Here would be its proving ground.

Minutes slipped by as *Lord Ryan* continued to pull away. Slowly but surely the cruiser adjusted its course to avoid the dreadnought and settle in behind its prey, albeit at an extreme distance. From well to starboard, a squadron of relic Harrier fighters launched from the carrier, *Marat*, and accelerated out to join forces with the cruiser.

Too bad they won't get here in time. Ah well, I suppose it's good practice.

"I have a firing solution, sir." Darmane reported a few moments later, "I am firing missiles...now."

Sixteen capital missiles streaked away *Royal Vengeance* like a convocation of angry eagles, each with enough killing power to utterly annihilate the civilian craft. A few minutes later, two more missiles fired, followed by two more.

Royal Vengeance had been equipped primarily with long-range strike missiles for running down fleeing craft in a system without a concentration of military units. It was one of those rare opportunities afforded a warship commander to find themselves in the situation they were equipped to handle. It made things so much easier.

Nothing was being left to chance.

* * *

August Delpero watched with growing horror as the cruiser on his tail fired from extreme range. The density of the salvo told him immediately that the commander was confident that the missiles could find their mark, otherwise they would've thrown away so many at one time.

That meant that they were hoping to go for the jugular right out of the gate.

Coeur was right, though 'out for blood' seems a bit of an understatement.

The missiles' overtake velocity was not as fast as some of the systems he had tested or sold at Novastar, but the endurance they carried to be in active burn all the way had to be very robust. It was one thing to avoid missiles that were on a ballistic course, but quite another to avoid them if they were still under their own power at the point of arrival.

"How much time before we can make the Jump to Aubaine?" he asked the multi-megacredit computer.

"Six hours, twenty-one minutes before we reach minimum safe distance at present course and speed," a pleasant female voice said.

"How much time until the missiles reach us?"

"Forty-three minutes at present course and speed."

"Will any of the evasion programs either decrease the Jump transit time or the increase the time the missiles will reach us?"

"Calculating," the voice said as Delpero nervously drummed his fingers on the console. "None of the pre-programmed evasion maneuvers will affect Jump transit time positively. Evasion-3 could increase the missile intercept time by up to twelve minutes, depending on their guidance systems. It will, however, lengthen time to Jump by twenty-eight minutes."

Evasion-3 called for the ship to move forward in a continuous zig-zag pattern, forcing the missiles to adjust their tracking and hopefully burn out more of the fuel in the process. The pre-programmed maneuvers were not as good as an actual flesh-and-blood pilot, but great pains and expense had gone into their construction, much as the sophisticated level of automation that allowed them to be utilized at all.

"All right, initiate Evasion-3 and update the time codes. I am also authorizing you to remove the safety governors from both the maneuver and Jump drives. Engage all counter-measures."

Numbers flowed across the screen as *Lord Ryan* ran for all she was worth, jinking and juking to escape the doom that was creeping up in her wake. As the figures and projections played across his console, Delpero saw that the improvement would not be enough. He was still going to be overtaken, he was just drawing it out.

Time passed and the impact counter continued to shrink. Already those missiles had made four course corrections to match him and it didn't seem to affect them anymore than a straight-line path. Each time they had to adjust, it bought them a little breathing space, though now they were getting diminishing returns. The missiles had started shooting less extreme angles of approach to adapt to the movements of their target. The marginal advantage the maneuver that built up for Delpero began to erode before his eyes.

His options were dwindling. The growing inevitability of a missile strike tightened its grip on his thinking. If there was no way to avoid it, then that left only one real option. He could attempt to Jump within the confines of a gravity well and take his chances. But, should he try an intrasystem micro-Jump and hope to maintain enough fuel in the event that he should precipitate into empty space, or should he go all the way since he was risking a Misjump either way?

The fuel tanks were full to capacity, which meant he had options, but only moments to decide how to use them. A part of him wished that Zorn or D'Esprit was with him. They would know what to do. The drumming of fingers on the console reached a fevered pitch and he decided.

A micro-Jump it is. If I'm not killed outright, I should still have fuel enough fuel to carry me someplace. If I'm lucky and make back here, I'll still have the means to get to Aubaine.

"Okay, prepare to go to Jump," he instructed. "Set the precipitation area to a point on the fringe of the system. Take into account any records of picket patrols that far out."

"Acknowledged," the computer said after an interval. "Jump engines are at standby."
"I suppose there's no point in delaying it," he said out loud, steeling himself. "Initiate Jump."

The ship's lights dimmed automatically, a long-standing tribute to the ancient Vilani tradition. Covering plates unfolded like a fan from the depths of their recesses to block all viewports. Delpero braced for the sensation of Jump that would tell him that they had crossed the threshold.

His console lit up in red with the word 'ERROR' in letters ten centimeters high.

"Unable to comply with Jump command," the computer stated calmly.

"What?!"

"Jump engines cannot execute properly. A security measure has been put in place to prevent their use. It requires a manual input code that is not on file."

Halafast and Kim, of course. They weren't about to let their favorite transport get away from them unless they were present.

"Can you override?"

"Negative."

He held his head in hands, feeling the already crushing weight become immeasurably heavier.

If Kim and Halafast had rigged the Jump Engines with a security system, what were the odds that he could find it in time, much less crack it? Risking a Jump had been his last card to play and there was nothing else to be done.

"Then it's over."

Checkmate.

"Do we have a relative location on the *Hornet* still?"

"Affirmative. We have their projected position based on the time it..."

"Fine, I want to send a one-way message to them on the tightest beam possible. Could that be intercepted?"

"Active sensors have found no contacts between our location and where we believe *Hornet* to be. The possibility of interception is virtually impossible."

"Okay then," he straightened in his seat, adjusting his suit jacket, clinging to what resolve was left to him, "Message begins..."

* * *

Hornet continued to careen through space in slow, forward roll with systems dark. Without extending the ship's larger passive sensor array, it was becoming harder and harder to know what was going on. They had registered missile fire, presumably from *Royal Vengeance*, but very little other than that.

Fortunately for them, it appeared that they had gotten away clean for the moment. No contacts registered on their 'short' passive sensors anywhere around them. It would still take hours before they were in a position to safely Jump, so once again they had to ply their spacer discipline and concentration to sit at their stations doing nothing, but ready to do everything.

"Captain," Sixer said at Coeur's side. "We are receiving an incoming transmission from *Lord Ryan* on a tight beam laser."

"Let's see it."

An image of Delpero's head and shoulders filled the screen. He seemed relaxed, but something about the light in eyes was resigned.

"I'm afraid I have some bad news for you, Captain," he began. "*Royal Vengeance* is proving to be every bit the foe you said she would be. Right about now, I've got incoming missiles that I can't outrun or outmaneuver. What's worse, I can't even risk a Misjump. It seems our Soleean friends disabled the drives in a way we couldn't have found in time even if we had known to look."

"Oh my God," Coeur gasped.

"Yeah," he said softly as though in answer. "I won't be delivering the message to Aubaine, after all. I'm sorry."

He looked off camera and his eyes grew distant in contemplation.

"In the final account, I suppose this is what I get for flying too close to the sun. I've lived a life that was hollow, filled with ambition, concerned only for my own aggrandizement. I do not look back on my life fondly, now knowing the kind of man I *could've* been. It's only recently have I begun to see the world with new eyes," he quirked a bittersweet smile. "A pity it came too late."

He looked towards the pick-up again with eyes laden with many unsaid words. "I will attempt to buy you as much time as I can. I only hope that it will be enough."

He pressed his hands together as if in prayer.

"Godspeed, *Hornet*. It's your future now. Delpero out."

* * *

August Delpero entered *Lord Ryan's* lounge, leaving the computer to its Fabian endeavor. At one time, this had been his home away from home. He had always kept the wet bar well-stocked with the finest spirits he could find, from refined Fijan rice wine to the cultured brandy of Spencer.

It was pleasing to find that Mr. Kim and Mr. Halafast had kept the bar up to the standards that he had set. It allowed him the small comfort of pouring himself a stiff drink while he waited. He took in a long draught of smooth Aubani whiskey, reveling in the sensation.

His hand went to the hidden control panel on the bar. Springing up around on the holographic walls was the illusion of a great jungle landscape. In the distance, just on the horizon hovered pair of yellow suns, their light in a perpetual state of twilight. The image had been a gift from Vega Zorn.

Somehow he had always assumed that this scene had depicted dusk, where the suns were about to fade from sight, their light giving way to darkness. Now he wasn't so sure. In his mind's eye, he saw two women standing there, taking the place of the stars. Seen in that light, he knew that the fiery sunset before him was actually a sunrise.

At that revelation, his mind wandered back. Once in his cell in Trantown Federal Penitentiary, he had lamented that loyalty, gratitude, dedication and other virtues he had considered essential were absent in the modern day. He had been wrong – he'd been looking in the wrong place. Today alone he had seen dedication reflected in the eyes of the woman he still loved as she raced to save the life a broken Ithklur. He had witnessed the growing gratitude that humans had shown a Hiver, a race he'd committed genocide against, whose forethought and skill had given them a chance. Finally, he felt the loyalty that *Hornet's* crew felt for each other as they worked in concert towards a single goal.

Draining his glass, he settled comfortably into the couch. There wasn't much time now. Death had always been a long way away for a man of his position and prestige, an event to worried about another day. Now, faced with the knowledge that his hour upon the stage was quickly coming to a close, he wondered at how he might spend them. Questions filled his mind, all the unanswered questions that a lifetime will produce. Was there a heaven, an afterlife? Would it hurt, to die?

At length, his hand found the control panel next to the couch and brought up a favorite piece of music. If this was indeed to be his end, he would spend those final moments losing himself in the brilliance of a man whose genius could be felt echoing down through the centuries, bright and untarnished by the times.

He took a deep breath and closed his eyes, letting the music embrace him. At first a battery of male voices sang in a low baritone, heavy and somber as though bearing the weight of the sins he had committed. Then, a heavenly host of feminine voices rose up to merge with them in an angelic chorus, whose combined beauty was both transcendent and sublime.

It was his favorite part of Mozart's Requiem – Kyrie. He moved his arms to the music, imagining himself a conductor directing a choir adorned in purest white.

Kyrie eleison, they sang - Lord have mercy upon us.

Forgive me for what I have done, he thought in response.

Christe eleison, they sang – Christ have mercy upon us.

Good-bye, Orit.

Kyrie eleison, they sang – Lord have mercy upon us.

I love you.

Their voices swelled to a note that resonated in his soul as the first missile struck. There was a grand pause of silence, but the voices returned as more missiles struck, coming quickly to a crescendo.

August Delperio gave thanks to whatever higher power had allowed him to hear this one more time in its entirety.

He thanked them for their mercy.

As the last notes rang mournfully and perfect, *Lord Ryan* exploded in light, shining brighter than the stars.

Chapter 20

Admiral Shannon Hayward idly swiveled back and forth in his chair as he tried to study the latest fleet reports. It was imperative that he internalize each set of numbers to have at a moment's notice. What were their magazine levels, their victuals stores, their replacement parts and spares? How many fighter squadrons were combat-ready? What percent of their fleet was present, and how many had yet to arrive, and why?

These were all questions that he normally devoured as a facet of his job, but today was different. Today made the minutiae a hard pill to swallow for many reasons.

Two days had come and gone since *Hornet* vanished like a ghost. A lot had happened since then, and more than any facts or figures, it was the aftermath that Hayward hurried to factor into this thinking.

First and foremost was the High Technarch, who was alive and well, despite having his wedding bombed. His bride, too, had escaped the blast with bruises, scrapes and a minor case of smoke inhalation. The casualties had been high, considering the number of people present when the bomb went off. All too many of them were fatal. Mestrovic had picked a number of young, presentable servicemen and put them in front of the cameras in dress uniform. Almost all of them had been Oriflammen, and more than 73% of them were now dead. That was one statistic that he had no problem assimilating immediately.

Once the damage control teams made it to *Golden Flame's* CIC, they found that the doors had sealed themselves as though the compartment had been shot away and only the starry void could be found on the other side. Even emergency override protocols couldn't crack them.

The teams had to cut their way through to find a smoke-filled slaughterhouse. Even some of the most hardened souls had grimaced at the scene.

They had pulled Mestrovic out from under a mound of bodies. The old man had screamed himself mute. Dr. Symon had to put him under heavy sedation to bring him down from his wild hysteria. Along with his bride, Captain Emory had also survived, battered and unconscious, fortunate to have been standing below the CIC deck at the time of the explosion.

It was when the bodies were counted and the compartment cleared that it became known that Admiral Alcantara was among the dead. News of her death had spread among the ISN crews like wildfire. Hayward had thought that some of the ships might quit the campaign on the spot and set a course for home. That attitude was quickly crushed, thoroughly and mercilessly, by the now senior-ranking ISN command officer, Gaylon Fox.

The news had perhaps resonated aboard *Royal Vengeance* perhaps the greatest of all, Hayward thought, considering the number of personally-endorsed officers that had known Alcantara as a patron. In short order, Fox had managed to transform that murderous rage into a cold sense of purpose, doing Hayward an enormous favor in the process.

The other ISN officers fell in line behind him without debate, each knowing that he had been one of their fallen Admirals most favored disciples. There were at least two carrier skippers that could've pressed a claim to be the next link in the chain and assume command, but none had. Fox had been the natural choice as the successor.

It had been a blessing at first for Fox to have taken care of the problems in his own house, thereby relieving the need for Hayward, an outsider, to step in and dress them down. The situation started to turn, however, when word got to Fox that the action with *Lord Ryan* had been a ruse to allow *Hornet* to slip away quietly.

The whole situation painted Coeur D'Esprit in a new light. Had she hung August Delpero out to dry, or he had he deliberately made himself a target? The details remained muddled on that point, but the end result was that he was dead and *Hornet* was nowhere to be found.

When Fox had caught wind of this, those blue eyes had grown as cold as space when he came to visit. His team had been able extrapolate the specifics of how the escape had been executed, and, shortly after, he informed Hayward that *Royal Vengeance* and a fast attack squadron of ISN ships would be pulling out of the system immediately and jumping for Phoebus.

There was really no way that the Admiral could've realistically denied Fox's non-request. To prevent the ISN from launching a punitive action could've brought an already deteriorating situation down in flames and risked permanently alienating the ISN's unchallenged commander. That would've been the road to complete disaster. Not ten hours before, *Royal Vengeance* and eleven other ISN units, all fast and lethal warships, departed early for their next port of call. Though it nettled Hayward to think it, Fox was right. *Hornet* had to be stopped before she could deal a more serious blow to their efforts.

The result was that the remaining command staff was almost entirely Oriflammen now, which, in turn, led to the next phase on a very slippery slope. A little more than a day after Mestrovic was admitted to the Infirmary, Dr. Symon released him to Hayward's lament.

Since coming to this system, Hayward had taken note of his old ally's ever-increasing sense of paranoia. If it hadn't been fully realized before, it was now. The bomb had been meant for him, and he knew it. Furthermore, it had been placed there, it was believed, by Vega Zorn or by Lady Eos.

The old man was jumping at shadows now, imagining traitors and enemies everywhere, fueled by the knowledge that two of his most trusted agents, not to mention a newly-minted Technarch, had betrayed him. Hayward had even heard unconfirmed reports that Mestrovic had made a round of summary executions aboard *Golden Flame*.

Those rumors had not yet reached him when the Admiral had been recalled from *Phoenix* to meet with the old man, shortly after his release. The Technarch had ranted and raved, nearly frothing at the mouth as he called Hayward to the carpet for his, "negligence, laziness, and hopeless incompetence."

It apparently didn't register in the old man's head that he had invited all three of the traitors into his private sanctum, given them access to the most sensitive parts of the ship, and let them be privy to information vital to their operations. The Technarch had done all that, but in the final account had pinned the responsibility on Hayward.

Gold Fleet, he had informed Hayward, would now fall under the command of the only person he fully trusted to lead – himself. The Admiral remembered the exact moment when Mestrovic handed down that edict, remembered what he had thought at the time.

Good God, are our fortunes now to be decided by this man? Even if we succeed, what then? What does that merit us?

Mestrovic had stopped short of doing anything more rash than relegating the Admiral to a second-in-command without any harm being brought to his person. It was that respite which formed a small pocket in Hayward's mind, opening the door for a bold-faced lie to lodge in his thoughts.

Of course Mestrovic was furious. Close friends had betrayed him, choosing to strike at him and his bride-to-be at their own *wedding*. What man wouldn't come close to losing himself in a raging torrent of fury? The rumors of executions were just that, rumors. He'd known Mestrovic too long to believe that he would be that careless, or have such blatant disregard for human life. *That* was not the Vitali Fyodorovich Mestrovic that he'd known for the better part of a decade. It was just stress and anxiety, working its way through an old man who had never let the firebrand of his convictions cool with age. Now, a victim of his passions he gave his molten anger an outlet. It would all blow over. The Revolution was still alive and well.

That poisonous line of thinking had almost conquered him. That is, before a landmine left behind by an enemy, addressed to him personally, had wiped the slate clean faster than a tactical nuke.

Thirty-six hours after *Lord Ryan's* destruction, a message had been forwarded to his personal queue from *Golden Flame*. Expecting more damage control estimates or requests for additional personnel, the heading had been labeled, "The Truth."

The author had identified herself as an intelligence officer in the employ of Reformation Coalition Intelligence, on which assumed the guise of The Mask, or Lady Eos.

Hayward had very nearly deleted it right there, believing it to be an attempt to sew dissension in the ranks, or outright subversion. After checking to make sure the message contained no bugs or hidden riders, he read the letter. Dear God, he'd read it. How could he have possibly known?

The contents of the missive had been inflammatory in the extreme, largely accusing High Technarch of being a madman, a tyrant and a despot in the making. It listed in detail the people Lady Eos believed would be in danger of being executed if the campaign were to continue. Hayward's own name was on the list along with Boris Seitzmann, and a number of his senior officers.

Once again, he had been ready to trashcan it and go on about his business. Dropping the names of his officers, merely proved that Lady Eos had known they existed, hardly a challenge for a trained intelligence officer that was given unlimited access by the High Technarch. The other nail in the coffin was that Lady Eos and company had been responsible not only for the chaos in the CIC, but several teams of Marines that stood between them and their ship. Perhaps they might've been nameless, faceless pawns that were merely obstacles to the escaping prisoners, but each had a name, a face and a family. Already, there was a long list of names that required him to write notification of death letters to families of Oriflammen servicemen and women. He would tell them, as he always did, that their sons and daughters had died as heroes.

As he had thought about that list of names awaiting him to discharge a grim duty, the blasphemous message had provided a new list of names that shook his world to the foundations. According to Lady Eos, she had cracked Mestrovic's personal databank and found the manifest revealing the contents of the mystery transport with the brilliant flame markers. In no uncertain terms, it spelled out in sickening detail the friends, lovers, husbands, wives and family of everyone of importance of Oriflammen heritage in the fleet.

Near the top of the list had been a grouping of three entries that had unmade him.

Laura Hayward, 33, Wife.

Elizabeth Hayward, 9, Daughter.

Moirra Hayward, 0, Daughter.

He had not been ready to believe any of this outlandish tale until the third entry had stopped him cold. It had been four months since he'd last seen his wife, just before he'd headed back to hidden fleet exercise facility. By then her belly had started to show four months into the

pregnancy, and only continued to grow more beautiful in his eyes as the life inside her waited patiently for their upcoming day of arrival.

In an old Oriflammen tradition favored by her mother's family, Laura had opted not to know the sex of the child ahead of time. They had done it that way when Elizabeth had joined them. Had she been born a boy, her name would've been Steven. This time around the names they had painstakingly decided were James or...

Moira Hayward, 0, Daughter.

The first indication he ever had that his wife had given birth to a daughter was seeing her name on a prisoner manifest. Through the haze of pain that followed, he'd wondered - was there any way Lady Eos could know that? Unfortunately, he didn't need to be told that it was true. He knew it was as surely as he knew the number of emergency rations stored aboard *Phoenix*, deep down he knew.

The message that had so devastated his world ended with the statement:

"Words can't express how sorry I am to be the one to tell all of this. I know that you are a decent and honorable man, Commodore, as surely as I know that Mestrovic is madman. I know that you believe the revolution you are bringing about is just and necessary. And, had you been the architect of it, and not Mestrovic, perhaps it would've been. The truth is that the revolution as you see it never existed, at least not in Mestrovic's vision of it. If he is allowed to rule, then I weep for any being finding themselves under the shadow of his sceptre. I trust that, in the end, you will find the strength and fortitude to do what you know is right."

That was the reason why trying to absorb long columns of readiness drill ratings and percentages of reactor mass depletion did not hold their normal sway over him.

A chime sounded on his computer. The press of a panel replaced the fleet report with Helena Paige's face.

"What can I do for you?"

"We've had a flurry of arrivals just in the last half-hour. From the looks of it, the *Marianne* squadron just came through along with *Joan d'Arc*, *Charles Martel* and *Burgundy*. The last two flattops in Commodore Thornberg's carrier group were with them. That puts us at 93% of total."

"Very well, send word to the fuel tenders to rendezvous with them. I want those ships refueled and ready to go in short order. Also pass the word to the rest of the fleet to get ready to pull out. Copy *Golden Flame* on all this as well. If His Excellency has anything to add, please do so."

"Yes, sir. I'll take care of it."

She disappeared, leaving the Admiral to his own devices. Plans were already formulating in his head.

I set out knowing full well that I would be committing treason. I just didn't think I'd be committing it against the Revolution I started. .

* * *

RCS *Hornet* made its way through the grey-blue envelope of Jump space, following its irreversible course towards Phoebus. Though ships traveled through the enigma of Jump space at a rate, and some argued against the idea that they 'moved' at all within a Jump envelope, some aspect of the ship seemed hell-bent for leather to its destination. It was as though the ship itself were anticipating their arrival to enemy-held territory just as hawk anticipates the appearance of its newest prey.

Something of that feeling pervaded the very air that recycled itself through *Hornet's* interior. The crew felt it with every breath. There was danger, yes, but the crew had come through the fire. The thought of taking the enemy to task on their terms made them each hungry for that moment to arrive.

Coeur could feel it crackle in the air like silent fireworks. Everyone that could be spared from their stations filed into the common area. She had opted to unfold a larger table attachment as an adjunct to the mess hall table so that they could all take a seat and command a good view of the display screen.

Drop Kick sat to her immediate left, the other Marine's trailing off to his right, and Gyro sat on her right with the other senior officers graduating down. Raven, whose reception had been mixed since their return, sat at the other end.

Coeur had to confess the escape had done wonders for their morale. Aside from just being glad to walk among the living, she had seen many of the rips and tears from Lamda-3 welded back together. For starters, it seemed that Drop Kick and Snapper had managed to reconcile whatever it was that had been eating away at them. Crowbar and Raven had avoided each other the first few days, but now they too were starting to rekindle what bonds they shared. Though unhappy with being shot, the engineer had been willing to overlook her "overbearing bit of tradecraft." Theirs was a slower path than the betrothed couple, but apparently Crowbar hadn't taken it as personally as everyone guessed he might.

In something of a reverse, Striker's sacrifice had brought the crew closer in line with Hunter, the only Ithklur still on his feet. The villain of the piece at Lamda-3 had proven to be the hero of the Spires breakout. His end made it that much easier to glaze over his misdeeds of the past. Bonzo had been the one to say a few words at the ceremony.

"You all know what happened on that horrible rock," he'd said. "I won't rehash the past, not here, not now. I will tell you that Striker personified what it meant to be not just a Marine, but a warrior. He followed a code without question, without apology and without regret. We may not have always agreed with how he applied that code to life, but no one could ever doubt that he stayed true to himself all the way to the end," he'd looked down at the flag-covered coffin. "In death, you taught us all the greatest lesson we could learn in these times. Charge forward, ignore the odds, and never ever surrender. For as long as I live, I won't forget that, Striker, thank you."

He then added.

"It's too bad, too, I have a bottle of aged Phoeban scotch I wanted to split with you. Nothing says let's forget the past like shared intoxication. Next go round, buddy."

Really the only static left on the ship was between Zorn and Physic, and to a lesser degree between Raven and herself. There was still an uneasiness there, between the Captain and her IO, would take time to go away. Zorn and Physic, however, had proved to be like oil and water, especially now with Delpero's passing. The two circled each other warily like tigresses, never letting the conflict come out in the open. Their silences were full whenever they were around each other, like now.

It was a saving grace that the seriousness of the situation was enough to smooth out even that conflict on a temporary basis. That left Coeur with a crew that was united the way she needed for her plan to work.

"Okay, let's get started," she said to gain their attention. "We're headed back into territory we know is compromised, and we don't know a lot about how it's changed since we left. By now, Hayward has figured out our deception. From the level of fuel we had at the time we left, he can surely narrow down the places we could've gone. If interdicator ships aren't already in Jump Space heading for Phoebus, then I would be willing to eat one of Razor's corndogs raw."

"I would not advise that, Captain," Razor said from his stool. "Your digestive process would necessitate them being cooked first before ingestion. Though, I am willing to experiment along those lines if you are."

"Thank you, Newt, let's hope it doesn't come to that," Coeur said deadpan. "So, let's start with what we know. Raven?"

All heads turned from one end of the table to the other as though following a tennis match.

"Mestrovic had become more and more displeased with the good Steward of Phoebus for sometime now. He believes Garrett is a Centrist only in the shallowest of terms, who doesn't possess the – and I use his words here – 'moral rectitude or personal wherewithal for what's to come,' thus he decided to tie up that loose thread by taking his government away from him. Problem solved. Now, from what I gather, Mestrovic and an agent he called The Emissary worked out a timetable so that they could coordinate from both ends of the Spires/Zloga tunnel. The plan was to imprison Garrett about the time that Spires was scheduled to fall. Once they reached that stage, Mestrovic believed that any outward pretense that Garrett still ran his own shop was unnecessary. *But*, he was to remain alive until Mestrovic on the scene to personally oversee his execution."

"That means," Coeur said. "We know where a planetary leader is being kept and that he's still alive in enemy custody."

The Marines perked up, their eyes bright, as they instinctively knew what that would mean.

"Since this whole mess started on Aubaine," several glances were openly cast at Vega Zorn. "We've been fighting a defensive battle at every encounter since then. Now we have the advantage. The enemy doesn't know we're coming, or where we'll strike. It's possible to fight them on our terms this time, to finally take the war to the enemy, and that is what I intend to do."

She saw that noble luster in their eyes, standing like greyhounds at the slip, straining upon the start. All she had to do was point in the right direction and woe be unto any that stood in their way.

"Since our last appearance," she continued, "we have to assume that they have orbital sentries. If they've decided not to hide anymore, then it only makes sense that they would lock the planet down from orbit like they did at Spires. Raven, you mentioned that you have a possible counter to that?"

"Yes, Newton and I have examined the sensor ghost stealth program in more detail. It's natural for us to assume that the Majority of their ships have this ability, if not at the very least a way to detect when it is being used. While Newton was playing possum, it wrote few hundred thousand lines of code that took that idea and modified it further. When we compared notes again, I think we've managed to pin together an alternate that should get us past the improved planetary sensors and any pickets they have stationed there. On the downside, if someone sorts out what we're doing, it won't take long for them to spot us. So, I would suggest that we run as dark as we can and go in ballistic."

Snapshot caught Coeur's eye, nodding that she wanted to speak.

"Snapper, you have something to add?"

"Yes, thank you. One of the original ideas that Gyro and I had during the development of the Bulls-Eye program was a more effective way to decoy ourselves with missiles during combat. It involves switching places with one of our missiles that squawks our emissions, allowing us to either run silent, or take the place of one of our missiles that suffers a malfunction so that we can get in close to a target – we call it the Three Card Monte. If we can fold this sensor distorting program into that, I think we'll really have an ace up our sleeve if things get hot."

Coeur nodded. "Excellent. I want you to work with Newt and Raven once they have a finalized source code."

"Will do, skipper."

Coeur thumbed a panel on the hand-held at her elbow. The large screen lit up with a bird's eye view of Garrett's castle, Stonecurtain Keep. The craggy lines and towering spikes dissolved into the skeletal wireframe of the edifice's floor plan. The view zoomed down past the living quarters and administration centers down to the extensive dungeon complex below. A corridor lit up with rooms branching out from it on either side. The camera's point of view began to orbit that section, displaying it from all angles.

"According to Mestrovic, this is where they are supposed to hold him. I suppose we can thank him for being so overly devoted to the details," Raven said. "It certainly narrows the playing field."

"Assuming he's still alive," Zorn said with absolutely no emotion.

Zorn had told them of the parting gift that she had left behind for the High Technarch before they departed. There was no way to know if it had worked at all, though Zorn held hopes that it had struck a blow deep into the heart of the opposition.

"Let's not discount him just yet," Coeur said. "Let's file his alleged death under 'happy coincidences' if it proves to be true, and move on."

Drop Kick had been studying the map on the screen and the mirror of it on his own hand-held. He was scrutinizing the layout before with his usual eye for the tactical side.

"The place was built to prevent orbital or air insertion," he said. "We'll go in from the ground level and work our way down as quietly as possible. That means no heavy armor. Even scout battle dress would ring like a gong in there with every step to say nothing of any energy sensors they have stowed away down there. We can't blast our way in from the outside either or we risk bringing the whole warren down on Garrett's head."

"It'll be SAG rules, right Sarge?" Whiz Bang asked.

"More or less, but we won't have a team setting up the way months in advance, but otherwise yeah. We're talking good old-fashioned body sleeves and face paint, commando-style."

"To that point," Coeur said. "I plan on bringing us down in the ocean and working our way to this point here," she indicated a point on the world map that had retreated to the background. It was an inlet about eighty kilometers from Stonecurtain's location. *Hornet* will sit on the bottom and refuel and lend support however we can. Since the opposition was kind enough to leave the Valiant untouched in our cargo bay, we can flood the bay and launch it submerged."

"She's got emission dampeners, so we'll be able to get her in close. Won't be able to take her below, though." The sudden thought of prison guards coming face-to-face with a grav tank brought a sudden smile to his face. Of course, the tank was too wide to fit down the narrow passageways.

"Another thing, we don't want them calling for help and letting everyone know the game's afoot. If we can disrupt their main communications beforehand, I would count that a victory by itself," Coeur said.

Drop Kick mulled it over and looked down the table towards the Ithklur.

"Hunter, you up for being our second-story man?"

The lithe alien leaned forward over the table.

"You'll probably have to explain that particular turn of phrase to me, but if you're asking if I'm up for a pre-strike sabotage mission, then yes. Most definitely." He said.

"Good man. I thought you'd say yes."

"The other issue we will face here is time," Coeur said. "I figure we don't have much more than a day's head-start on any ships that come looking for us, if that. As soon as they show up, the whole system will be on alert even if we avoid detection, so timing will be critical here. We get in, we get out, hopefully before anyone jockeying a warship knows what's going on."

She checked her chronometer then turned to Drop Kick. "That leaves you about ninety-four hours to finalize your operations plan. Think you can work with that?" They both knew the answer to the question.

"I could have it for you in three hours if you needed it," Drop Kick chuckled. "So yeah, Red, that should be fine. We'll have plenty of time to prep the equipment and any specialty load outs we need."

"If that's the case, are there any questions?" She said, looking around the table. There were none. "I'll be leaning on everyone hard the next few days, so there'll be no surprise when I start harassing you for progress reports," a wave of laughter washed over the crew. "We only have one shot at this, so let's make it count." She gestured, signaling the end of the meeting.

Everyone stood up, gathered their gear and began to break for their respective stations. As Coeur straightened her things, Zorn leaned over to speak quietly at her shoulder.

"Can I have a few words with you in private?"

"Of course, right this way."

It wasn't very far to Coeur's quarters, but Zorn was quiet for the short trip, conscious, it seemed, of the other crew members that floated around them. As they entered her stateroom, Coeur stood by her desk, setting her hand-held down with a 'click' that rang in the silence.

"So, what is it?"

"It's about what happened on Aubaine," she said sealing the door. "I know why Physic is catty with me. She's has plenty of reason to be. God knows there's plenty of history between us. Since we made the break, I haven't had a chance to explain myself to you, Red, and I feel that I should."

As she said that, Coeur amended herself. There was another personal disconnect that she felt that extended beyond Raven. Images of two sleek interceptors falling out the skies of Aubaine filled her mind. Eight Ball and his squad gone in an instant as Zorn made her escape. It built on it self, a kaleidoscope of images.

"Oh, yeah, about that...."

Without warning, Coeur balled up her fist and struck out at Zorn's jaw in a blur of motion. It was not the first time she had cast a punishing blow at the space pirate for her misdeeds. This time, however, Zorn moved first, catching Coeur's fist in her steely grip.

"I sort of figured that was coming at some point," she said, making sure Coeur wasn't about follow up with another punch before letting go. "Let's not jump to conclusions until you hear what I have to say, okay?"

Coeur crossed her arms and leaned against her desk as Zorn massaged her hand. "Unnnhh, my palm stings now. I keep forgetting how scrappy you are."

"So you were saying?"

"I'm guessing that outburst has to do with your *Cobra* pilots, right?"

"Good guess."

"Thought so. Well, that wasn't my idea. I didn't know that Kim and Halafast had set up that up in advance. Getting August out of jail was my mission, but those two co-opted the escape while you chased us."

"Was there an apology in there somewhere?" Coeur asked. "Because last time I checked, saying you're sorry doesn't bring people back from the dead. If it did, us Star Vikings wouldn't be so broken or burned out."

"You're right. I'm not apologizing for the part I played in the escape, I'm just sorry that two of your pilots went home in a box. You know me, Coeur, during my whole career as a pirate I never took the life of a Coalition serviceman even when they gave me this," she pointed to her eye where the saber scar should've been. "I did what I thought was right on Aubaine, but, like every time I'm on the opposite side from you, things get loused up. I guess that should tell me something about you, huh?"

"Don't make this about you and me," Coeur snapped, "this about you and your crusade against the Reformation Coalition. First you went after the Hivers, nuking Ra in the process. That didn't work, so you helped foster a revolution led by a madman. Did it ever occur to you how many people that would hurt, main or kill? People, I might add, that were left over from your days with the Dawn league, the ones you served with. Perhaps you spared them as a pirate, but as revolutionary, you've thrown them to the wolves. They have been the ones to pay for your private little war, Zorn. You know, for a patriot you personify the old saying, 'with friends like you, who needs enemies?'"

Zorn clenched her jaw and Coeur knew that her words had found their mark. The grey-blue eyes were mirrors of reflected pain.

"All true. I've managed to heap mistake on top of mistake, and other people have paid for it. Cicero, V-Max, August – they've all died because of what I did. I can't bring them back, I can't bring any of them back. All I can do is try to make it right, like I did before when things fell apart. I'm sorry if that's not enough."

Nearing the door she looked back. "If you need further proof, look at the recording from Aubaine. I know you have it here somewhere." Then she disappeared out the door.

It was true, Coeur thought, after she was alone, Zorn had gone out of her way to correct her mistakes, often with explosive results. Sauler, Mexit, and now Spires. Had she been absent from any one of those events, *Hornet's* exploits might've come to a sudden and dramatic end.

But they hadn't, and somehow Zorn's strand of fate had become entangled inexorably with that of Coeur and her ship. Circling the desk, Coeur settled into her desk. A few commands later, the communications log from *Sparrow* was ready to conjure that one sickening moment in time into the present.

The suit of relic battle dress sat at the controls, its blood-red visor the glare of a demon. Had that been Mr. Kim or Mr. Halafast behind the mask at the time? She heard Hammer's voice from off screen.

"Put us back on."

"A preventable loss, Commodore," the armored figure said a moment later, "I trust that further demonstrations will be unnecessary."

Zorn was in the background of the capture, dressed in her tailored vac suit and drumming her fingers on the back of a chair.

It was just as she remembered it. Nothing was different, except...

She replayed the clip, zooming in on Zorn in the background. This viewing made the image literally speak to her as she was surprised to find that the idle drumming of Zorn's fingers on the chair was a message in Anslan.

I didn't know, Zorn signed. You've got to believe me, I swear on V-Max's grave, Coeur, I didn't know...

* * *

Starvine Amaryllis, whose true name had never been uttered by his human companions, quietly filled the entryway to sick bay. The normal proud set of his shoulders, the serious gleam in his yellow eyes was noticeably absent now, replaced by a weight on his shoulders that he alone seemed to bear. His shadow from the corridor caught Physic's attention.

"Hunter," she said surprised. "He's finally awake. He's been asking to see you." She motioned towards the medbed furthest from the door.

"I'll leave you two alone to talk." Part of any good bed-side manner was the ability to know when to excuse yourself, and Physic had that down to a science by now.

Hunter pulled back the blue-green curtain and stepped inside. His broken leader lay reclined on the bed, a collection of tubes and cords connecting him to the machinery. The top of his head was cocooned with bandages, covering his eyes and the nostrils that resided at his temples.

"Starvine." Raptor said in native Ithklur.

"I'm here." Starvine clasped his leader's hand. "I am glad that you have rejoined us. The doctor was concerned that you might never regain consciousness. You have proved her wrong."

"She will not tell me how badly I am broken," Raptor said. "Perhaps she feared that I would want to be released from this body if my wounds proved to be too limiting."

"They are not," Starvine said quickly. "A number of your bones were broken when...when the explosion went off."

Lirien's hand tightened, a testament of the strength he had even in his weakened state. "Do not blame yourself for my condition, my brother. Such are the fortunes of war. I would be unhappy if you let this become a distraction to what is required of you."

"There is something else, Lirien," Hunter said gingerly as though probing the edges of sore, "It's Veranus. He...he fell during our escape. There was nothing any of us could do."

"Our brother...dead?"

"Yes," he bowed his head. "He is gone."

A shudder ran through Lirien's body like a wave on the ocean as he began to weep. Starvine's resolve faltered as he saw those tears began to fall and all the emotion he'd bottled up for the sake of appearances swelled to the surface.

It was bad enough that he was on a ship filled with people that saw him as an outsider. Bad enough that his brother had died to help them escape and not one of them seemed to appreciate the sacrifice made on their behalf. Bad enough that his leader, more a father than a brother, was brought to this state. And for what?

He was never sure how long that outpouring lasted. All it once, Lirien's weeping came to an end, which prompted a pause in Starvine's own grieving.

"Did he die well?"

"Yes," Starvine said, wiping away his tears. "He didn't die alone. Many of the enemy shared his passing."

"Then that is all we could hope for, all any of us that follow our way can hope for."

"As you say."

"Listen closely," Lirien said. "Our circle is broken. You must stand in our stead for what is to come. Show them why we are worthy of their respect."

"You have my solemn vow," Starvine said. "I will carry both your standard, and that of Veranus. I swear it." The tears threatened to return.

"Weep no more, my brother," Lirien said softly. "Leave me now and turn your eyes to the future."

Starvine clasped the large hand with both of his for a moment longer then left his leader's side. The path forward would not come easy, nor would the tests that path would require.

When they came, he would be ready.

* * *

Hornet precipitated neatly from Jump Space in the Phoebus system, immediately rigging all systems for silent running. In the starry distance, the blue-white dot of the planet awaited them.

"How's it looking?" Coeur asked her astrogator.

"We are on target, sir. We will need to adjust our course only slightly to come in on a ballistic path the entire way."

"Nice work," she said. "What's our ETA to planetfall?"

"A little over five hours. It will take a bit longer since we are not under direct power."

"Any contacts in our vicinity?"

"Not at the moment, sir."

"Okay, keeping monitoring," she switched on the comm and Drop Kick's face appeared in the cargo hold. "How's the launch partition coming along?"

"Newton just finished a new battery of tests on the walls. I think they'll work for our purposes. Crowbar rigged up the pumps a few hours ago, so we should be ready to get wet as soon as we're down."

"We'll try to set you down without too many bumps."

"Gee thanks, Red." He smirked. "Drop Kick out."

Coeur settled in for the long haul, making herself as comfortable as she could. Part of their silent running program had included Newton and Raven's mimicked, and completely untested, stealth program. Construction of that device had taken up most of their time during their transit.

Now they were back, in a system that had almost proved to be the death of them once. The scar across her stomach was nearly invisible now, but the memories of receiving it were vivid.

Since they'd left, *Hornet* had really made a large triangle in what was thought to be the relative safety of the Reformation Coalition. They had never left their own back yard, but each system had presented them with their own dangers. They had come through them all as best they could. That she had been able to get this far was extraordinary. Several times now they had tempted fate, beating the odds every turn, and here they were about to mount a rescue mission in enemy-occupied territory.

Had it been the right call to come here instead of trying to make a double Jump to Aubaine? Warning the capitol of the unseen threat descending upon them was a first concern wasn't it? Then again, if it was acceptable to abandon a planetary leader to death, what did that say about her moral compass, and by extension, the state she served? If members of this Coalition could be so casually dismissed as collateral damage, then was it much of a Coalition?

It all boiled down to the hard truth – Delvin Garrett was Phoebus. He alone possessed a form of personal power over his subjects unrivalled by any other planetary leader in the Coalition. Even if the planet in question was often considered a glorified, low-tech refueling station, its continued survival fell firmly into the hands of one man, the man they came here to liberate.

Hours passed in silence as Coeur kept their one goal in mind. She was almost in a trance-like state when Deep Six's voice broke it.

"Sir, I am detecting ships in a wide orbit around the planet. They appear to be positioned in a standard guard formation."

"How many?"

"I'm reading two powered signatures right now, one off our port and starboard bow, respectively. There could be more hiding un-powered."

"Can you get a read on their aspect or configuration?"

"Partially. One of them is 87% likely to be RCC *Jörmungandr*, a System Defense Boat. The other is unknown, though it appears to be in the same general emissions range."

Coeur studied the new contacts, watching their slow orbit around the planet. The SDB was certainly compromised to have taken up station around the planet like that. She gave a silent prayer for the lives of their crews.

"All right, set me a course that shots the gap between them. I think we can risk a small thruster burn to nudge us into place."

"Yes, sir."

Hornet continued her glide path, seeking to fly between the sentinels. In agonizing slowness, the far trader traversed the endless night towards the pale jewel in front of them. Coeur gripped the controls tightly, ultra-sensitive to what they told her in all their subtle ways, as she threaded the needle where she hoped the contacts' sensor overlap was weakest.

Space began to give way to atmosphere, and still the guardians did not challenge them or acknowledge them in any way, nor did Phoebus ground control. *Hornet's* tuning fork prow and undercarriage began burning brightly as they pierced the atmosphere. Coeur struggled to keep her at the proper angle without powered support. *Hornet* was leaden as she came down. A bead of sweat of formed on Coeur's forehead as she fought the controls.

Come on, come on. I know you have it in you girl.

Through the fiery glow visible in the main viewport, Coeur spied lazy banks of clouds floating easily through a baby blue sky. The local time was a few hours after noon, so the magnificent fire trail announcing their presence would be visible for kilometers, though not nearly as noticeable if had been nighttime with *Hornet* looking the part of a vengeful comet about to strike. Counting her good luck, Coeur found on the world map were they where coming down. It was over a coastal region that had little to no population.

From here they would be able to follow the inland sea all the way to the Lorrianna inlet and set up a base of operations. Cloud banks gave way to a placid and unbroken ocean below. It was growing rapidly as Coeur finally brought up minimal braking thrusters to slow their descent.

Hornet was taking a page from old drop trooper doctrine by letting gravity do its work until the very last moment to avoid detection. Down, down they plunged, leveling and braking, braking and leveling in minute amounts.

A feathery plume of water was thrown high into the air as *Hornet* broke the surface of the water, coming finally to a halt. Diffused sunlight filtered down and played across the hull and viewport. In a matter of minutes, Coeur's view had gone from stars, to sun-lit sky, and now underwater. Schools of brightly-colored fish scurried away from the behemoth that had come upon them.

Switching over to *Hornet's* contrgravs, she eased the ship down into the depths. The floodlights flared to life, casting white rods of light into the living darkness as she got underway.

They would stay in the depths for much of their journey, only risking the shallows of the inlet at the end. By then, the sun would be going down, allowing them to operate under the cover of darkness.

Next to her, the Schalli took in a deep, cleansing breath. "It is good to be below the waves again, even if it's not my ocean," he said. "I see the glittering light of another world, smiling down upon my weary soul like a rainfall of liquid diamonds. The movement of the currents is a gentle wind, a light kiss that soothes my turquoise world, turning always in faultless, elemental rhythm. I am reborn."

"That was beautiful, Sixer," Coeur said. "Who wrote that?"

The Schalli turned to look at her, his large eyes dancing.

"I did, Captain."

* * *

As the shadows lengthened near the end of day, *Hornet* came to rest on a rocky perch in some thirty meters of water. Above her the sea floor rose steeply up to the surface, forming the saber-blade shape of the Lorianna inlet.

The strike team, which was made up of the Marines, plus Vega Zorn, began arming themselves, checking and re-checking their equipment. With the exception of Whiz Bang, who would take an assault rifle, each member of the team carried a compact 'bullpup' SMG with built-in sound suppressors. They wore body sleeves with the hood pulled over their hair, leaving only the face visible, making them look remarkably like some pre-space Terran superhero. Light body armor covered the ballistic cloth, along with a tactical 'Y' harness of grenades and other necessary equipment. Finally, a cyclopean, sight-enhancing visor and black face paint completed their panoply.

The first wave to go in would be Hunter and Zorn to sap communications and open the door for the others to advance. Their travel accommodations to Stonecurtain Keep were not going

to be as spacious or reliable, but had much less of a chance of being spotted on their way in. Instead of dressing like the others, they gird themselves in vac suits, stowing their gear in sealed, water-proof containers.

"We have about twelve minutes before we need to leave," Hunter said as he folded the matte-black broomstick into its most portable form. Zorn checked her chronometer.

"Got it. I'll, uh, be back in a few moments."

There was still one person she needed to see. Leaving the mustering area, she entered sick bay. Physic was there, preparing the space for incoming wounded. Midway through sorting painkillers, she looked up to find Zorn standing there.

"What do you want?" the doctor's voice was neutral.

"We're about to head out in few minutes."

"Did you need some extra medical supplies? I stocked the kits fairly well."

"No Physic, I came to talk to you."

"What could you possibly have to say to me?"

"You're not going to make this easy are you?" Zorn said with a grim smile. "Look, I know that there's a lot of bad blood between us. If I were in your position, I'd hate me too."

Physic put her hands on her hips, but made no reply.

"I won't waste air with an apology. I know you wouldn't accept it anyway. For what I've done, to you, to those you cared about, there can be no forgiveness. I just wanted to know that I had tried, at least once, to reach out to you."

The doctor's dark eyes were cold and dangerous.

"What do you want me to say, Zorn? That it's okay that you stole my husband? That you got him killed? That we can just forget about the Hivers you poisoned, who died by the score while I watched? Is *that* what you want to hear?"

Zorn stared at the much smaller woman. "Ideally, yeah, though that's just wishful thinking on my part. Some acknowledgment that that I'm not your enemy, or that you recognize I'm trying to make up for my mistakes, but I suppose that that is, again, a fantasy."

"I think you should leave."

Zorn nodded heavily. "Fair enough, I realize it was a mistake coming here. All I've managed to do is re-open old wounds, and you of all people know how painful that can be."

"I can only tell you this," Zorn continued. "August loved you. He never told me, but he didn't have to, I just knew. Losing you was his one big regret, and I now I know why. If it means anything to you, what he did at Spires he did for you, not me."

The two women faced each other, and Zorn was the one to turn away first.

"Good-bye, Orit."

* * *

Sea water began to fill the port-side airlock. The green liquid slid slowly over their ankles, then past their knees, their chests, then over their heads, making their facebowls look like windows into an aquarium.

"Equalizing the pressure," Coeur's voice said in their ears. A feeling of lethargy followed soon after, lightening somewhat as their suits compensated for the additional atmospheres of pressure. The round airlock hatched cycled open, revealing the pitch dark depths.

Zorn and Hunter kicked off of the ship, switching on their headlamps as they prepared for ascension. Hunter angled around to secure a magnetic connection into the external socket. Extending from the outlet was a ropey coil of optical cord which he tied to the other end to his belt. Once done, they checked again that the balance of their equipment was tethered and strapped securely to their suits, allowing them to concentrate on making it to the surface.

The lamps did little but allow them to see each other. The darkness swallowed up everything over a meter. Zorn's mind could only wonder what creatures could now see them, but were invisible their sight. The claustrophobic feeling of water pressing in all around was counterbalanced by the almost euphoric sense of floating that grew as the water pressure lessened. Their helmeted heads broke the water, thirty meters from a wind-swept beach.

Moving with purpose, they swam as quickly as possible towards land. The waves lapped and sighed on the shore, as they crept out of the water. Within a rocky alcove the two removed

their vac suits, stowing them under the rocks. They worked without talking and with as little noise as possible. It was very possible that the enemy could have aerial patrols in the area. They could afford to take no chances.

Hunter unwound the optical cord from his vac suit. From within one of the bulky equipment bags he produced a small black pedestal. Setting it down on the water-smooth rocks, he connected the loose end of optical cable to the underside, then palmed the activation button. A small sensor dish unfolded from the top. The green activation light burned, telling the Ithklur it was operational. Pulling the tab at the base, a ring of rubber inflated fully in six seconds. It had taken a little bit of finesse, but between Crowbar, Razor and Raven, they had modified a life-jacket to fit around the communications uplink. Hunter set the bundle into the water and it began to bob among the waves.

Zorn, meanwhile, was beginning to set up the modular broomstick that would take them to within striking distance of Stonecurtain. The former space pirate had silently whistled when they had shown her this model. It was much more man-portable than regular units, could be remotely recalled from within fifteen kilometers, and came with a base coat of heat-dampening paint. It also boasted two 'saddlebag' bays to stow extra equipment.

That alone must've cost several times that of regular broomstick. This spoke volumes to Zorn about the importance RC high-command had placed on her mission. They weren't shy in springing for the best of available equipment.

Like that relic grav-tank they have sitting in their cargo bay.

"Eagle-1 to Nest, Eagle-1 to Nest," Hunter said quietly into his visors comm unit. "Do you copy?"

"Loud and clear, Eagle-1," Coeur's voice said over the line. "Proceed to target. The Lions will follow and wait for your signal."

"Copy that, Nest, Eagle-1 out."

Zorn, or her new designation, Eagle-2, settled into the pilot's seat of the broomstick as the Ithklur climbed onto the back, his SMG cleared for action. She was grateful to have someone along with her that was actually trained for situations like this riding shotgun. Testing the controls, she was pleased to feel the smooth agile response of the craft, awaiting her command. As silent as an owl in flight, the broomstick lifted off the beach and streaked away into the night sky.

* * *

The Valiant sat in the cargo bay surrounded by the partition constructed around it. The wall sealed the tank away from the rest of the cargo bay, giving it exclusive access to the belly ramp.

The Marines sat inside the vehicle at their posts – Bonzo at missiles, Whiz Bang at the fusion cannon, Mercy in the pilot's seat and Drop Kick in the commander's chair.

As the operations plan called for Mercy to wait with the tank, she had opted to wear one of the suits of relic Imperial battle dress, which was oddly fitting considering the Valiant was designed with enough room for occupants to dress in that fashion. To Drop Kick's mind, seeing her sitting there was a scene out of time, from before the Collapse of the Imperium.

The mission clocked counted down on their HUD's. Hunter and Zorn had been gone nearly forty minutes. That left five minutes before their departure.

"Lion-1 to Den," Drop Kick said over the feed that streamed through the uplink Hunter deployed. "It's nearly time. Start pumping the water."

"Roger, Lion-1," Coeur replied. "Prepare to get wet."

Hornet's external fuel ports had been redirected after the fuel tanks had been topped off. Long nozzles carried the water forward to flood the inside of the partition. The belly ramp lowered a moment later and the Valiant exited the ship from the front and into the water depths beyond.

"Good hunting, Lion-1" Coeur said over the comm.

"Roger that, Den. Set the table, we'll have guests for dinner. Lion-1 out."

The grav-tank, now painted a non-reflective shade of black, oriented itself and surfaced. The sleek form of its turret raised slowly out of the water like a crocodile emerging from its lair.

Mercy spurred the vehicle on and they, too, disappeared into the shadows.

* * *

Zorn was running the broomstick about fifty meters in the air, high enough for people on the ground to miss them, but low enough that conventional radar would have a hard-time picking them up.

Their path was not a direct one. The number of mesas and other raised protrusions forced them to thread through the labyrinth of rock and stone. She negotiated them easily under her experienced hand. The mesa formations gave them potential cover at every turn due to their high content of heavy metals. It would play havoc with sensor readings which gave them an extra measure advantage.

Far on the horizon she could make out the thorny exterior of Stonecurtain Keep. So far they had run across no patrols, but now they were entering the heart of the occupying enemy. It was unknown what kind of countermeasures they had installed, but Zorn didn't want to find out the hard way. She maintained her winding course to the destination ahead.

Hunter tapped her on the shoulder.

"I'm detecting sensor pulses ahead. We'll need to go in dark."

"Well, at least we get to have a little fun while we're here."

Zorn sat the broomstick down on the flattop of a tall mesa commanding a view down on Stonecurtain and the surrounding valley. Taking out her PRIS binoculars she scanned the distance.

"They probably rigged remote sensor nodes down there to prevent the this kind of thing."

Panning across the scene, a large aerial antennae platform with a circling sensor dish caught her eye. "Bingo." She said. "There's the communications array. Probably doubles as their eyes for firecontrol."

Hunter was unloading the saddlebags, drawing from them a series of collapsible polycarbonate rod and poles. Zorn lowered her PRIS and joined him.

"So tell me, Hunter, why are you doing this?" she asked as she assembled her own rig. "What's in it for you, this mission?"

"It needs to be done," he said, his hands never stopped moving.

"There's got to be more to it than that."

Hunter unfolded the bundle of double-strength black nylon.

"Our journey with *Hornet* has been...less than optimal in many ways. Though I feel I've done nothing wrong, I feel must demonstrate my worth to the Captain and the others. I am the only one left to carry on. There is no one else."

The nylon stretched firmly and place, drum-tight.

"Well then, it looks like both of us came out here with something to prove," she said. "Okay, I'm ready."

Hunter secured his weapon and ran at a dead sprint towards the edge of the mesa. Zorn was only a few steps behind. Leaping into the air, Hunter clutched his hang glider tightly, riding the thermals high up into the air. Zorn felt a wave of vertigo wash over her as she saw the valley from above. It was a long way down and only a thin frame and a layer of nylon kept her in the sky.

The two soared through the star-lit sky all but invisible, like two bats in flight. Veering off from each other, they departed towards their chosen targets. Had sensors been able to pick them up, they would've presented an aspect no larger than a bird.

There were only two places that made landing practical anywhere on the installation. One was the narrow landing pad which permitted one or two vehicles on it at a time. The other location was a new addition to Stonecurtain, provided, no doubt, by the opposition and their new sensor network. The dish platform gave a small space to gain purchase that hadn't existed previously. Zorn circled around to the former, while Hunter dove toward the latter.

From the Ithklur's viewpoint, the stone structure grew steadily as he aimed straight for the dish. The spikes and protrusions waited beneath him as he altered his approach. If he missed his chance, they would claim him.

Pulling back on the guider bar, the Marine pulled the nose up slowing his descent. The tail lightly cleared the spinning dish as he seized the latticework of the antennae tower at the same time he jerked back on the bar. Strong hands found the reassuring metal and locked like vises. Wind harassed him, ruffling his clothes and pulling against the upright glider that had

become a sail. Anchoring himself to the tower, the Ithklur reached up with his free hand to hit the folding stud. The hang glider folded in on itself like a noblewoman's fan.

He had about six minutes to make the climb down, access the dish and place the shaped charge. Once Zorn secured the LZ, they could call in the cavalry.

If the enemy knew they were here, they had shown no signs of it. Unless it all was an elaborate ruse, the foe was about to get a rude awakening.

* * *

Vega Zorn drifted down gently on the air currents, seeing the landing pad rising up to meet her. Her approach had brought her almost full circle around the keep. At any moment she had expected some hidden gun emplacement to knock her out of the sky, but it didn't come.

It was exhilarating – the danger, the feel of the air playing sensuously across her skin. Somehow it didn't matter that she might be a bullet-riddled corpse in the next few minutes. She was lost in the moment. She couldn't remember the last time a mission was this much fun.

Pulling up to stall her forward movement, she brought the rig down lightly, her boots touch down on the ferrocrete. Extricating her self from the glider, she collapsed, stowing it in one of the rain gutters. Crouching down, she armed her SMG and flipped off the safety.

Ahead of her, a series of torches and iron braziers burned brightly illuminating the main entranceway and the main barracks about thirty meters of to her right. From the looks of it she was alone. There were no sentries anywhere around.

Pressing her back up against the far wall, Zorn slid down to the double doors of the barracks. Sounds of shuffling feet and muffled conversation came from within. Pulling two Longsword antipersonnel mines from her pack, she set the convex bars up just outside the door. The business end of the mine read: FRONT TOWARD ENEMY. Zorn checked it twice. The old saying with Longswords was: *if you don't know which side you're on, you're on the wrong one.* They were now armed and ready. She could remote detonate them at any time.

And now, just to add insult to injury...

A black strip of material, not unlike tape, flattened over the lock mechanism. A sound, barely-audible, hissed for four seconds under the strip. A slight wisp of grey smoke rose out of the lock as the two doors were chemically bonded to one another. It wouldn't slow them down for long, but it would make them work to get out.

A light in her visor that had been burning a steady red turned to green, a signal that Hunter had finished his work. Whether they realized it or not, the enemy was now blind and deaf. She reached for her comm and froze mid-movement. A metallic jingling echoed off the ferrocrete from around the battlement. She side-stepped into a stone alcove and held her breath.

Two men came around the corner. One carried a long pole-arm, but wore a modern weapons belt. The other openly carried an assault rifle. Neither were in the archaic armor of the Regent's Guard.

What do you want to bet that you're not native Phoebans?

"Harry's a jerk, I've told you that before," one man said. "You can tell by the way he cheats at cards. I have no use for guy's that don't pay up when they lose. Gives us all a bad name."

"I know, I know," the other man said. "You'd think I'd learn. It's only taken me..." he paused. "Wait a minute, what's this?"

They found the Longswords.

Sliding out of the shadows, her SMG coughed once at each man. They clutched their chests and fell to the ground with a muffled thump. The halberd the one man carried spun around in place like a top. Rushing forward, she seized it as it fell to the ground like an axed tree.

A few seconds passed and no reaction came from the barracks. Exhaling in relief, she drug the bodies out of sight, stuffing them into the alcove of her hiding place. Her hand went to her comm.

"Eagle-2 to Lions," she whispered. "Eyes and ears are down. You may proceed."

"Roger, Eagle-2," she heard Drop Kick say. "We're on our way."

* * *

The Valiant left its rocky hiding place at the base of a mesa thirty clicks away and screamed towards Stonecurtain Keep. In a flat-out race between the G-Carrier and the Valiant, the tank would win hands down. The tank could go supersonic if it suited her, but Mercy kept their speed below that mark on the approach.

It took less than two minutes of flight time to reach the landing pad. Settling down on its idling contra-gravs, Drop Kick scrambled out of his seat and flew through the open hatch, Bonzo and Whiz Bang right behind him.

Vega Zorn was there to meet him.

"Looks like we're clear, though I think you might have turned some heads on your way in," she said. In the distance, there was the thumping sound of a wood and metal door being battered by hand.

Down the way, the door to the barracks was thrown wide open. A group of guards were visible just inside the archway, armed with a sampling of modern weaponry. The Longsword mines detonated, annihilating them to a man.

Zorn looked down at the detonator and handed it over to Drop Kick. "Here, give this to Mercy. I've set a few others along the walkway in both directions. Should give them a little something to think about."

Drop Kick handed it up the chain from Bonzo to Whiz Bang like a sailor's throw line.

"Alright, let's move out," the Sergeant Major growled. "Go, go, *go!*"

Zorn fell in line with the Marines as Whiz Bang kicked in the front door. The staircase to the dungeon was two-hundred meters away through a winding series of passages. It would be close-quarter fighting the whole way. But, they were already building momentum, and each of them could feel it. It was time to run rough-shod over anyone that got in their way.

Woe to the vanquished if they did.

Chapter 21

His Excellency, Delvin Garrett, Hereditary Steward and Protector in the stead of Imperial Duke, Lord High Regent over the Sovereign Lands of Phoebus, sat in the floor of his hay-strewn cell, deep under his former home, now a prisoner in reality, not just in practice.

It was just a matter of time. He knew this was the way it would end. It did surprise him that he was still alive, however. They'd kept him down here a while now, hours, days, weeks, it all blurred together – the first sign that he was being mentally broken by his incarceration.

The bows of reverence the Emissary had shown him had continued to become more hollow, until they had ceased all together. Any pretensions that he was in any way still master of his own destiny fell away completely.

The breaking point came when he had overheard one of the Emissary's conversations with a subordinate. There was talk of *clearing the way* or *making ready for the grand arrival*. Whatever it was, it was always spoken in hushed tones and never directly in his presence.

One day, the Emissary had left his chamber door unlocked while he was away, giving Delvin a chance to sort through his papers and notes. The picture those notes painted was nearly unthinkable. Detentions, interrogations, troop movements, ship schedules, it was all there. What wasn't stated outright could be easily extrapolated and it turned his stomach.

He had nearly made a clean break when one of the Emissary's guards had caught him coming out. Upon the Emissary's return, he'd questioned the Regent about his behavior. Had the Emissary guessed that Delvin possessed an eidetic memory, or that he could recall every detail of what he found, it might have ended with him being stood up against the wall and shot.

As it was, he was able to downplay what he knew. The Emissary had only smiled cruelly at the sad little king of a back-water rock.

"I suppose it doesn't matter now," he'd said. "I've been informed that I don't have to play games with you anymore. I do hope that your new accommodations will meet with your protest, revulsion and dread. Good-bye, your Excellency." He'd bowed mockingly and escorted the planetary ruler down here at gunpoint.

Now the white and gold jacket he wore was filthy and in tatters. His facial hair, normally sculpted into a pristine mustache was overgrown like a garden left unattended. His hair was wild and knotted, and he could only imagine the how disgusting he was, reeking from days or weeks without bathing. Thankfully, he could no longer smell the worst parts of the prison; his sense of smell had largely disappeared.

At first he feared he would go mad, locked as he was behind the stone walls. Left to his solitude, and cut off completely from the outside world, his mind would devour itself. Alone with his failure, the knowledge that he had brought this on his house, that he had become a beggar to his own demise, would corner his mind, trap it, leaving him nowhere to hide from his sins.

Soon after they had imprisoned him, they had done him a perverse sort of kindness in that they threw his servant, Rikart Orlaf, into the same cell. The older man continued his role, just as he had before, sometimes giving his own portion of water or prison rations to his lord. Consequently, the old man had grown dangerously thin, leaving himself open to all manner of ailments that ran rampant in dark, dank places that never saw the light of day.

The company was two-edged sword, however. While it kept him from loneliness, and the minefields that resided there, it was meant as a calculated form of humiliation. For a liege lord to be in such a state in front of a vassal, it neatly underscored how powerless and impotent he had

become. For the servant, it was an object lesson in the illusions of nobility and power, and the ease with which they were dispelled.

Other than his servant, the only other friendly voice down here was woman who shared his fate in another cell. When she was first put down here, he had believed her to be a deliberate plant aimed at winning his trust. As the time wore on, through long conversations while the guards were away – a frequent occurrence, leading Delvin to suspect they were merely hired muscle – he had come to believe her harrowing story in its entirety. It confirmed a great many concerns that he had harbored even before his incarceration, which, in turn, made him feel all the more helpless.

Many were the times that he had imagined overpowering the guards when they came to question him, of taking their weapons and paying his respects to the Emissary. A hundred times he had done it in his mind, the scene playing clearly in his head like a holovid, complete with heroic music matched to the cut scenes. It would be a futile effort and death would come quickly only if he was lucky, and Rikart would surely share his fate.

He closed his eyes in pain. He had waited patiently, giving the Emissary exactly what he wanted, creating an obedient façade from which to work behind. All he had managed to accomplish with all that maneuvering was to get thrown into his own dungeon. The one glorious blow that he had envisioned delivering at that critical moment would never materialize. It was a hard truth. Hard to admit, and harder still to accept.

He had failed.

“Come now, master,” Rikart said soothingly, “do not torment yourself. Here, eat something,” he offered his own plate that lay untouched, “you must keep up your strength.”

“I am sorry, Rikart,” he said, opening his blood-shot eyes. “Sorry that I have brought us to this. I’m sorry for everything.”

The plate clattered to the floor.

“*No!*” Rikart’s eyes leapt to sudden flame. “*Never* apologize to me for acting as you did, do you understand? My vow of service is to you, my lord, in all things, come what may. Do not insult it with anything as common as an apology.”

Garett recoiled at the man’s fervor.

“But this, all of this, is my fault...”

“Don’t say it, my lord,” it was a warning, not a request. “Had you resisted, they would’ve merely killed you and installed an imposter. Their behavior betrays their mind, for if they were willing to imprison you when you cooperated, they would have most assuredly taken your life if you had refused. I can’t allow that, *will* never allow that as long as there is breath in this old man’s body,” both of his eyes glistened as his words came from someplace deep inside.

“Don’t you understand, my lord – as long as you are alive *there is still hope for our world.*”

“Rikart, I...”

Thoom.

An odd echo rumbled down the old stone corridor like distant thunder. Both men stopped, their eyes searching space as they listened.

Ch...ch...ch...ch...

Sounds of distant voices yelling could only barely be heard. There was some kind of commotion outside, but what?

Pst...pst...pst...

It was definitely louder now, as though the storm front was moving towards them. More voices, shouting and crying out. Something metallic rang out of the stone, closer still, as though a gong had been thrown down a staircase. Then the hushed sound of footfalls outside the door, then silence.

The space of three heartbeats passed, almost enough for the two men to believe that their imagination was playing tricks, when the lock began to run in bright rivulets as a blinding white light shown through.

The door erupted open a second later.

Delvin was now on his feet, without the memory of every commanding his limbs to do so. Standing in the smoky doorway, he got the impression of an enormous Cyclops, dark as midnight, peering back at him.

The monster moved towards him.

* * *

Drop Kick framed the door as the last of the thermite ate away at the steel door. The man in front of him matched the flatpic that Coeur had shown him, though he was dirty and unkempt. Yet, even through the grime, Drop Kick could see the man's innate nobility shining through. He was standing and alert, his eyes the very mirror of a bird of prey's focused gaze. There was no doubt that this was the planetary leader.

He stepped forward and saw the man coil up like a spring.

"My name is Sergeant Major Escher, sir, Coalition Marines," he removed his goggles so that the other man could see his face. "We're here to extract you."

"Then you are most welcome!" the elderly man at Delvin's side said. "Come, my lord, we must away. Providence has smiled upon us!"

"There is another prisoner you need to free," Delvin spoke in a clear voice. "I believe she is one of you."

Drop Kick motioned to Bonzo. The Marine was already checking the other occupied cells. Stepping out of the tight confines of the cell, the Marine motioned for the two men to exit into the hall.

"I need a weapon," he said, seeing his former captors lying very still on the floor. "Just in case."

The Marine reached for his body pistol without argument, smoothly priming it and presenting it handle first to the Regent.

"Be sure to clear your field of fire." He said. "The safety's on the side, just thumb it forward and you're hot."

"Sarge!" Bonzo said down the musty hall. "Over here."

The door the sensor specialist called out was indistinguishable from the others in the corridor, heavy, metal-banded and foreboding. This one, however, had a slight moan, coming from behind it.

"Blow it," Drop Kick ordered as Mercy's voice crackled over his earbug.

"Lion-1, we've got attack choppers inbound," she said. "Four of them."

"ETA?" Drop Kick said, putting his hand to his ear.

"Seven minutes."

The second thermite charge was already reducing the lock to molten slag.

"We've gotta move," Drop Kick said. "We've got air cavalry on the way, and God knows what else."

Bonzo kicked in the door, shining the flashlight mounted on his SMG into the darkened space. A pained face looked back at them, covering her face from the searing light. Ragged and dirty as the others, she wore the remnants of an RC body sleeve that hung off her in tatters. Dark skin that should've been smooth as silk was swollen and broken in places. She made an attempt to stand, but her right leg below the knee hung at unnatural angle.

"Oh God, Boots?" Zorn gasped. "Is that you?"

The woman nodded, eyes still straining to adjust to the light.

"Zorn?" she rasped. "Thought you were dead."

"The rumors of my death have been greatly exaggerated, old friend. Here, let's get you up."

"Leg's broken. Wanted to make sure I couldn't go anywhere."

Zorn lifted her up so that the other woman could steady herself.

"They took the *Montrose* as soon as we came in," she said with a pained step from the cell. "Thought they were friendly. Even flew the right IFF."

"Are there any others?" Drop Kick asked.

A shadow of pain passed across her face as she struggled with the memory. The boarding party. The matte-black of their guns. The confusion, the dawning terror. The empty look in the man's eyes as he had lined them up...

"No," she said. "I'm the only one. God help me, I'm the only one."

"I'll carry her," Zorn said to Drop Kick, steadying the smaller woman against her. "Just keep 'em off me."

"Roger that," the Marine said. "Mercy, deal with the reinforcements. We have what we came for. We're coming out fast and hot." He turned to Delvin, who could barely contain his fury at the sight of *Montrose's* commander. Something dangerous glittered behind the Regent's eyes.

"I apologize in advance for the damage we're going to do to your home." The Marine raised his voice for everyone. "Okay, back the way we came, people. Whiz Bang, you're on point. Clear us a way. Bonzo, leave a present for anyone following us from the lower halls."

A moment later the small band moved out, leaving the bleak and shadowed cells of the prison, and the darkness that permeated the walls, far behind them.

* * *

Mercy looked down at her instruments, a direct feed from the much more sophisticated passive sensor uplink from *Hornet*. Four blips outlined in red crawled across her screen on their way from what appeared to be a remote air station some kilometers away. The speed at which they were moving told her that they weren't local. Last time she checked Phoebus didn't have much in the way of aircraft, let alone the attack wing of advanced Thunderbird choppers headed straight for them.

If someone had managed to signal the choppers, didn't it also follow that they would've alerted the forces in space as well? All this could be for nothing if they got blown out of space trying to make it out of the system.

But, she couldn't let that concern her right now. Put out one fire at a time, that's what the Marines had taught her. While it was frustrating to be sitting here, drumming her armored fingers on the controls while her comrades conducted the raid, she'd been far from idle.

Since the team had left her, she had detonated two of mines Zorn had left for her, ensuring that the landing platform remained unoccupied by anyone but her. The mere sight of the angular black behemoth hovering out there would make even seasoned troops think twice about drawing its attention.

"Lion-2," Hunter whisper over the comm, "You have a parasite on your six."

Her grip tightened on the controls. Of course, *drawing* attention would be suicide, but moving quietly in, that was another matter. Sapping tanks by stealth pre-dated interstellar travel. The heat sensors around the tank, however, showed nothing but the residual heat of the explosive discharges.

"Eagle-1, can you confirm that? The scope's clean."

"Affirmative, I see him."

"I'm popping the top." She reached for her weapon with an armored gauntlet.

"Negative," he said quietly, "I'll deal with it."

* * *

He had been taught by some of the best, which was why his heart was still beating when many of his friends were smears of smoking meat. The outlands had been his training ground. He had refined and re-shaped himself with the TED-infested sinkholes he visited. A little demolitions here, some heavy weapons there, evasion, sentry-removal, reconnaissance, the list went on and on. It was a rather impressive repertoire of skills that had landed him this job, compliments of his brotherly contacts through Spencer. Over the years, he'd used those skills ruthlessly, cutting a bloody swathe wherever he went, and reaping the benefits that came with it.

And now, he was plying another talent that one of his many mentors, now dead, had taught him – anti-armor. He had to laugh a little at his own paranoia. He kept a folding IR shroud on him at all times just in case he needed to do what he'd done - fade away. He had always known it would come in handy.

After donning the life-saving garment, he had slithered around the edge of the landing pad just below the stony rim. A ledge about half the size of his palm extended all the way around the outcropping. Clearly, it had been meant as a track for mounting machinery or just as a decorative base board of sorts, but definitely *not* as a walkway. The wind had moaned and

whipped along the narrows, nearly twice sweeping him into the verdant valley hundreds of meters below.

Instinct had told him that the Longsword mines were meant to clear a landing zone. Whoever these people were, they seemed extremely well-equipped. There was also a touch of professionalism to the silent strike they were prosecuting. Somehow he could just tell.

When he saw the black hover tank come storming in, his hunch had proven right. It was a big sucker, too, of a kind that looked too advanced to be anything less than a relic. It hovered about a meter off the ferrocrete, quiet and lethal.

There was only one thing to do to something like that. Relic armor would laugh at any explosive he carried. No, the one way to neutralize it was to crawl underneath and set off an explosion enough to smoke out the crew. Once they opened the hatch, they'd shortly find three of his anti-personnel grenades thrown down into the cabin, or he might just shoot them outright if they weren't heavies. Either way, the tank would be out of action and any escape that might have been made would be cleanly eliminated. A sizeable reward would be waiting for him, both for the capture of the relic equipment, but possibly for the strike team as well.

It was the thought of the reward that filled his head as he moved with infinite care across the landing pad. It was possible that they might have motion sensors on that big rig, but so far he hadn't tripped any of them. He was no more than two meters from the undercarriage now.

The wind whistled between the deck and the tank like a mournful sigh and he froze in place. Something wasn't right. Had someone asked him to explain the sensation he couldn't have done it, not even to one of his fellow mercenaries. Something was wrong.

Risking everything, he made a tight roll, bringing his sidearm to bear. Something cold and rock-solid smashed into his wrist, sending the weapon sliding across the stone surface.

Peering up, a cyclopean demon with bat-wings stood outlined against the star-lit sky. All it once it seemed ancient and inevitable, as though Death himself had chosen this exact moment to take him. If he'd had the time, he might've noticed the body armor or the tactical belt that would've revealed his enemy as being something other than supernatural. In all his campaigns he'd never froze or hesitated under enemy action, until now. Some corner of his brain could not reconcile what he saw. Left with no rational explanation, it invented an irrational one. It told him that this creature had just materialized out of the night. Why else would his sharp ears not have heard its approach?

Dear God, what demon have you sent to punish me?

Something shiny and jewel-like flashed in the spectre's hand. It raised then descended from the heavens like a falling star.

* * *

"Threat eliminated," Hunter said over the comm channel.

"Copy that Eagle-1," Mercy said on the inside, "and thanks for the assist. Now, care to give me a hand in here? I could use a gunner if you're up for it." She could almost see in her mind the Ithklur beaming a rather predatory smile.

"If no one has told you what a truly beautiful person you are lately, Mercy, then it pleases me to be the first."

"Yeah, yeah," she giggled. "I bet you say that to all the girls that let you handle advanced weaponry." She hit the release button and the hatch flipped open. An Ithklur in tactical gear flowed through the hole with liquid grace, settling into the missile station.

"Yes, as a matter of fact, I do. I make it a point to be polite to any lady that carries a weapon, *especially* the advanced ones." His voice didn't carry the heavy sibilance of his brothers, but did hint at a playful side that lurked under the all-business exterior normally present.

She had avoided the Ithklur as much as possible during this voyage, and certainly after Lamda-3. Now, she hoped they all lived so she could get to know this comrade as well as Bonzo or Whiz Bang. She realized he was well worth the effort.

"Strap in. I'm going to wait until the choppers get a little closer before we pounce. Be ready with those Whistlers."

"Yes, ma'am!" he said, letting his obvious joy show through. "Lock and load!"

* * *

The four Thunderbirds drove towards Stonecurtain Keep as fast as they could manage, mesas and treetops passing below them with dizzying speed. Beneath the *fuff, fuff, fuff* of the rotors, the side-gunners waited impatiently. Behind them, the relief troops were a double row of mask-like faces. Stonecurtain had been declared a target-rich environment. They were given *carte blanche* to fire on anything that they deemed hostile. It was a rare opportunity, but one that sparked the nerves and lit the eye.

The thorny castle was growing closer as they approached. Perhaps as little as two minutes remained before their boots touched the ground and they flew headlong into a hot landing. There weren't many facts to go on, which made many a gloved hand flex involuntarily around their weapons. All they knew is that HQ had made a call for help to the air support base. Enemy – unknown. Disposition of forces – unknown.

In the distance something dark was rising up from behind the fortress, an object that didn't register on their sensors. In the moonless sky it was black patch, slowly eclipsing, then revealing, the stars that lay behind it. The shape twisted around, orienting itself towards them, presenting an even smaller cross section to the naked eye.

A protrusion on either side of the phantom shape shuttered open. Flares of missile drives flickered to life, briefly illuminating the strange invader. The helicopter pilots saw the flashing lights too late. They were too close.

More than a dozen white contrails laced together in a cat's cradle just before a series of explosions lit up the sky like fireworks on Reformation Day.

When the fires faded, the skies were clear once more.

* * *

Drop Kick and his command edged along through the complex set of corridors. Some of the passages looked to be hundreds of years old, obviously predating the modern ferrocrete structure above. New tunnels had been created with old ones bricked up, then re-opened and moved around, creating a maze of blind passageways and zero cover corridors. Barnstorming in had been easy, fighting back up with civilians and wounded in tow had proved to be the hard part.

Opposition had been scattered and uncoordinated, which Drop Kick was quick to seize upon. He'd done the same at Mexit where his tight group had laid low a force far superior in numbers, but fighting in penny packets and without cohesive leadership. As they sought to regain the landing pad, twice they had run headlong into a group of guards, likely sell-swords by the look of their mismatched gear. Whiz Bang had dispatched the first lot, Drop Kick had dropped the second.

Up ahead a doorway glowed blue-black with the outside sky. Vaulting up a small flight of stairs, he swept his SMG across the space just inside. Whiz Bang came up behind him. This was the outer gallery, which lead to the landing pad. The Marine gave the 'all's clear' motion to the others down the all and sidled up to the stone archway. Whiz Bang mirrored this movement opposite him.

With a ready nod, the two Marines swung around doorframe. Drop Kick went to one knee while Whiz Bang remained standing as the landing pad came into view. It remained much as they had left it, though the Valiant was noticeably absent.

"Lion-4," Drop Kick whispered into his mic. "Status?"

"Bogeys are down. Twenty seconds to LZ," Mercy's voice said in his ear.

The rest of his group formed up behind the two Marines in front, keeping to the solid walls around them for cover. Seconds ticked by, measured in thumping heartbeats, as the black shape of the Valiant appeared overhead and eased downward to the landing pad.

Drop Kick heard it first. A loud, sizzling hiss came from way off to his right accompanied by a blinding trail of light.

"Down!"

A small surface to air missile struck the Valiant violently in the undercarriage. A wave of heat swept across the landing pad as the tank reeled from the blast. Another shot followed the second, then a third each with a ripple of heat and deafening report.

Drop Kick pulled himself up, shaking off the dizziness. A group of armed men off to the right were bringing up heavy weapons to deal with tank. Some part of his mind laughed at that. They had no idea what they faced.

The Valiant righted itself in the air and, continuing to descend, unfolded the anti-personnel laser from the turret. A slender beam of blue death traced across their skirmishing line. The attackers, however, had wisely chosen to strike from behind the corner of the building, leaving themselves less vulnerable to fire.

One fusion bolt from the turret would have quickly solved the dilemma, but the range was too close with friendlies in the area. Whistlers were likewise next to useless without endangering the nearby strike team. The tank and the enemy traded fire in staccato bursts as the Valiant hovered low towards the deck.

That's as close she'll be able to get without bringing the whole house down around us.

The hatch on the tank blew open and a reptilian shape leapt out of it, turning as he landed to use the Valiant as cover. Biting the pin out of a grenade, the Ithklur launched it the air. Before the object had reached the zenith of its arc, he had thrown another. Both were in perfect form, sailing through the air landing on the spot of his choosing.

The first one was a simple fragmentation grenade, merely meant to make the enemy seek cover with any casualties it caused merely an added bonus. The second grenade began to spew thick black smoke even before it landed. A wall of billowing darkness enveloped them, obscuring their vision, buying a moment's pause in the action.

The Ithklur motioned towards the door as he readied his SMG.

"Go, go, go!" Drop Kick roared. His group burst from the door to the waiting sanctuary of the tank. They ran, forming a ragged column with Whiz Bang in front and Drop Kick a step behind covering Garrett and Orlaf. Bonzo brought up the rear behind Zorn and the limping Boots.

As Drop Kick watched, he saw Hunter whirl around a hundred and eighty degrees to open fire towards the remains of the barracks. The Sergeant Major had been focused on the tank and the enemy to starboard to the point that the arrival of an equally large force on his port side had all but escaped him.

"Contact left!" he shouted, pushed Delvin forward towards the tank. Immediately Bonzo and Whiz Bang pivoted around, pouring strafing fire at the group while moving in. Between them, they were a three-man anchor for the others to get clear.

Bullets passed each other in the air, and were indiscriminate as to who they struck. Zorn stumbled as bullets punctured her armor and ripped through her mid-section. She collapsed with Boots in a heap.

Whiz Bang similarly jerked as rounds struck him in the chest, luckily where his armor was thickest. By tapping some well of inner-strength, he managed to stay on his feet and keep moving, even throwing a concussion grenade back in reply.

Orlaf had moved to interpose himself between the danger and his lord when a burst of fire found him. Faded mouse-colored robes blossomed to red as the old man sagged into his master's arms.

"My Lord," the old man said with a ragged sigh.

The pistol in Delvin's hand came up sharply, tracking across the enemy formation until he found the man that had delivered the killing blow. Somehow, he knew who it would be before he ever looked. Now he saw the long black robe with the hood thrown back, the arrogant face, those empty eyes.

The Emissary.

His breathing stilled and the world moved in slow-motion before the Regent's sight. He leveled his pistol and fired a single shot. There was sense of pre-destination he felt as the bullet found its mark, as though he had known before he fired what the end result would be. His

nemesis went down, his left eye ruined, and a sense of vengeance or justice, the Regent didn't know which, filled him to capacity.

Then an armored hand was reaching down from the ledge of the tank to haul them both up to the top. The suit's shining red visor looked evil to the Regent, a color that matched the loyal blood he wore, pulled himself and his still-breathing servant into the tank.

Mercy hefted her Gauss rifle and began firing pinpoint bursts of hyper-velocity darts towards the enemy. Below her, Hunter surged away from the tank and, with the help of Drop Kick, recovered Zorn and Boots from where they lay sprawled on the round. This time it was Bonzo that provided the cover as he hurled two of his smoke grenades into the teeth of the enemy.

Despite the utter chaos around them, they began to pile into the Valiant with clock-work precision. The time they'd bought on both the left and right flanks was wearing dangerously thin, but they were making the best use of it.

Only Hunter remained outside the tank, which was now very tight in quarters with the added mass and weight of the wounded it would carry and the Regent. He had summoned his own ride minutes ago.

A skeletal shape now flew out of the darkness to hover quietly just off the ferrocrete. Mounting the broomstick like a horse, he peeled off from the tank and put the hammer down.

The Valiant's hatch thudded closed as it rose quickly into the air. Once they were at the proper height the turret traversed around, aimed and fired three fusion bolts down to the area below with Whistler missiles following closely behind. The entire landing pad rumbled with secondary explosions, as nearly every square centimeter was saturated. The whole landing pad tore itself free of its foundation and plummeted into the valley below.

"Lion-1 to Den," Drop Kick said into the comm. "Mission accomplished."

* * *

"That's our cue," Coeur said, bringing up the flight systems which had been on stand-by for the last several hours. "Do you see any movement above us?" They had monitored the strike team's progress as much as possible, enough to know that someone had radioed for back-up.

"Yes, it appears that *Jörmungandr* is maneuvering into a geo-synchronous orbit over Stonecurtain Keep. I'm also reading that at least two of the other pickets are doing the same. Smaller contacts are breaking off from them."

"They're deploying landing craft," Coeur said. "That means we go with the Bait and Switch. Snapshot," the young woman's face appeared on her comm. "Load the decoy. Launch it as soon as soon as the strike team is aboard."

"Yes, sir."

"Crowbar," she said as he appeared. "Power us up, but not all the way. We don't want them to notice us, yet."

"You got it, Red." The engineer grinned back. "Ready on your mark."

She switched the comm once again to the ship's address.

"Okay, I'm taking us up. Everyone get ready."

* * *

Delvin Garrett knelt in the cramped quarters of the Valiant and held the hand of a dying man. He had feared that his servant had already departed, but life still remained in his wasted and aged body. Blood flecked at his mouth, reddening the fringes of his wizened beard. His eyes were open, but clouded with pain.

Bonzo worked furiously on him, plying as much of his first-aid, but a slight shake of his head told Garrett all he needed to know. It was all the Regent could do to keep from coming undone. The pressure behind his eyes was overwhelming, but somehow he hung on. He would pretend to be the lord that Orlaf believed him to be; pretend to be the kind of master worthy enough of his sacrifice, even when he knew that he was worlds away from being that kind of man.

Truth mingled with fiction as Orlaf continued to slip away. He couldn't speak. His lips moved as though he wanted to, but no sound came out. Something in Delvin died that the old man had been denied even that.

The Regent had seen this moment a hundred times before in the holovids. A friend lay dying, uttering with their final breath some final wisdom or encouraging words so that the hero could keep fighting. Somehow the vids never showed how your hand shook so violently, or how you could be so numb and yet so wracked at the same time. When their eyes became fixed, you knew that the actor would hop back up when the scene was cut. Here, he looked on, helpless, once again unable to prevent another part of his world from being destroyed. There would be no moving last words, no final outpouring, only death.

All at once, Rikart's faded green eyes cleared and drew his master's gaze. His gnarled hand closed around Delvin's hand with desperate strength. No words were exchanged, but that gaze spoke volumes to Delvin in an articulation of meaning that transcended words. In only a few seconds, those mirrors into the man's soul spoke of his lifetime of service, his love of Phoebus and its ruling house, his unwavering devotion and, above all, his total lack of regret for the life that he had lived.

A slight smile formed at the corners of the old man's mouth, with the knowledge that his master had understood.

Then he was gone.

"Farewell, my friend," Delvin said softly over him, kissing his forehead. "And may flights of angels sing thee to thy rest."

* * *

Hornet surfaced amid a roiling torrent of water and bubbles, hovering just above the shore. The belly ramp yawned open as the Valiant crested the hill and killed her forward acceleration. The tank slid smoothly through the opening and into the partitioned space, looking as though the far trader were an alien fish swallowing its next meal whole.

As the ramp retracted and sealed itself shut, the ship spun in place, presenting its port-side airlock towards the shore and sank back below the waves. It would be several minutes before the Ithklur came zooming over the horizon on his broomstick. It was in that window that Coeur needed to launch her escape contingency she'd labeled Bait and Switch.

After the initial confusion in orbit, the landing craft would report the current state of Stonecurtain. In all likelihood, they were already scanning the area to try to find them. Coeur was about to give them what they wanted.

"Okay, Snapper, launch the Doppleganger." She said.

The missile tube flooded and a very specialized missile blasted away from the ship beneath the waves. She was one of five dedicated decoy missiles *Hornet* carried, and she had been modified more extensively than her sisters. Not only was she rigged to give off an exact duplicate of *Hornet's* emissions, but her endurance life had been greatly enhanced due to the combined efforts of Razor, Raven and Crowbar.

After a few kilometers, the missile broke from the water and skimmed along the surface. Her bearing took her towards the gap created by the clustering of the orbital pickets.

One of the pickets, however, took notice of her as it came about, cutting the angle around to intercept and to bring its cannon to bear. Bolts of light pierced the heavens, raining down from the sky like Jovian lightning bolts. None of them, however, came close to hitting the small target.

"It appears they are firing some sort of ground support laser, sir," Sixer said. "I would wager that's why she was tapped for orbital duty in the first place."

"Yes, it certainly a way to keep the locals in line," she turned to Snapper on his comm. screen. "That last shot was close enough, blow the first flare."

In mid-flight, a flare attached to the Doppleganger's side erupted harmlessly in a fireworks show. The thermal bloom was meant to burn bright simulating a glancing hit. The pre-programmed flight path angled up towards the sky on approach to orbit, but began to wobble and buck like a starship that had been winged upon takeoff.

More laser bolts screamed down, but spent themselves on the ocean as the Doppleganger continued into the skies. Another set of protocols activated and the missile began squawking radio signals of *Hornet's* personnel, garbled and encoded. If anyone had ears on the target, a decent cryptographer would be able to sort out Coeur's static-filled voice radioing to imaginary ground forces. *Hornet's systems were overloading and going critical*, she warned, *and that that their damage was worse than she thought. She would try to compensate.* As Coeur's voice grew more desperate, it cut off mid-word as the Doppleganger fulfilled her final mission directive and exploded.

The pyrotechnics created an impressive fireball of *Hornet* in her apparent death throes. Adding to the illusion were packets upon packets of sensor-returning chaff. With any luck, that volume in the air at one time would look like clouds of falling debris many times larger than the missile herself, enough to somewhat approximate *Hornet's* 200-ton hull. What's more, the chaff was floating down over a deep trench in the ocean floor, which would make searching for large pieces of debris problematic and time-consuming.

It wasn't an illusion that Coeur thought would last for long, but if it could hold long enough for the real *Hornet* to slip away, then it would serve its purpose. Phoebus had a short orbit to transit time, just three hours. All she needed was three hours...but there would be hours of maneuvering before she bridged that gap.

"Hunter has made splashdown, sir." Deep Six said. "He just sealed the airlock."

"All right then," she said, taking *Hornet* gently down into the depths. "Let's get this show on the road."

* * *

Hours later, Coeur stood and stretched her tired and cramped muscles as Mercy took over the pilot's seat. The ship continued to prowl the undersea on her way to a secluded place to launch. By now it was getting close to morning. If they could push ahead they could use the last vestiges of night to escape before dawn exposed them. It would hardly do to fake their deaths only to be spotted by a stray shepherd or farmer.

"Just keep her on course. I'll be back after I've had a chance to speak to our guests."

"Yes, sir, will do."

Coeur arched her shoulders, rolling them around as she went abaft. The tension of the last few hours would give her knots not easy to unwind. All told, the operation had gone by the numbers. As smash and grabs go, they could've done far worse. They weren't out of the woods yet, and she knew she wouldn't relax until they were in Jump again.

Palming the entry panel to her quarters, she straightened herself before entering. She had a guest the likes of which *Hornet* had never seen.

Standing there was the Regent, regal as she remembered. After being cleared by Physic, he had availed himself of a lengthy shower, a shave and a clean pair of clothes. The transformation from prisoner to leader-in-exile had been dramatic to say the least.

An old olive-drab commando sweater belonging to Crowbar fit the Regent's lean frame rather well, lending him a kind of military weight, as did the grey slacks that tucked neatly into black spacer's boots. His hair was combed down, and his mustache neatly trimmed. Only a few stray scrapes and scratches across his face and neck hinted at his recent peril.

Considering all that the man had gone through, he looked serene and dignified, but changed from the last time she'd met him. There was something older, wiser, more acute about him now than before. Whatever it was, it only served to lend his already commanding presence a greater gravity.

"Your Lordship," she said. "I trust you will forgive my absence. Duties required my personal attention until just now." She motioned for him to take a seat as she settled in behind her desk.

"I rather doubt that an apology is necessary, my lady D'Esprit," he said smoothly, "Seeing as how you just saved my life."

Coeur felt her face burn ever so slightly at the honorific.

"Um...Captain will do just fine, your Lordship."

"There I would have to disagree. For what you and your people have done, I can never truly repay the debt I owe you and your ship. I have nothing with which to even try, save paying you the deference and respect you have proved you deserve. It is only just and proper...my lady."

"Very well," she said uncomfortably. "an it please thee, my lord."

"It does."

"Then if protocol is thoroughly satisfied, let's move on. First, let me first extend my condolences for the loss of Mr. Orlaf. I can only imagine what he meant to you."

"Thank you," Garrett said softly, eyes darkening. "I will miss him beyond my ability to express in words."

"I understand that you've spoken to my Intelligence Officer, correct?"

"Yes, the Lady Raven and I had a lengthy conversation on the state of my Realm. I believe it was quite illuminating for both of us. I'm more than amazed, shocked beyond belief is more like it, that have you endangered your ship and crew to recover me."

"Perhaps you underestimate your importance, your Lordship. You are effectively a one man government. By preserving you, we preserve the legitimate authority of an allied system in its entirety. Had it been any other world in the Coalition, the same act would require the rescue of hundreds, perhaps thousands of people. With Phoebus there is really only you," she smiled. "You made it awfully convenient for us when you think about it, your Lordship."

"Please, do not belittle your actions. You and your ship have shown uncommon valor to come this far when, by rights, you should have left me to my fate and gone ahead to warn Aubaine. It's a long way to go to preserve a single vote in the Assembly, my lady," he smiled thinly, "and a Centrist vote at that."

There was a trace of bitterness to his words. As far as member worlds went, Phoebus was a very small fish, complicated by its low tech level and the Regent knew it. Due to their low population, they were allowed only one representative in the Assembly of Worlds. That one representative, however, wielded the same power as a delegate from Aurora or Trybec, both of which were planets with nearly a thousand times the population.

"Well, I've often found that uncommon valor is a common virtue among this crew. They understand that the protection of a single voice, even a Centrist one, is part and parcel of the democracy the Coalition was built upon. But, in the interests of good relations, let's simply say that you happened to be on our way and leave it at that, shall we? Plus, I might remind your Lordship that we are not out of the woods just yet."

"I have every confidence in your ability to carry through, my lady" he replied. "Though on that note, there is something I think you should know."

"What would that be?"

"I had a look at the station commander's notes, an act which led to my ultimate imprisonment. I discovered that there is a refueling station that they have set up around the second gas giant, Yomathall. I made it a point to memorize the exact coordinates. From what I understand, it will be used to greatly speed up the fueling turnaround for those ships not streamlined to skim from the atmosphere of the giant."

"Or those that can avail themselves of your oceans," Coeur said.

"That's it. The presence of that station will allow them to prosecute the final assault on Aubaine much more expediently than their numbers would normally allow."

"I see." Coeur interlaced her fingers together. "You shared this with Raven?"

"Indeed, my lady, I did. She was eager to speak to you on the possibilities."

"I bet she is."

"If you were able to disrupt that station..." his voice trailed off and he held out his hands.

"I understand the strategic value of such an act, your Lordship, but our first duty if we can clear orbit is to Jump to Aubaine. As you pointed out, they are still in the dark on what is going. It's always possible an outside source has warned them, but I can't assume that to be the case. If we are destroyed in the attempt, then the capitol gets blind-sighted."

"With respect, my lady, that is the very argument that should have led you to bypass my home altogether when you left Spires, though I'm obviously grateful that put in for a visit."

"Touché." Coeur said shaking her head. "Now I suppose you're going to tell me how delaying the enemy fleet is worth potentially more than busting you out of jail, is that it, your Lordship?"

“Not in so many words,” he said with a wave of his hand, “but something rather close. I am obviously not in a position to order you or your valiant crew about, but I do believe you have a unique opportunity to strike at the enemy, seeing as how they believe you, and me, to be dead.”

Coeur sat back in her seat to regard the man in front of her. It wasn't desperation she was seeing here, nor was it a plea to be a proxy for a personal vendetta. This was a clear-headed attempt to give the Reformation Coalition a fighting chance. Considering the tonnage the enemy fleet represented, time wasn't luxury the government had, but, it was a commodity her actions could purchase.

Her mind wandered back through the halls of history in her mind. The Alamo, Thermopylae, Washington's New Jersey, The Expanding Russian Front, The Prometheus Gambit, Reaver's Deep, and even her own mission aboard *Altinak* were meant to delay the enemy so that others could marshal forces to move on the grand scale.

Did she play it safe, or risk it all?

The voice Pat Ritter, one of the senior and most decorated commanders of the RCES, welled up from some vault in her memory when her old ship *Lirgishkhunan* had the privilege to ride shotgun with the finest ship in the Dawn League fleet.

It's all a gamble, son. Anyone who tells you different hasn't seen it for himself. When the chips are down, a gamble is fine, so long as you are the one that gets the stack the deck.

“I like the way you think, your Lordship,” she said. “Heaven help me, but I do.”

“Excellent! Then I will remove myself to other quarters and let you get back to what it is you do so well.”

They both stood and she led him to the door. To Coeur's great surprise he took her hand and raised it to his lips, kissing it lightly with the practiced ease of a gentleman.

“Thank you again, my lady,” he said, never breaking eye-contact. “You have restored my faith in a system I once thought irretrievable. Would that a lady of your grace and character had been with me these last few years, perhaps then my pride would not have blinded me as it did.”

She saw something dance in his eyes as he squeezed her hand gently and took his leave.

* * *

Just as the dark of night was beginning to give way to blue, *Hornet* surfaced from the ocean waves, far from the sight of land. Her tuning-fork prow aimed skyward as she ascended as quickly as she dared. The orbital pickets seemed to have bought into their ruse as three of the four sentinels remained over Stonecurtain Keep. Only the fourth kept a vigil over the rest of the space, creating the necessary gap for *Hornet* to shoot.

Unlike their entry to the planet, they were forced to fully utilize their maneuver drive to escape the planet's atmosphere. Tense minutes passed as the crew stood ready in case the enemy became wise to their presence. The cloud-filled sky was slowly replaced by the stars in the main viewport. The blue orb of Phoebus began its slow retreat from view as the far trader put distance between them.

After the initial burn, the ship again went ballistic, coasting on its built-up inertia to maintain a low profile. It would take much longer to drift into the Jump-friendly area, but the odds of them being spotted fell way down into a zone of greater statistical comfort. For all the passing ships knew, she was merely an empty patch of space.

Coeur did risk extending the larger passive array to give them a deeper look into the system, occasionally making short thruster burns to shape their course towards the installation at Yomothall.

All the while, Coeur could hear a doomsday clock ticking in her ear. The day's grace they had achieved at Spires would be largely gone by now. They could expect a forward squadron to arrive at any time and that could drastically change the landscape of the situation literally at a moment's notice. She could only hope that the stunt they pulled would buy them more time. It was a strange—they were buying time for themselves, so that they could in turn buy time for the Coalition, and there was little to be had on either front.

Fatigue was beginning to seep into the equation as well. They had attempted to spot each other in the critical areas, but that only served to take the greatest edge off. The anxiety they felt as this side-mission unfolded could be cut with a knife, which hardly lent itself to restful sleep even when the time permitted. Now that they were spacebournee again, Coeur knew she would want to stay at her post until the dealing was done. Absence could spell disaster in a critical moment.

Coeur continued to ply her powers of observation to the seemingly blank scope, ever-watchful of the enemy that lurked in the stygian depths around her.

Chapter 22

A swirling grey eye opened in vastness of space, its center radiating to life in a glorious flash of indigo Cherenkov radiation. Then it was gone, dark once again, and in its place was the rounded delta form of *Royal Vengeance*.

"All stop," Gaylon Fox said from his perch on the bridge.

"Status report."

One-by-one, each station and department reported in to the bridge.

"All secure, sir." Jamar said from his station. "No reported issues."

"That's what I like to hear. Show me our position."

A representation of the Phoebus system appeared on the overhead screen, repeated on his the arm of his chair. The tiny planet was a lapis marble with a cluster of signatures around it. None of the names there were confirmed, they were only projections based on what the Oriflammens time schedule had mandated. Other green icons were scattered around system denoting the system pickets, the Majority of which were just outside the safe Jump zone to interdict traffic from the planet. Another grouping centered around the system's smaller gas giant and the aid station that had been meticulously, and clandestinely, built there. *Royal Vengeance* had appeared just on the ecliptic of the system at a locus between the planet and the Yomothall station.

Fox reclined in his chair and gripped the armrests of his chair in thought. Once it had become clear that *Hornet* could not be accounted for, Fox has sent his own people over to *Golden Flame* to ascertain and verify the facts of their escape. Fortunately, Hayward had been too busy dealing with his little tin dictator to get in his way. From the fueling logs Fox was able to glean that *Lord Ryan* had been fully fueled when she disembarked. *Hornet* had likewise topped off her tank, but had made no attempt to fill its rather unorthodox collapsible fuel bladder.

Sifting through the information, the sensor logs and the capabilities of each ship, Fox and his team had come up with a couple of working theories. The yacht, with its long legs, was probably attempting to make a run directly to Aubaine, or perhaps to Kruyter, *Hornet's* last port of call to advise either system of what they found. One theory suggested that Delpero might have been attempting to alert Shenandoah and the forces of the scout base there.

The two ships were obviously working in concert, thus *Lord Ryan's* objective was something of a key to that of *Hornet*. In the final account, however, the yacht was immaterial to Fox's thinking. The far trader had enough fuel to cover a Jump-2 stride. It was ruled out early that they would head to trailing, or Kruyter. The only real path Fox could see her taking was a direct to Phoebus on her way to Aubaine.

That meant she would have to refuel before further transit, and there were really on two places to do that in the system, the planet itself or the gas giant, both of which should be covered by cause-friendly units. *Royal Vengeance* had picked this spot for precipitation to split the difference. One thing was for certain, no matter how ingenious or sly *Hornet's* commander was, the cruiser could out accelerate her by a factor of four. If she was ever caught out in the open, it was over. She wouldn't be able to run, and neither would she survive in anything resembling a stand-up fight.

"Get a message off to both stations. Inform them of who we are, what we intend and have them send the positions of all units stationed here using our unified codebook. Impress upon them that time is of the essence. I expect expedient action from all quarters."

"Aye, aye, sir," The comm officer said.

The Oriflammen Revolutionaries had been in charge of staffing this station, particularly on the planet. With manpower at a premium for this undertaking, they had resorted to hiring outside mercenaries to keep the little backwater in check, many of whom Fox held in utter contempt. They were the carbuncles to be scraped off his boot. Severely lacking in both uniformity and discipline, they were, in short, a shabby and detestable lot that were a necessary evil.

"Did anyone else come through with us?"

"Negative, sir. We appear to be the only one so far."

Their arrival in the system had been earlier than expected, which Fox counted as godsend in regards to the chase. It did have the secondary effect of leaving the *Kinunir* to its own devices, however.

"XO, set Condition Three," Fox ordered.

"Condition Three, aye," Jamar answered with a near musical cadence. The ship came to a mid-level ready status. The reactor would be kept at a medium standby, while half of the ship's weapons would continue to be manned.

Minutes ticked by as their messages darted through space at the speed of light. It would take more than an hour before they heard a response from the planet, assuming they answered back right away, and longer still to hear from Yomothall.

Until they had a clearer picture of what was going on, Fox would not commit them on a course of action. He could wait an hour perhaps two to get a handle on the situation before acting. The wheels of fate had seen fit to grant them a little extra time. If the best use of them was to sit tight and do nothing, then that is what he would do.

Composing himself, he got comfortable.

"Call down to the galley. Have them bring some chow to those at stations and up here to the bridge," he said to Jamar. "There's no sense waiting on empty stomach."

* * *

"Any change in aspect or disposition?" Coeur said, her eyes never leaving the tactical display and the gleaming red contact that hovered there.

"Negative," Sixer reported. "I don't believe they've spotted us. Their course and speed are unchanged."

"I doubt they would be so obliging if they knew we were out here," she said, massaging her aching hands at the controls. "Let's put number three to bed and move on."

Since leaving the planet, they had picked up three contacts just outside of the Jump-safe zone, spiraling around the planet in lazy arc. The superior sensors aboard *Hornet* were worth their weight in gold. There was no doubt that they were able to see the enemy before they could them. The sensor-distorting ECM they had stolen from the enemy had also played a part, she was sure, giving them just the extra edge they needed.

Based on their deployment, Coeur couldn't be sure if they were simply as a precaution or if her disappearing act had not been as bulletproof as she thought. Given what she'd seen so far, she leaned towards the former. The guard dogs seemed to be watching, but not actively searching. If their leader harbored any doubts about the illusion she'd fed them, the pickets would be burning up the heavens searching for them. In Coeur's mind, they should be doing that anyway, regardless of what they thought their sensors had told them. Instead they continued on their way, floating along their merry way. But, as lackadaisical as them seemed, it was almost certain that each of them represented a deadly threat. Had space been this cluttered the last time they had escaped from Phoebus, they might have never made it out. It just so happened that they had caught Mestrovic's plan on good day.

Hornet was now in the clear to Jump if she desired, and it was a test of nerve to deliberately steer into the storm when the weather was smooth and clear. Deep Six had been

working furiously to update Jump plots as they continued along in case they had to cut and run. The Schalli had opted to do that *and* to monitor the sensors – two mind-wrenching tasks for anyone, which he attacked without complaint.

In a few hours they would reach Oropos, the largest of the four gas giants. There they would power up enough to sling-shot around the sphere of gas, propelling themselves quietly into position so they could strike at Yomathall. The gravity well Oropos represented would make Jump once again hazardous in the extreme. Of course, it was always possible to Jump anyway and hope for the best, but Coeur had been down that road before with no wish to retrace her steps.

She could feel the stiffness in her spine, going down all the way to the small of her back. Her hands and wrists stung as though ants were stinging her with every move. Her eyes were dry, but focused. She shoved all of that aside.

There would be no relief, not until it was done. It was going to take everything she had, but she was ready, even anxious, to bring the enemy to task.

* * *

Gaylon Fox sat at his station, perfectly composed to the outside world. Inwardly, though he was seething with cold fury. It appeared that the inmates were running the asylum, since it had been more than two hours to receive a reply from either Yomothall or Phoebus. It made Fox want to find the people in charge and stand them up against a bulkhead. It was one thing to be forced to wait for a reply due to the distances involved, but it was quite another for the insufferable simpletons to squander another of his precious hours.

A dozen times he had almost ordered the ship to make for either destination, but checked himself each time. If he went to the planet, *Hornet* would've surely gone to the gas giant, if he went to Yomothall, they would've gone to Phoebus. He was canny enough to know Murphy's Law that well.

Successive messages had proved pointless as the mercenary contingent would care nothing for the authority of the ISN, nor recognize the sovereignty of the High Technarch. He had threatened them with both with the same result.

"Incoming message, sir." The comm officer said.

Gaylon snapped to him, hoping he hadn't imagined it.

"Route to my station and update the board."

As the tactical display updated, very little changed, much to Fox's surprise. He spared that only a glance, instead hungrily devouring the contents of the text scrolling on his arm display. Perhaps there would be an explanation hidden there. It had better be a good one.

Jamar noticed how his Captain's posture began to tighten. After a moment's perusal, Fox released the message to his XO. Jamar scanned the words, understanding the Captain's mind.

The message read:

*To: CO, Royal Vengeance
From: Phoebus SYSCOM
Subject: Situation Report and Status*

The profile you sent us via file rider has allowed us to positively identify RCS Hornet as the ship we destroyed as she attempted to escape Phoebus orbit. There were no survivors.

We believe this ship served as a base for a covert operation that struck Command HQ, resulting in numerous dead and wounded. Knight Commander-2, CO SYSCOM Phoebus, was among the slain.

We have deduced that the operation was meant to extract the former Regent from HQ detention, rather than as a straight decap mission, though the reality is that it accomplished both. The loss of our HQ facilities and personnel has greatly hampered our planet-bound operations.

All system assets have been alerted to the situation and have been ordered to maintain their vigilance and duties until planetary control has been re-established.

"Helm," the Captain said quickly, "Set a course for Yomothall. Inform the engine room that we'll be going to maximum military power." He threw a look to Jamar. "Sound General Quarters."

"Yes, sir." Jamar made the announcement over the intercom, bringing the ship to its fullest combat potential.

"Comm, send a priority message to Yomothall. Order them to bring their units to ready status ASAP."

"Yes, sir. At once, sir."

Jamar slid from his station went to stand by Fox.

"Sir," he said just loud enough for the other man to hear. "What are we doing?"

"What we came here to do," Fox returned. "I don't believe for a second that those apes have destroyed *Hornet*. They may think they have, but that's what she wanted them to believe. I doubt that any of them have had to contend with a woman of her...capabilities before."

"I follow that, but what makes you think she's headed for Yomothall. She could still be on the planet, or Jumped away by now."

"She's already been to the planet. She got what she came for there."

"The Regent."

"Yes. There's only one other place in this system worthy of her attention – the Achilles' Heel of the fleet."

Jamar's eyebrows went up.

"Surely, even *she* wouldn't try that in a far trader. There are five ships defending it, all of them armed. That would be suicide."

"And how many warships were in the Spires system when she escaped?"

Jamar raised his hands, acknowledging that his Captain, as usual, had a method to his madness.

"Point taken."

"We've learned the hardest of ways that we can't underestimate Captain D'Esprit, or her capacity to be our bogeyman – not ever. If she's still in this system, she's going to attack the refueling station, and I intend to be there when she does."

"How can you be sure that's what she plans?"

Fox looked up from his repeater and held his XO's gaze. These questions demonstrated why Fox had wanted him for his second in command in the first place. He deserved the most honest answer that Fox could deliver.

"That is what I would do in her place."

* * *

Hornet's maneuver drive was nearly at full power as she broke free from the mighty pull of Oropos. A series of thruster flares made micro-corrections in their course as the little ship angled away from the dusky orange and tan-dappled Jovian planet and back into space like a bullet fired from a gun. Slowly the glare of her engines died away.

"Secure for silent running," Coeur said to Sixer, as she nudged the ship right where she wanted it. The slingshot had taken longer than she thought, but it had been worth it. They had picked up enough speed to make their attack run on Yomothall without their active engines revealing the game before they did.

It would be a while before they reached a minimum distance to launch. They had no solid estimate on the kind of protection the station had. All that they had to go on was Garrett's word that the station had no active defenses of its own. It would be reliant on ships to screen it and protect it from incoming fire. If it proved to be too dangerous, they would Jump, but if the situation was workable they would press.

All her contingencies were in place. She had layers upon layers of scenarios built up in her mind with counters to every one. There were even a few free-form measures she could call upon to fight the unexpected turns and twists that might surely manifest themselves.

The Bulls-Eye program that Gyro had shepherded into being was now fully operational, and this was the first time it would be used to its fullest potential. They had faced the situation at Lamda-3 without it, and now they had the element of surprise and all the aces up their sleeve that the ship and crew possessed.

It was nearly time to put it all into action.

Steady as she goes, she thought. *Steady as she goes*.

* * *

Around Yomothall station, the threat alarm sounded. The five guardians, powered up from their parking orbits. Reactors were stoked, gunnery crews strapped into their stations, missiles were loaded into tubes.

Originally numbering three, the picket now included a patrol cruiser, two recovered free traders and the system defense boat, RCC *Python*, the small flotilla had recently added the captured *Star of Montrose* to their order of battle.

Based on the alert that *Royal Vengeance* had sent them, the station responded to the threat by sending its pickets out to cover the approach of a ship making its way from the inner system. The patrol cruiser and SDB, the real muscle of the formation, held back while the three merchant ships took a forward position. Together they formed a five-point net to snare their elusive prey, putting their back to the wall against Yomothall itself. As they formed up, the merchants each went to active sensors while the two warships remained silent, waiting

If they played their cards right, the traders would drive the enemy like hounds to the hunters. If the overbearing Solee cruiser was correct in identifying the ship they were looking for was a fragile far trader, *Hornet* wouldn't have a chance.

It was doubtful she would ever see it coming.

* * *

"They did *what*?" Fox demanded. His XO dutifully repeated himself.

"They've adopted a forward posture with their defensive units. Three of them just went to active sensors."

"Thank you," Fox said choking back on the angry words his crew didn't need to hear.

Those idiots over there were willing to give the game up before it had properly begun. By switching to active sensors they just announced their positions loud and clear to anyone in the area. Secondly, they had also sent the message that they were on alert. It was possible, though unlikely to Fox's thinking, that *Hornet* might simply bug out once they realized someone was watching for them.

What's worse, they had spread their defensive strength out away from the station, which was surely the real target, instead of keeping it tucked in tight for the maximum density of point defense.

The commander over there was trying to be clever in laying a trap, but the emphasis was in the word *trying*. If Coeur D'Esprit was the kind of ship-handler he believed she was, she would take full advantage of their folly. In essence, the trap might be sprung in reverse. Without knowing where she was, there was no way to know which method of attack she would choose, which form or which angle.

With *Royal Vengeance* still well out of the area in question, Fox could only ponder the possibilities and advise the foolhardy commander from a distance.

"Comm, tell that commander to pull those ships back in ASAP with quiet sensors. No, scrub that, *order* him to pull them in, or he will personally face the full weight of law when the fleet arrives with the High Technarch."

"Yes, sir."

"Don't you think that's a little heavy-handed, sir?" Jamar said quietly. "We tried brow-beating them with Mestrovic's name before and that didn't work."

"A feeling," Fox said. "That was before we knew that the planet's organization was smashed. I'd wager that leaves the good commander over there as the next in chain of command SYSCOM Phoebus, which means the responsibility is now his if things go south."

"Ah, I see, the perils of promotion."

"Correct."

Jamar passed a hand over his face in thought, gathering his words. There was a possibility that his Captain was wrong and that the ship they were looking for was somewhere at the bottom of a Phoebus sea. In the time he'd known Fox, the man had demonstrated remarkable insight when it came to situations like this one. Still, there was something Ahab-like to his fixation with that troublesome ship and the woman that commanded her. He cleared his throat.

"Tell me, sir, if it comes down to the station or *Hornet*, which will you choose?"

Fox shot him a glance that he normally reserved under-performing crew members, the ones who weren't quite up to speed.

"Do you even need to ask?"

* * *

Aboard *Hornet*, the sensor display lit up with three bright contacts, extremely hard to miss on passives. They were still a good distance off *Hornet's* bow, making it easy to avoid the enemy's sensor envelope that they had been courteous enough to provide.

"Well, that definitely makes things more interesting," Coeur said more to herself than anyone. "What are the odds that *all* of their units out there lit off their sensors?"

"I would estimate the probability is very low, sir," Deep Six said.

"At any rate, they must suspect that we're out here somewhere," Coeur said, checking the ship's chronometer. "That tells me that someone from Spires is now on the scene, someone that could anticipate our intentions out here." The face of a devil filled her mind. She felt the kiss on her forehead, felt the hand around her throat.

Oh God, please, not him....anyone but him.

"All right," she said, turning the information over in her head, "We go with the Around the World shot. Got that, Snapper?"

"Yes, sir!" Snapper said over the comm. That plan was a long shot in both the literal and figurative sense. It would require some crack missileering, and Snapper was bubbling with enthusiasm to try it.

"If we're going to make that work, we've got to make them spread out more, and smoke out their strikers," Coeur said, thinking out loud. In a moment she had it. "Okay, they already think we're out here, let's give them a target," she turned back to Snapshot, still on the line.

"Drop the Changeling in our wake. Be prepared to fire missiles on my mark," Coeur said and saw the smile grow broader on Denise Valencia's face.

"Yes, sir."

As *Hornet* continued towards the gas giant, one of her remaining decoy missiles spat out of her missile tube without power. It fell behind at a rapid pace, tumbling end-over-end through space. Once the distance was great enough, Snapshot sent it a signal.

It ceased its aimless flight, stabilized its yaw and pitch, and set out on a divergent path from that of its mother, all the while flickering emissions meant to replicate *Hornet* trying to make a quiet course correction to avoid the enemy net.

Changeling, like Doppelganger, had been meant to draw the enemy's attention to allow the real *Hornet* to work unseen on other fronts.

It worked.

* * *

One of the recovered merchants picked up their scent. It was subtle, and they almost missed it. That tiny little blip on the screen told them everything they needed to know. The information was passed to their squad-mates, and firing solutions were computed.

In eight minutes, the seemingly innocuous blip had been analyzed, categorized and targeted. The two heavy ships coordinated a missile broadside as they seized forward. The merchants likewise forged ahead as a screen. They weren't quite in range of their lasers, but it wouldn't take long to get there if they veered off and cut the angle.

A salvo of missiles lit up space and homed in on their target. As the storm descended on their intended target, the vigilance of the pickets relaxed – they had found their target and were taking steps to eliminate it. The game was simple now that the players were revealed. Or so they believed.

All the while their sensors methodically screened out all of the ghosts returns on their scope, so as not to trouble their human operators with trivialities, including the one that might've shone them a ship making a course correction away from them. The nine smaller contacts that separated away from the shadow did show up on the sensors, but were disregarded universally as echoes of the broadside their formation had just fired along the same plane. Nor were they aware of the subsequent objects that detached themselves in four sets of two which would soon be pointed straight at their flanks and baffles.

Minutes later, the formation's missiles found their mark. A cluster of nuclear explosions blossomed as they were focused into killing X-rays. The target seemed undamaged or unscathed by the attack until another large nuclear explosion flared to life in the midst of their attack zone, a signal that their target had been neatly dispatched.

* * *

Coeur watched as all five ships now under full power and drive began braking to reverse course. Once again she had to marvel at the resources at the disposal of the Oriflammen revolutionaries. There seemed to be no end to the ships and personnel they had to pull from – and they done all of this in secret. It boggled the mind.

Just as they found at Spires, however, no amount of ships or equipment were enough if the operators didn't know their best way to utilize them. Now she was seeing that concept in effect. The heavy ships should've stayed dark instead of jumping at the first chance to strike.

Now that they were intent on returning to base, it was time give them something else to think about. The four sets of missiles were waiting for the command to stab the formation in the back. They weren't capital missiles, and the likelihood of them destroying either of the heavies was remote. It might slow them down, it might make them expend counter missiles, but the real intent was to keep them busy, and distracted from the prior nine missiles that would use that moment of distraction to insert themselves into the gas giant's orbit.

"Okay, Snapper, start cooking them off," Coeur said.

Out in space the eight drifting missiles activated and scorched across the night towards the enemy formation that very nearly had their backs to them. *Hornet* didn't have enough MFD bandwidth to control all eight of them. Four was about the maximum they could manage, which is why they were dropped in pairs. Each missile, in effect, was running with a wingman. The programming allowed the off-hand missile to mimic its main until it came within proximity of one of the pre-programmed targets, then it could take wing on its own. The accuracy of the secondary missile was markedly, but the fact that *Hornet* was able to throw a full broadside of eight missiles into the teeth, or hindquarters in this case, of the enemy was staggering.

They made a relatively short run to the target as the missiles had lit off just outside of their active sensor spheres, concentrating on the two heaviest ships. Some of the ships had enough time to bring their point defense lasers online.

One of the 'wingmen' wandered off the path as it drew near to one of the merchants. It detonated, tearing a hole through the thin-skinned *Moraine*-class trader. Another of the followers similarly strayed off to be picked off by the defensive fire from *Star of Montrose*. The rest homed in on the patrol cruiser and SDB. Each ship reduced the incoming fire by one with their point defense, but took the brunt of two more warheads as they let fly with their deadly X-ray spears at close range.

Both ships bucked under the punishment. The SDB's thick skin shrugged off the glancing blow of the first X-ray. The second one, however, found her maneuvering drive, just as it was intended. A cloud of fire shot out from the back of the ship as her powerful drive was hamstrung. The patrol cruiser, with its lighter armor weathered the worse of the two. The first ray sheered off the bulbous point on her needle-like prow where the Majority of her sensors were located. The second one pin-holed her center mass, slicing through avionics, electronics and crewmen with equal ease. Her reactor struggled, sputtered and went into an emergency pile.

All it once, the two heavies dropped out of the race, leaving the three merchant ships alone. A cry of triumph went up among *Hornet's* crew which drove back the edge of fatigue. In one fell swoop, they had temporarily nullified the two ships that truly mattered, and the enemy still didn't know their position.

The enemy ships returned fire, as much as their firing arcs allowed, saturating the area randomly in the hopes of finding their tormentor. None of them came close - until *Star of Montrose*, the closest of the ships, whipped around in a g-turn that could've easily wrecked them, and trained both of their laser barbettes in *Hornet's* general area. The range was pretty far for an accurate shot, but their rate of fire was rapid.

They've deduced where we are based on the trail of contacts. They don't know exactly, but they can guess, Coeur thought.

"Gyro," she said as bolts flew around the ship. "Sting them."

The relic laser folded out of the hull, telescoped out to its fullest length, then swiveled around to track the merchant. Two red rectangles, one representing the target and the other the weapon, aligned in flashing brilliant green. Gyro held her breath, and fired.

The 1200-mj laser beam flashed through space and found the lightly-armored vessel, dead amidships, holing her outright. Seconds rolled by as the merchant's fire ceased as she listed, streaming debris and atmosphere. Her heart had been destabilized and reactor plating continued to crack and buckle. If there was anyone still alive aboard her, they shared the ship's fate as the *Star of Montrose* died in a fiery ball of white light.

The blast, while effective, had been a gamble. Because of its dedicated power supply and shielding, the Stinger could've given away their position. Her counter bet was that the blast was powerful enough, and *Montrose's* destruction so complete, that the distracted squadron would take it for another round of missile fire. For all they knew, their sister had wandered into a minefield and been consumed.

Coeur had used the ship's death blaze as a cover for yet another hard thruster correction to angle them off from the planet and back into deep space. If their first salvo did the job, they would be free to Jump away.

Characteristic of space combat, they had witnessed a flurry of intensity, which was now being quickly replaced with a spell of quiet inaction.

It wouldn't last.

* * *

"She isn't playing around, is she?" Jamar asked rhetorically. He shook his head at the damage his repeater plot showed him. "I'm tempted to think that she's traded ships since *Spires*. She's running that thing like a missile frigate."

He punched a computation into his console, cross-referencing the data taken aboard *Golden Flame*. "I suppose she can afford to toss away birds like that. She's got far and away the largest magazine of any *Jayhawk*-class I've ever seen."

"Yes," Fox agreed. "She's also extremely adept at playing to her strengths as *Yomothall* station is learning at a premium price. Her every move is designed to elicit a response, one which she has already foreseen and factored into her next maneuver. As we've seen this afternoon she not only outthinks her opponents, but outclasses them. It is what allows her to contend with foes that should, by rights, be orders of magnitude beyond her whilst never exposing her delicate ship to danger. Brilliant, simply brilliant."

There was genuine admiration in his voice. It was almost as if he were talking about one of his brother or sisters in uniform.

"You admire her, don't you, sir?" Jamar asked in his conversational, low voice.

"Of course," Fox replied. "She has the mind for tactical planning and execution that would make any officer, even this one, envious of her gifts. Any foibles she might possess are filled in by the talents of her crew, but she carries the lion's share of it, I've no doubt. There aren't many that can operate on her level anymore, so it's a rarity, and, I admit, something of a pleasure, to see her in action – particularly when my ship is *not* the one she's decided to target."

Fox smiled wryly at his XO, who returned it with a chuckle.

"Not yet, at least."

"I tell you, Kendall," Fox said, using his exec's first name. "If we had a dozen officers like her, we wouldn't need to go through this elaborate charade with Oriflamme. The whole sector wouldn't stand a chance, Guild or no Guild. The Queen would have it all." He sighed.

"Unfortunately, we only had one, and she died on the flag bridge of *Relentless*," he said, using the Soleean name for *Golden Flame*, "which means that Coeur D'Esprit's destruction is an absolute imperative. If we can't have one on our side, we can't suffer one to exist at all."

"You really place that much importance on her?"

"I do," he said, "and it gives this ship and this crew the rare opportunity of engaging an enemy that's truly worthy of the killing."

Across the bridge, Lieutenant Darmane turned to face the two officers. Both men could tell that the tactical officer was on to something, just from the look on her face.

"Sir, I think I have them."

The two were on their feet and hovering around her station in a blink.

"Explain, Lieutenant," Fox said.

Darmane punched up the sensor record of the merchant vessel's destruction on the main screen, which had been streamed to them by Yomothall station. The records had been a Major boon, giving them a detailed look at the situation without being detectable in the area. The Lieutenant turned the events back to the point where the initial blip had first catapulted the pickets into action.

"Here," she indicated. "This is where they picked up what looked like a course correction, though it's pretty easy to deduce that it was a sensor drone that parroted their drive emissions, or some other kind of sensor decoy. That's the first contact, which was on this course and heading when it was destroyed." A blue line with an arrowhead marked it on the display.

"Once the squadron turned to intercept, missiles had been strategically, and surreptitiously, placed to nip at them on their six. That's the second contact." A blue dot marked the area.

"The Majority of the missiles look as though they were under guidance, which tells me two things. One, that sensor blip the pickets destroyed was not *Hornet*, and two, they were in the area. Of course, their use of remote missile guidance doesn't narrow their probable position down a whole lot...that is until this point."

The log displayed the instant before the *Star of Montrose's* fiery demise. Another blue dot appeared in an area far off of the merchant's port side.

"The merchant started firing randomly in this direction while everyone was burning up space over here," she pointed to the two very different target zones. "I believe this is the third contact. I don't think the ship was just letting fly haphazardly, I think she had a lead on where *Hornet* actually was."

The map zoomed out slightly so that all three contact points were visible.

"If you connect the three contact points and project the decoy's flight plan in reverse," a deep violet line lit up in a more or less straight line. "You can actually find where they launched the decoy. You can also see where the method used to destroy *Montrose* was actually a laser, not a mine or a missile."

"You're sure of this?" Jamar questioned.

"Oh yes, sir," she said. "First, the flight time for an impact-style missile like a contact nuke would've taken much longer to get there. A laser would've taken a little over a full second to hit her. It wasn't an X-ray laser either because there was no nuclear catalyst that I can find." She swept her hand around the picture in miniature on her station that mirrored the main screen.

"It's hard to see, but when you slow it down enough, you realize that the only explosion that occurred out there was the one when the ship went up," she pointed at a strange energy discharge that seemed to arc to the ship seconds before its death. "I couldn't figure out what this

was, at first. I thought it was a laser, but it seemed far too muscular for the 150-mj laser we know she mounts. Unless you were just dead lucky, I can't imagine a laser that size being able to take a merchant ship like *Montrose* with a single shot."

"It could've been a direct reactor shot, or a magazine," Jamar pointed out. "There was a delay between the discharge and when she blew."

"It's possible, sir, but the odds for a one-shot-one-kill with a 150 against a ship with that many enhancements is astronomical, and it doesn't explain the enormity of the discharge, until I expanded my math."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning, sir, that if you multiply the force on that reading by a factor of eight then it fits."

"Are you suggesting...," Jamar's voice faded with the implications.

"Yes, sir. I believe that ship somehow mounts a laser emplacement that is somewhere in the neighborhood of 1200 megajoules, almost double our two most powerful lasers put together. A bolt of that magnitude could *certainly* dispense with *Montrose* with a single throw."

"They must've missed it somehow when *Golden Flame* examined her," Jamar said. "Gaia only knows how they could overlook such a monster."

"It would have to be an independent system," Darmane said. "Something you'd have to dig to find, or something internally camouflaged to look it was part of another subsystem."

"Then it can probably only fire once, perhaps twice," Fox mused to himself. "I give the Coalition full marks for ingenuity. They've managed to outfit a Q-ship that has some serious claws, or sting in this case." It looked though his mind was about drift along that train of thought, but he centered himself.

"You said you might have *Hornet's* position, Lieutenant. Do you have it or not?"

"Yes sir, I believe I do," she made some final adjustments at her station. "They waited until the ship exploded to make their course correction, hoping that the thermal wash would mask it. It almost did. It's right here." A flash of energy flared and disappeared. It could've been so easy to miss it, or associate it with any number of celestial phenomena that could account for it. It had taken Darmane's eagle eyes and analytical mind to sift through that and find *Hornet*.

"*Hornet* was right here when the ship exploded. If you compare the three timecodes on the three points of contact, it appears that they all occur at a uniform speed. I would imagine she's been coasting on a ballistic course this whole time to avoid detection, and a brisk one at that. So, all you have to do is look at the vector of force their thruster flare is giving off and apply the distance they would've traveled at that constant speed. That puts our girl right about...here."

A red diamond icon sprang to life, making its slow crawl towards the outer reaches of the solar system.

Fox considered the images on the screen with his piercing gaze.

What is she doing? Why is she abandoning an attack on the refueling station? She's raked their defenders hard. It would be a small thing to get her shot in before anything could catch up to her. Is she worried about getting caught in the gravity well? Has she decided to cut her losses? In any case, I suppose it doesn't matter. Unbelievable, we've finally got her out in the open and she's too close to a planetary body to Jump.

The bridge crew, having watched their Captain's blue eyes tracks across the display, half-expected the screen to either frost over with ice or burst into flames.

"I see only one thing wrong," he said to Darmane. One of her raven black eyebrows went up.

"Sir?"

"You are clearly out of uniform," he said critically, seeing her obvious surprise. She looked down at her clothes, inspecting them thoroughly. "I would expect one my Lieutenant Commanders to dress accordingly."

Jamar concealed a smile as Darmane fumbled for words.

"But, sir, I'm not a..."

"You are now," He replied calmly. "As of about five minutes ago, that is. You found our ghost, when she was determined *not* be found, Lieutenant. That's worth a whole pay grade right there, plus a month's retroactive salary."

The young woman braced to attention and snapped a text-book professional salute, radiant as a star.

"Thank you, sir!"

Fox turned to Jamar, "Please note the time and date of this promotion, Commander, for the official record."

Jamar brought his arm up to spy a look at the chronometer on his wrist.

"Noted and logged, sir."

"Very well," Fox said settling back into his chair. "Helm, come about and put us on an intercept course with those coordinates and deploy sensor drones."

"Aye, aye, sir."

Fox took a deep, cleansing breath, composing himself and savoring the moment. Today might just prove to be Coeur D'Esprit's last day, and he would be there to see it. It was only fitting that she would just come off the heels of her victory over the station pickets. It was a last great testament to her extraordinary abilities, one last hurrah before the end. Fox was grateful that fate had arranged that at least. Still, a part of him felt an edge of regret that he would be the instrument of her ascension. It was a strange honor he was being paid, one doled out by a universe with a sense of irony, or, at the very least, a sense of humor.

Such a pity...

* * *

As *Hornet* put her rudder to Yomothall station, she continued to drop deactivated missiles behind her at regular intervals. If any of the pickets decided to pursue, they would have to run a continuous gauntlet which would force them to divide their efforts between the chase and staying alive. If their initial salvo failed, they could always light these missiles off for a secondary attempt to finish the job.

"Steady as she goes," Coeur said over the ship-wide comm, "everyone standby at their stations. What's our ETA to Jump?"

"Three hours, twenty-one minutes. We were able to slice off a considerable amount of time by following our present course away from the planet, sir."

"You know, if I didn't know any better, Sixer, I'd say you were fishing for a compliment."

The Schalli's head turned so he could look at his Captain.

"May I ask what you mean by 'fishing', sir?"

"Figure of speech, Sixer."

"Of course." Deep Six returned his attention to the sensor display. Those large eyes at the end of his eyestalks narrowed almost to glittering slits. His barbels twitched in sequence, the Schalli equivalent of scratching his head or stroking his beard. Coeur could feel the wheels turning in his head.

"Talk to me. What do you have?"

"I'm not sure. It was more or less on the edge of what we can see clearly at bearing zero-eight-one, mark zero-one-nine. I thought it was another energy signature, possibly another ship." His tentacles began a flowing dance across his panel.

"Pipe it down to Raven for identification."

"No need, sir," he said, keying in a final sequence. The schematics of a ship shown in profile with an accompanying bird's eye view eclipsed the tactical display. "I've identified her positively. The heat profile she gives off as she accelerates is quite distinctive. Their ECM didn't mask it this time."

It's was him. He's the one that alerted the base. Now he's blocking our way out.

The profile of *Royal Vengeance* diminished into a corner of the display. The contact was re-designated. A miniature representation of the cruiser faced off against the even smaller avatar of *Hornet*.

"It appears they are on a direct intercept course, sir."

"Then that means they know whereabouts of where we are," she looked at the flight chronometer. The message they sent at the beginning of this engagement should be arriving just about now.

Once they had dealt with the devil behind them, they could move on to deal with the one in front.

It was going to be close.

Very close.

* * *

The stealthed sensor drones *Royal Vengeance* had unleashed into the area had so far come up with nothing. On the reverse side, it was unlikely they had been spotted, but their blank return was puzzling.

Perhaps they were picking up nothing because *Hornet* was not there at all. Had the ship managed to triple think their double think? Fox couldn't rule out the possibility that, despite all the evidence, Captain D'Esprit might once again offered a feint within a feint.

Given the circumstances, they had compensated as best they could. The missile barrage they planned consisted of contact nukes that would disperse within the zone of *Hornet's* possible position. Secondly, they were holding their fire, letting the range fall away. Every moment they didn't fire gave them time to pinpoint their target, catch her scent, and refine their firing solutions. It also equated to a shorter flight time for the missiles, to minimize the amount of chicanery the enemy Captain would be inclined to conjure.

Where are you, Captain, Fox thought.

* * *

Around Yomothall, the refueling station floated in orbit around the gas giant on the equator of the gargantuan sphere. The pickets were wounded and disorganized, but limped around the star-spangled darkness, each seeking to huddle around her sisters for protection against further attack.

A growing feeling of unease began to spread like a plague on the station. They were uncovered and vulnerable. What's more there was no confirmation that their tormentor had been dealt with in permanent way. The crippled squad was too far away and their agonizing progress back to the barn was cause enough to send acidic cold bubbling and churning deep down in their collective stomachs. The station commander was red-faced and screaming through the comm at the ships to make their way back. No amount of cajoling, browbeating or threats could give speed to the ships that were, at the moment, looking out for their own survival.

At the height of their agitation, nine sensor contacts lit up their scope in close proximity, nearly on top of them. Little had they known that *Hornet* had sent their initial salvo on a circuitous route around to the far side of the planet, nearly circumnavigating the giant's orbit. Once the salvo had gained an orbit on the equator, they had let their inertia carry them around to the dark side, where they had fired up their drives to gain speed until re-emerging on the opposite side. Before they cleared the horizon they had once again gone dark and coasted towards their target with no betraying power signatures like any other piece of stellar debris.

It would've been practically impossible for *Hornet* to guide missiles in at this stage, but the beauty of the strike was that such guidance was unnecessary. The missiles had been programmed to orbit the planet and arrive at a specific locus in space, a position they had known in exacting detail, courtesy of the Regent's photographic memory. His information was flawless.

The station realized too late that the attack was coming from the opposite direction they expected. As effective as the enemy attack on their pickets was, it had merely been a ruse to get the protective units out of position to clear the way for the nine missiles that had just gone active. The station commander had a moment of mixed respect and terror before doom fell upon them like the anger of angels.

Four of the missiles extended their laser rods, converting their nuclear explosion into a focused lancet of X-rays. Two of them missed outright, their deadly energy continuing out into space. The other two struck the station, with only one piercing the belly of the station. The X-rays had not been meant to destroy the station outright, but merely to throw them into to disarray and chaos so that the other five could get close.

The remaining five all carried nuclear warheads. They descended on the station in succession, delivering their apocalyptic ordinance in an ever-expanding ball of fire, consuming it utterly.

When the light gave way to the darkness again, nothing remained.

* * *

Hornet's comm was filled with a moment of cacophonous outpouring from all quarters. The expression was short-lived, however, as their attention naturally turned towards the incoming ship. *Hornet* had never faced this ship on an even playing field before. The three times they'd come into contact, and they had always held the advantage – some piece of the high ground to allow them to contest a ship of that size and magnitude. This time was going to be different.

To Coeur it was clear she was going to have to manufacture an advantage if none was forthcoming, but to her surprise, she felt steady, still, as though the mask of calm she wore so well on the outside had finally projected itself inward, solidifying her sense of purpose and thought. By rights she should be terrified. The battle with *Orion* had rattled her in Kruyter, and now she faced a far more dangerous ship, commanded by a masterful Captain. There was no fear now, only the situation unfolding before her and the will to act.

"Snapper," she said. "Prepare to initiate Three-Card Monte, full spread with every bird, on my mark. Standby Crowbar."

She was going with a variant of one of the contingency plans, the details and departures of which she fed into Snapshot's queue. If they could get in close, they could get their parting shot. If not, there was always the alternative.

"All right, ladies and gentlemen, here's what we do."

* * *

"Sir!" the sensor officer cried. "The station, it's..."

"I see it," Fox said with a level voice. On the tactical display the refueling station flared, then disappeared as the display updated itself. The sensor stream they had used to monitor the situation would cease as the last minutes of transmission reached them.

They were a few light minutes out, which meant that the station's destruction had occurred minutes ago. The information was just now reaching them. If *Hornet* was out there, between his ship and the station, she would have received this news first. If he knew her at all, she had already formulated her next move and was moving to put it into action. That meant he had seconds to act, or he would cede the initiative to her.

Facts and numbers whirled in his head in a kaleidoscope of images and insight. It was very possible she knew he was here, he couldn't put that past her abilities, regardless of how much *Royal Vengeance* tried to conceal herself. He would love it if she could, just once, prove him wrong, but the universe didn't work that way. A quick computation told him the number of missiles she might have remaining in her magazine. Given the situation, and her need to run silent...

"Ready counter missiles and stand by point defense," he said to the now Lieutenant Commander Darmane. "Prepare for incoming fire."

"Yes, sir." She said, her train of thought arriving at the same conclusion. Jamar likewise nodded sagely. The three were of one mind – Fox had just arrived there a few seconds beforehand.

"You think she's dropping birds in her wake." Jamar said as a statement, not a question.

"The Imperial Navy used to use that trick, but even they learned it from the Terran Confederation. Accuracy is poor, but the salvo density greatly increases your potential number of hits. More importantly, it doesn't give away your position when you fire."

"Her service jacket says that she was in the Imperial Scout Service," Jamar replied "but given her unorthodox techniques, I would've guessed she was a naval officer, and certainly an Academy graduate. I didn't think the Imperium trained its scouts quite to that level."

"They didn't, though she's cherry-picked tradecraft from both the Navy and the Scout Service. Beyond that, I believe our distinguished Captain over there was an independent study, which is how she managed to land the killing blow on the station before the engagement ever started. Probably hid her winning hand by firing on a reciprocal plane the moment the pickets

opened fire. If that that last burst of sensor data showed what I think it did, she used the angular momentum of the planet to deliver her attack. *That* trick she picked up from the Vargr.”

“Multiple contacts, sir!” The sensor tech reported. Fox turned to Darmane.

“Right on cue. Report.”

“Incoming missiles, sir. I’m tracking eight of them,” she said, “in a staggered formation.”

Fox and Jamar exchanged a knowing look. So, she had been dropping them behind her in case someone was on her trail or their Vargr sleight-of-hand didn’t work.

Darmane’s head snapped to the sensor tech as two new objects appeared on her screen. “Sensors, confirm those newest contacts!”

“Confirmed, sir,” the officer said a moment later. “It looks as though *Hornet* has fired an additional missile and is changing course. They are making a run for it, sir.”

“Very well,” Fox said, straightening in his chair. “I think it goes without saying that I don’t want any of those missiles, not a single one, to touch this ship. I trust I am fully understood, Lieutenant Commander?”

“Crystal clear, sir,” Darmane said, bringing the ship’s countermeasures to bear that had been brought on line only a moment before.

“Shall we change course to follow them, sir?” Jamar asked.

“No. I don’t want to chance exposing our flank until those birds are dealt with in detail. Until we are sure that *that*,” he pointed to the *Hornet* icon up on the board, “is really them, we don’t want to dance to the tune they play.”

“Understood, sir.”

Already today they’d seen how deadly a choice that could be.

“Firing countermissiles, sir,” Darmane said. “I am re-tasking our larger lasers temporarily for long range point defense.”

There was no way to know the configuration of those missiles at this range. They could be X-rays, or nukes, or any other payload used in the theatre of space. None of them were capital missiles, but by the strictest of definitions, *Royal Vengeance* wasn’t a capital ship. Only the scarcity of relic warships and the overall reduction of hull size in the modern era put her much higher in standing than she ever would’ve had in the Third Imperium which had held no love for her class at the time.

Those missiles still represented a grave risk to the ship. All it would take is for one to find the reactor, the magazine or any other vital location for the ship to fall once again to the predations of *Hornet’s* commander.

Fox watched as the counter missiles fired away, racing out to meet the incoming threat. Their two large 700-mj lasers opened up as well, though it would’ve come as a surprise if they scored kills just yet. Unless they were X-rays, they would have plenty of chances between now and any potential contact.

“New contacts, sir!”

Fox turned to see what new twist D’Esprit had managed to throw at him now. He was sure he wasn’t going to like it.

“I’m reading two more power signatures from *Hornet*. Both of them are mimicking their emissions, sir.”

The icon of the ship broke into three parts, the sensors reading each of them as RCS *Hornet*. They were perfect copies of each other, indistinguishable from the others. They dispersed on three separate escape courses. The courses the ‘*Hornets*’ were pursuing represented three completely viable alternatives. It appeared she wasn’t obliging enough to let a rogue or unlikely course narrow down their choices.

“The old Switch-A-Roo,” Jamar commented. “They must’ve saved a few decoys for a rainy day.”

Fox laced his hands together in his lap then rested the knot under his chin. She had demonstrated that her ship was capable of many tactical surprises stemming from the technology her government had saw fit to bestow upon her. Passive stealth, first-rate sensors, a ridiculous magazine, an awesomely powerful laser, the list went on and on. Furthermore, she had demonstrated a marked propensity in using these as tools to shape perceptions. Perceptions shaped decisions, decisions shaped actions. That’s what had allowed her to take a squad of five ships out of the equation without breaking a sweat.

Now she was attempting to play a shell game with him by presenting three identical copies for his consideration. He could run down one of them, perhaps two, but it would buy her time to find some other way to defy him. The one thing he absolutely could not give her was time regroup and to get her legs back under her.

No.

Mentally, he took a step back. His assumptions were starting to shape the movements of his thoughts, which could prove potentially fatal. The knot of his hands moved from his chin to hover just below his eyes.

What was better than directing your enemy into playing a guessing game with three choices? The answer: convincing your enemy that they had only three choices in the first place.

That's it!

He turned the full coin of his attention to the sensor officer.

"You're certain that all three emissions are alike in every detail?"

"Yes, sir." The sensor officer replied, surprised at the sudden scrutiny. "The only variance I can see is their maneuvering output, but that's only because their differing flight paths require it."

"I will ask again," Fox said calmly. "Are you *sure* that all three contacts are identical?"

"Yes, sir, one hundred-percent sure, sir," the man replied.

"Very well," Fox said turning back to the screen, taking in the distance between his ship and the incoming missiles. "Engage active sensors."

All of his bridge crew had been with him at second Mexit, when the command to raise active sensors had gone hand-in-hand with fire and death. He knew they were with him, but past experience gave them a moment of pause.

"Sir, you realize that will give the missiles our exact position," Jamar said.

"I do," Fox said. "Not everything here is what it seems. Now, my order stands. Engage active sensors, now."

The sensor officer had nearly lost his complexion at the order, but Fox's calm voice resonated with experience and that touch of competence that told the poor man his Captain had not taken leave of his senses. Trusting to the judgment that had been proven time and time again, he complied.

"Active sensors, aye, sir."

Royal Vengeance came to her highest level of awareness, blazing bright in space. Fox had greatly upgraded the active sensor suite on his ship since Mexit, vowing that if he ever needed to broadcast his position to everyone in space, he would at least get a superior look around him in return. The active sensors reached out into the night, nailing the positions of each of the incoming missiles and rendering the decoys useless.

Most importantly, it revealed the actual position of *Hornet*, which had somehow traded places with one of its missiles and was moving into position to rake them with their powerful laser at nearly point-blank range.

"Redirect lasers!" Fox said, never raising his voice, but conveying the urgency of his order. Darmane's hands flew over her control panel.

Gotcha.

* * *

Alarm sirens sounded as *Hornet* came under active sensor targeting. Her ruse had almost worked. They had almost got in close enough to unleash The Stinger at a devastating range.

Coeur hadn't counted on *Royal Vengeance* having that much sensor depth on actives, or that she would reveal herself quite so loudly while staring down her salvo. Somehow he'd seen through her stratagem, just as he must've anticipated her dropped missiles; he'd responded to them fast enough to tell her he had prepared to receive them in advance.

Now they had been spotted and had only a few seconds to act before *Royal Vengeance* reduced them to slag. She had kept one last plan up her sleeve, a last resort, a road she'd taken once and hoped never to do it again. The moment was here, and there was no fear. She had caged that waiting beast once and for all.

"Gyro, now or never," she said then turned to Deep Six.

“Case Omega.”

The Schalli nodded quietly and piped his last plot to her station. Without hesitation, she punched the commands in that would once again put her crew in the hands of fate.

Missiles and countermissiles met each other in space with explosive introductions. A laser bolt from *Royal Vengeance* flashed by them faster than the eye could see. A golden beam of light lit up the darkness in answer, reaching out and finding the cruiser’s front starboard quarter and raking across it as a final, parting shot.

They were on the outskirts of a gravity well without a fully projected Jump plot, two things that could spell certain disaster when taken individually, and an even greater danger when compounded together.

Regardless, there was no going back.

A great grey eye opened in the heavens between the two ships and RCS *Hornet*, along with every soul aboard, vanished within it.

Chapter 23

The *Glorious Reign* had been the second ship of Captain Fox’s impromptu posse to precipitate into the system, followed closely by her sister ships, *Divine Right*, *Hand of Justice*, *Crown Prince* and the light carrier, *Exarch*. Each of them were the cheetahs of their respective classes, able to bring the greatest force available to bear at the fastest rate. They had been hand-picked by Fox to help him hunt down a single ship only to arrive too late. Their quarry was hours gone by the time they could contact their *de facto* Commodore.

What they found was the *Royal Vengeance*, damaged, and trying to effect repairs to its upper starboard deck. The jagged black line that marred her otherwise flawless silver lines stood out like an ugly dueling scar along her hull. It was immediately obvious that whatever had caused that scar had been powerful enough to slice and boil the ship’s armor with relative ease. As these things go, the shot could’ve been much worse. The butcher’s bill listed five dead and twelve wounded.

The skippers of the newly-arrived ships had fully expected their group leader to be a living torrent of wrath, exhaling hellfire with every breath, eyes burning like suns. When they were able to raise *Royal Vengeance*’s Captain, however, they had found him remarkably calm about the whole affair, with even a touch of amusement coloring his character. He seemed almost pleased with the turn of events and how they had played out to the extent that his XO had sent them all private messages reassuring them that his Captain had not buckled under the pressure.

Whether punch drunk, or accepting defeat with uncanny grace they didn’t know. It had not slowed his response in getting them reorganized into a squadron, which he did with his usual aplomb. Soleean Marines were dispatched to the planet to shore up the situation there. Repair crews were shuttled over to expedite his ship’s restoration as well as that of the ragged picket force that had been presented with the sharp end of *Hornet*. As they were brought back into service, Fox pressed them into his formation. For a time, the Phoebus system belonged to Gaylon Fox unchallenged in any way, and he was quick to bring it to heel.

When elements of Gold Fleet began to appear a day-and-a-half later, they found the system pacified and ready to accommodate the heavy traffic. Fox had even managed to lessen the loss of the refueling station by ferrying water into orbit directly from the oceans of Phoebus, which were stored as huge blocks of ice. He was already constructing the heating, cracking and distribution apparatus to parcel out the fuel when *Phoenix* arrived on the scene to relieve him of command.

Admiral Hayward had been suitably impressed at the progress he’d made in such a short time. Much could be accomplished, Fox assured him, when the need for secrecy could be cast

aside. The military could operate orders of magnitude more efficiently when it could dictate terms to the civilian population, and not vice versa.

Of course, Fox had been reluctant to cede system command. It wasn't easy to step aside once you were at the top, but he done it. It was with a sense of satisfaction at knowing Hayward was likewise replaced a day later when *Golden Flame* materialized at the head of another battle group.

The flagship had to be scoured from the inside and out since her crippling at the hands of the rebels. Her damage had been patched up enough to get her into Jump. Now that she was in system, the repair ship, *Liberté*, would continue to work her magic. The dreadnought was still recovering, but she remained the most powerful ship in the fleet, more than a match for anything the Coalition might throw at them, including the cornerstone of the Aubani planetary defense, the mighty *Kukulcan*.

Once word had spread to the true master of the fleet, the High Technarch had personally invited Captain Fox to dine with him aboard the flagship as the new commanding officer of the ISN forces.

Fox had agreed, of course, there was no way he could refuse such a request. The thought had crossed his mind that Mestrovic might try to arrest him for letting the *Hornet* slip away, and who knew where that might lead. As he boarded his shuttle, he didn't quite dismiss the idea that that might happen, but he didn't fully embrace it either. He'd read Alcantara's report on the deterioration the old man was going through, at least in terms of his attitude. It would carry grave consequences should anything happen to the recognized leader of the ISN forces, but the old man might not think that far ahead.

There was no small part of trepidation on his part at leaving his ship, but it was hammered flat by his discipline. The last time he been aboard *Golden Flame*, he'd been an unwelcome visitor. Now, he was the commander of more ships than even Hayward. He was an Admiral in all but name now, and it would feel good to greet Mestrovic on those terms, regardless of what came of it.

As repair crews swarmed over the exterior of his ship like vac-suited ants, Fox's shuttle left the boat bay and set a course for the titanic ship and the dictator that waited there.

* * *

To his great surprise, Gaylon Fox had not been clamped in irons as soon as he set foot aboard the flagship. Quite the opposite, in fact, his shuttle had landed in the starboard landing bay and an honor guard of mixed Imperial and Technocracy Marines had been there to greet him, many of them in battle dress.

The High Technarch had not been there himself, but had sent Captain Emory to welcome his guest both on behalf of the ISN and the Technocracy. Moments later, he'd been ushered into the cathedral-like dining hall where he was to share a private meal with Mestrovic.

The meal was exquisite, the wine first-rate. The two had passed small talk until at last Mestrovic had set his wine glass down with a definite thump, a signal it was time to get down to the business at hand.

"I would imagine you were unsure of just how you would be received upon your arrival, am I correct?"

"Your Excellency is very perceptive." Fox said lowering his own glass.

"I believe this particular encounter has cast events in a different light," Mestrovic said. "I wanted to thank you for being the catalyst to set them in motion, the hand that turns the wheel, if you will."

"I'm not sure what you mean, Excellency," Fox said. "I failed to protect the station, or intercept *Hornet*. It is possible that even now she carries a forewarning of our arrival to the heart of the enemy capitol." There was no touch of regret or recrimination, he was merely stating the facts.

"All true," Mestrovic said fiddling with a morsel on his plate. "But come now, Captain, surely you can see what a bold and decisive move it was for you to come ahead of the fleet as you did. *Hornet* could've been anywhere in the space of three star systems, a tiny speck of flesh

and alloy in all the heavens, and yet you found her. Can you imagine what a heroic feat that was, Captain? Certainly one worthy of Jason, Decatur or even The Red Admiral.”

“I trust your Excellency will forgive me I don’t see it in those terms.”

“See it in what terms you like, Captain,” Mestrovic said, an impish light in his grey eyes. “Consider this, your beloved Admiral, and my friend, is murdered, cowardly struck down at a wedding. Her successor, upon his own initiative, with nothing but his instincts, goes in search of her killer. Against all odds, he succeeds in finding the vermin. A brief clash ensues, but the villains managed to give our valiant hero the slip after laying waste to much of the system, with dozens, perhaps hundreds dead in their wake.”

Mestrovic set his fork down, his hand noticeably shaking, and leaned in.

“Can you imagine what a fire that will build under our men and women? It will bring our two branches together like never before, and their need to avenge the fallen can only be satisfied by a direct strike on Aubaine itself. Had you destroyed *Hornet* here, the story would’ve ended. Her escape ensures that the story continues, and brings the villains and heroes of the piece sharply into focus. On such foundations is drama built,” Mestrovic said. “So whether you realize it, Captain, you have given us the perfect lead in to when we take the stage of Aubaine.”

“Then it’s not everyday an officer can manufacture a victory from a defeat,” he raised his glass in a toast. “To Lady Victory, may she come on swift and glorious wings in the trials ahead.”

“To Victory,” Mestrovic answered, setting his glass down with another audible thump. “Besides the stage dressing and moral, there is another dimension to the situation which works to our advantage, Captain. Can you guess what it is?”

Fox sensed the test being presented to him, and accepted it. In an odd sort of way, Fox and Mestrovic shared much the same headspace, having arrived on the same page by vastly different routes.

“A warning to the capitol could work to our advantage as we near the end-game.”

“Excellent! I knew you would not disappoint!” Mestrovic beamed. “Please go on.”

“If the capitol is warned of the danger then they will have two choices, run or fight. If they run, they abandon the seat of government and concede the match. If they fight we will crush them, and any reinforcements they summon as a result of being forewarned.”

“Oh, bravo!” Mestrovic said, clapping his gloved hands. “Defeating them in detail, once and for all, will save us years of rooting out rebel units in the outlying systems or having to endure a new government they might form elsewhere. Better that we crush them all at once and be done with it.”

“We are in complete agreement, Excellency.”

“I can see why the late Admiral thought so highly of you Captain Fox,” Mestrovic mused. “She was an uncanny judge of character.”

“That she was, Excellency.” Fox said with a cruel smile.

“There now, all of the pieces are on the table. The bold truth is, Captain, that you have achieved infinitely more in trying and failing than you ever would by succeeding outright. It is a rare man that can do that, Captain, a rare man, indeed.”

“As your Excellency says,” Fox replied.

“Don’t worry, my friend, there will be ample opportunity for you to demonstrate your brilliance at Aubaine. Should *Hornet* reveal herself on the battlefield, I will ensure that you, and you alone, will have the honor of finally ridding the universe of that troublesome ship.”

“Thank you, Excellency,” Fox said, the cold smile growing wider. “When the time comes, I will fully embrace that honor.”

“Of that I’ve no doubt.”

“If I may be so bold, Excellency, might I make an additional request?”

“You need only name it, Captain.”

“The mercenaries here – they showed a distinct lack of discipline and professionalism. Had they heeded my word, perhaps the loss of ships and equipment could’ve been minimized. I would like to see them punished.”

Mestrovic froze in his seat, fixing a flat gaze on the Captain. Fox returned it levelly. Just as he was beginning to think he’d said something out of turn, the old man let out a laugh that was utterly devoid of any humanity.

“Amazing, Captain, we must be operating on the same brainwave. Before you arrived I had already drawn up death warrants for the lot of them. We have no room for the summer soldier or the sunshine patriot in our ranks.” He said. “If you like, I can allow the Soleean Marines to carry out the sentences. Will that be acceptable, Captain?”

Fox raised his glass in silent toast and took a long draught.

“Yes, Excellency, that is most agreeable.”

* * *

Lady Liu An-Wing Mestrovic, First Domina of the Technocracy and Lady Sovereign of its people found herself once again alone, a prisoner. The only difference in her stint between prison terms was that she had gained a tailor and few more servants. Her apartment was the same as before, though the food had stepped up a notch at least. As cages went, she could've done much worse.

They had Jumped again since her wedding day, though where she was, was impossible to tell. From the snippets she'd gathered here and there, Zorn's plan had worked. She'd definitely heard that *Hornet* had pulled a disappearing act and gotten away. For her part she was glad to contribute to their escape if only in an indirect way. Coeur D'Esprit might be a royal pain at the time, with a penchant for pushing her buttons, but, in retrospect, Liu had given her plenty of reasons and occasions for that quiet, annoyed-mother look she had.

Even still, Red Sun cared about her people and the Reformation Coalition for all its obvious flaws and foibles. That alone was worth having to take sacred wedding vows with a man she wanted to see cold and dead. The bomb had nearly claimed her life, but missed its intended target.

Her companions couldn't have known that her husband would switch the location at the last minute. Surely they had thought to strike at him when he took his leisure. She couldn't hold it against them. If she had died in that blast, it would have been worth it to her to know that Mestrovic came with her.

Ironically, the plan had been to marry the man to get close to him, but the bomb had made that plan backfire by driving him further away. As it was, he had stashed her back in her cabin and forgotten about her. Not once had he come to see her, though she took that as kindness. The last thing she wanted was to have the old man come around looking to formally consummate their marriage. Repulsive at that might be, if he did come calling it would give her a chance to end his life, and that, she realized was what her world centered on right now.

Revenge.

There was the tired old notion that there was a difference between justice and revenge, of how the line often became blurred and unrecognizable, but she didn't care. Philosophers could call her urge to end her husband's life what ever they bloody well wanted, it changed nothing.

Beyond the fact that he had probably murdered her uncle, Bela, and untold others, beyond his lies and deception, his maniacal designs, he had managed to stain the one thing that meant more to her than all of those things combined – the honor of Oriflamme.

Since the Coalition was formed, the other systems had always viewed Oriflamme with suspicion. With their large population, ambitious attitudes and private military forces, she couldn't blame them. Even their staunchest supporters, their most ardent Centrist allies, must've at one point or another pondered the possibility that Oriflamme would rise up and force their agenda at gunpoint. It was a nightmare scenario that Mestrovic had brought to pass, and for that she hated him, hated him with the fury of a thousand suns. In the end, he had proved to the Coalition that their fears were justified, that the Oriflammen were nothing but self-serving, dictatorial scum, just as they had always suspected. Even if this crisis could be stopped, Oriflamme would be a pariah, an outcast, or worse yet, a target for retribution.

Looking back, the woman she'd been when she'd first left her home world aboard *Hornet* had been a part of the problem. She'd been arrogant, aloof and completely self-absorbed, all too often letting ambition set their course and passing it off as patriotism. Too many had been like her on Oriflamme for too long. People like her had let a man like Mestrovic come to power, and bring their house down to the foundations.

But, if there was any sense of balance left in this universe, she prayed that she would have a hand in erasing their hubris personified from the equation, even if it cost her life.

If somehow she could do that, if an Oriflammen tyrant could be struck down by an Oriflammen hand, then maybe, just maybe, the rest of the world would see that not all of them were the enemy. Perhaps with that act, she might somehow reclaim a measure of the honor her husband had so completely darkened.

If he only knew the deadly viper he kept as a caged pet, he would've surely done away with her, but the bomb had nearly killed her as well, which put her out of his immediate suspicion. Like so many others this petty little war had trapped, she would wait with perfect patience for her time to act. When that time came, she would act without mercy, and try to forgive herself later.

Fill me from the crown to the toe, top-full of direst cruelty...

* * *

Vega Zorn's return to consciousness did not come easy, nor did it come all at once. It was her breathing that she noticed first, then the awareness that she had awareness at all. After that her skin reported that it was cold, followed closely by a host of nerves in various places whose initial reports did not seem encouraging to her awakening mind. A patch of skin on her abdomen seemed particularly insistent that attention be paid, so she sent her newly discovered hand to investigate the matter. A soft gauzy material was what she found in the affected area.

It was at that moment that her memory of events began trickling into her thoughts like a glass being slowly filled with water. That's when her eyes fluttered open.

"Did we make it?" she croaked. Her mouth was dry and her tongue had seemed to have grown to three times its size.

"That remains to be seen," a female voice said from somewhere. A face hovered before her blurry vision. A lance of bright light assaulted one of her eyes, and seconds later the other.

"Frankly I'm surprised you're awake so soon, you lost a lot of blood. You also took four rounds to the gut all in an area the size of a playing card. One missed your spine by less than a centimeter. That one was a devil to get out. Lucky for you your body sleeve slowed them down enough that the damage to your kidney and intestines wasn't nearly as bad as it could've been. All in all, I think you'll make a full recovery."

"Try not to sound disappointed." Zorn said to the diminutive doctor at her side.

"Now you're sounding a bit more like your usual charming self."

"Boots?"

"Captain Po is resting and under heavy sedation. I had to completely reconstruct her knee and work the kinks out of her hip and ribs. Those goons did a real hatchet job on her, I'm sorry to say." Physic frowned. "I'm afraid the most grievous wounds she's received are beyond my ability to heal."

"She'll pull through it. She's strong. Like Coeur."

"Perhaps," Physic said. "That also remains to be seen."

"So why..."

"Why are you still breathing?" Physic said for her. "Why are you still among the living when you are under my ministrations? Why did I allow a known mass-murderer to live, when it was clearly within my power to let her bleed to death? Those are the questions you really want to ask, yes?"

"That pretty much sums it up, yeah."

Physic set the light pen aside and crossed her arms.

"I don't have the luxury of such decisions. If a life can be saved, I save it. Whatever their past, my Hippocratic oath makes no distinction. In the end, that's what separates us, you and me. You choose to kill with discrimination. I choose to heal without it."

"Well, I'm glad you went ahead and seized the moral high ground right away. We wouldn't want any moral ambiguity floating around here, would we?"

"Call it what you want," Physic said sharply. "The only thing that weighs on my conscious are the ones I wasn't able to save, many of whom were your victims. Can you honestly say the same?"

"No," Zorn said, "I can't." She closed her eyes. "I think now that if I had died aboard *Taylor the Bruce*, or before a firing squad, perhaps circumstances would be different. I brought this situation to a head. I handed a madman the keys to the gun cabinet. I drug poor August along and got him killed."

"You also risked your life at Sauler, Mexit, Spires and now Phoebus. You disrupted the Guild, unseated a tyrant and defied another, helped us escape and recovered a remnant Captain and a planetary leader."

"You're a strange advocate for me, Orit. Strange as I can imagine."

"True, though I acknowledge your deeds as much as your misdeeds, indifferent of their personal implications to me."

"But do they balance? Does the act saving the life of a Regent equal the taking of lives of scores of Hivers? Does deposing one dictator grant me grace in elevating another? Which side of the scales weighs in my favor in the end?"

"I can't answer that," Physic said. "I leave such judgments to history."

"Ah, the final arbiter for us all."

"Well, before I lose you into the black hole of self-doubt and recrimination you are surely headed for, I want you to know that I've thought about what you said. If it means anything to you, I don't think you are my enemy anymore. Before, yes, but this world has a way of turning us all on our ear. My time aboard this ship has certainly taught me that much at least."

Physic came closer to Zorn's bed, leaning in.

"I don't know if I can ever forgive you for what you've done to me, but maybe that's irrelevant given the grand scheme of things. Events have put you where you are, Vega Zorn. The part you play on this strange stage is up to you." she said searching the haunted eyes of the ex-
pirate.

"Maybe that's what's most important."

* * *

Once *Hornet* had escaped to Jump, and all stations were secure, she had cloistered herself in her quarters for a full twenty-four hours and slept a thankfully dreamless sleep. She'd just switched off, embracing a comfortable oblivion for a time, then reemerged invigorated. Now it was time to get back to business.

"How did you sleep?" Physic asked laying her latest report on Coeur's desk. "Sleep deprivation is not the body's friend."

"Like the dead," Coeur said. "I certainly didn't need any of your sleep aids this time around."

"I'm glad, both for your current rested state, *and* that you arrived at the proper conclusion *without* me having to give you a rather pointed order." She said sweetly. "It's so much easier that way."

"Beauty rest or not, it may not matter. It's possible that we Misjumped, in which case we may all soon share a dreamless sleep, for a very long time."

"Maybe, maybe not," Physic shrugged. "I suppose that means that your courtship with the Regent may have to operate on an accelerated time schedule."

"Physic!" Coeur reddened at the cheeks

"What? He has been around a lot lately, hasn't he? Always eager to show his appreciation in a quietly dignified, yet somehow very obvious kind of way, right?"

"You know I'm not much for romance, Orit. I've never needed that to define who I am. I've lived without without it for..."

"Oh, pish-posh! You are the one that's always seeing the people on this ship hook up, meriting your disapproving frown. Drop Kick and Snapper, Crowbar and Raven – surely it's poetic justice that you have a turn at the game at some point."

"Physic, we may not make out of Jump alive. I hardly think this is the right time to start a relationship."

"I would have to disagree. I think this is the perfect time, if nothing else because we may *not* have much time left. It's not everyday that *we* get to be the ones to save the handsome prince

from *his* tower, now is it? Besides, as princes go, this one is pretty tasty. Just enough to make a girl swoon, eh?" She gave an exaggerated sigh.

"You're terrible," Coeur said.

"Guilty as charged," the doctor gave a mock bow. "But, I'd hate to know that one of my shipmates, not to mention one of my best friends missed out on something special."

"But, it would never work out between us. The political differences alone, he's a Centrist, it just wouldn't..."

"I'm not suggesting you marry him, Coeur, just don't push him away is all I'm saying," Physic said. "Besides, a diametrically opposed sense of politics might be just the thing you two need to keep the fire going. It'll give you something to talk about."

"Why have you decided to play matchmaker now, Physic? Did you think things weren't too complicated and convoluted enough? This would be like throwing gasoline on a flame."

"True, maybe it would be extraordinarily bad idea to get into a spur-of-the-moment, relationship with a planetary leader, who, let's face it, is something of hottie, right as we may all die horribly. Maybe it would be ill-advised, maybe it would be foolish, but, dammit, Coeur that's what you need in your life is a little impulsiveness. You need to live a little, do something you can laugh about later, or take a risk that doesn't involve getting shot at, then somewhere along the way, maybe you wouldn't have to carry all that baggage by yourself."

"Is that your professional opinion," she said tartly, "*doctor?*"

"It is, *Captain.*"

"Well, I'll...take it under advisement."

"That's my girl." Physic said, flashing that winning smile.

Coeur opened her mouth to speak when the intercom chimed. She threw a look at Orit that said that their verbal sparring would continue later.

"Yes?"

"Sir," Gyro's disembodied voice said. "Captain Po is awake and asking to see you. She seemed very adamant about it."

"Thank you." She cut the link.

"She's in Mercy's quarters," Physic said. "I have a full house down in sick bay right now with Zorn and Raptor."

"Good to know." Coeur stood when Physic held out a hand for her to stop, the doctor's spritely demeanor giving way to concern. She crossed her arms beneath her breasts.

"Keep in mind what was done to her, Coeur," she said quietly. "That woman's been traumatized. That can be very...unsettling if you're not used to dealing with wounds that fresh." She took a deep breath.

"Just keep that in mind."

* * *

Coeur stepped into Mercy's stateroom on the upper deck with no small amount of hesitation. Of all the situations for another *Altinak* survivor to be in...a possible Misjump, a *fikking* Misjump, and she had drug the other remnant along with her. Again.

"Come in, Coeur," a thin voice said from the lower bunk. "Come sit beside me for a while."

Coeur scooted a chair next to the bunk and took the other woman's hand. Sacha Po was regaining something of those exotically handsome looks that had been, for a time, subsumed in grime and sores. Her leg had been reset, as had her shoulder and several other spots worse for the wear. The physical trauma was beginning to heal under the ministrations of Physic, but Coeur could tell from the fragile look in her friend's eyes that her wounded soul hadn't even begun to heal, if it ever would.

"I see the doc got you patched up," Coeur said squeezing her hand. "She'll have you good as new in no time."

"Yeah, she's all right," Po said. "Got an interesting bedside manner, though."

"She does at that." Coeur said, steering another course. "I'm sorry it's taken me a while to get down here. Physic had you doped to the gills, and I..."

"You've got a ship to run," Po finished. "You don't need to apologize, Coeur, I know what it's like to love a ship, to have her be your first priority." A melancholy note colored her voice.

"Then I take it you heard about the *Montrose*."

"Yeah. I did," her eyes bore the hint of mist at the edges.

"I'm sorry, Boots. I wish there had been another way."

"I'm not," she said. "I'm glad it was you. I can't abide the thought of her in enemy hands. Better that she be put down. I'm glad it was you that did it."

A lump began rising in Coeur's throat. If it had been Coeur, seeing her beloved *Hornet* become part of the enemy fleet would have been unbearable. Sacha was right, better that the ship be given to the god of storms, the lightning and the gale, then let a pair of hands that would never love her the same way, never know how much she meant to the people who crewed her, stain her name, her spirit. Thankfully, she had been spared that fate.

"I think I may've ficked up, Boots, big time," Coeur said mournfully. "We had to Jump. I made the call, just like I did at Carlyle, for the same reason, but...I may have used up all my luck, pushed too far. I may have doomed us all." Coeur's eyes dropped as her admission of the situation revealed its weight.

"Or you might have saved us," Boots said. "That's seems to be something of a habit with you." She reached out with her other hand to lift Coeur's chin, reforging their eye contact.

"You are at your best when it matters most, Coeur D'Esprit, never forget that," she said. "I certainly won't."

Coeur saw her strength drain away, consumed by the knowledge she had to impart. Sacha's forehead creased, nostrils flaring, with remembered pain.

"Gyro said that you wanted to talk to me," she bringing it out in the open, "my guess was it wasn't just to lend a steadying hand to a friend."

"No, it wasn't, though I'm glad I could help," Boots said. "It's about what happened at Spires, when I left."

"What about it?"

"It's Errol, Coeur, he's dead. Gone."

Coeur felt her face fall and it was Sacha's turn to squeeze her hand back. Only four other people had made it to the future the way she had. Now three remained. With this knowledge, somehow, the universe felt immeasurably empty now that Mad Dog was gone from it. How quickly the world could turn and change in the breadth of a few seconds.

"He covered our escape," Sacha continued. "He bought us the time we needed, even though he knew there was no way he could win. He knew, Coeur, the bastard *knew*. All I could do is watch."

"Oh God," Coeur said, trying to find the words. "Did he...?"

"Yes, he made them pay for it. Every millimeter, he made them pay. *Cervantes* did not go quietly, and she did not go alone."

Coeur hadn't even realized that Errol had been assigned to SDB duty. Last she'd heard of him, he'd been the XO of the *Valor*-class missile frigate, *Courageous*, before she shipped out to Mexit. An SDB skipper, though, would've been a good fit. He'd had the fighting spirit of pit bull buried under that odd exterior of his.

Without knowing the details Coeur knew instinctively that, facing down overwhelming odds with an unflinching resolve, Errol and his crew had lived up to the motto of *Cervantes*.

Brave Unto Folly.

And now she understood the root of her comrade's pain. Van Dorn had laid down his life for her only to have the second chance he so dearly purchased taken away by Phoebus thugs. Now she was tormenting herself, wracking her brain trying to see if she could've done anything different. The valiant act of *Cervantes* twisted her insides up, knowing that they had all died and she was able to give such a poor return on their investment.

Coeur could feel the grief in the air between them, charging up like a battery, building and building like the ice and stones leading to an avalanche, racing to a breaking point.

"I know it hurts, Boots," Coeur said as the other woman's face contorted. "There's nothing more you could've done. *Nothing*. I know your brain doesn't want to accept that, but don't kill yourself over something that wasn't your fault. He did what he did because he believed it was worth it. Just leave it at that."

Don't do what I've done, in other words, she thought.

"I just can't quit seeing them, they never go away. *Royal Vengeance* is coming at him, looming above him like a storm, and there he is beneath the torrent, small, but shining like a star. Then he's gone. My ship and my crew follow. He died, they *all* died," her voice caught and Coeur felt her take one step towards losing her calm mask. "Why did he do it, Coeur? Why? I didn't ask him to, I didn't...I..." her voice trailed off into moans that sounded as though sorrow itself were resonating her throat.

Something in Coeur snapped as years of guilt and mental anguish came boiling to the surface. Anger mixed with the tears, which now flowed freely.

"*No!*" she said, seizing Boots by the shoulders. "They *never* ask you, don't you understand? They *never* explain, never realize how you'll sleep in a bed of thorns, or wake up in a cold sweat, they just do it, and leave you with a lifetime of wondering why. Why am I so god-damned special, huh? Why am I still breathing when I should be dead? Why would Darien, a man I hardly knew, think that *I* was worth more to the future than he was? Why would he do that? He'll always be there, Boots, dead in Tube 16 while I get a second chance in Tube 23. He'll never go away. I didn't ask him to do that, never *wanted* him to do it, but he did, and he left me to pick up the pieces of a shattered life."

Her lips trembled as she spoke.

"They never ask," she said softly, "and it never makes sense."

"Oh, Coeur, I'm sorry." Po said, pulling the other woman into an embrace. "I didn't know."

They held that contact for interminable amount of time, each seeking to come to terms with the emotional scars that were open, raw and bleeding. Yet in that sharing, they drew upon each others' deep reserves of strength. There were few things that could fortify a grieving soul better than the arms of friend who understood the nature of their anguish.

At last, Sacha fell asleep in Coeur's arms. Coeur eased her back down on the bunk, pulling a blanket over her. She knew she must look like hell. It would only take a look in a mirror for her to see her blood-shot, puffy eyes. Running a sleeve over her face, she stood to leave, hoping that she could make it to her quarters without anyone seeing her. There she could decompress and rebuild her outward mantle.

It was when she turned to go that she found Delvin Garrett standing quietly in the doorway, his head bowed respectfully.

"Forgive me, my lady," he said softly. "I did not mean to intrude, nor did I mean to eavesdrop, though I fear I have done both."

Coeur became suddenly self-aware of her own condition, as often happened around him. What an unflattering image she must seem at the moment. If he had come seeking the collected, professional spacer, he wouldn't find her here. She couldn't find the strength to be upset, so she let it pass.

"It's okay. I was just leaving."

She brushed past him and sealed the hatch, with only a slight sniffing to betray her current state.

"I was coming to pay my respects to Captain Po," he said standing with her in the corridor. "I heard what was said and I am sorry."

"Me too."

She turned to leave, but he placed a light hand on her shoulder.

"At the risk of further intrusion, I must kindly disagree with you, my lady."

"What...do you mean?"

Those eyes searched her riven being as if they could see every flaw, uncover every secret, but they did not probe, nor judge, they simply saw her as she was.

"I know why this Darien did what he did," he said with conviction. "He saw your worth, not as you see it, but as it *is*. He realized that God's plan for you was only beginning, that the future needed you. There was only one way left to him to be sure."

"I don't want to talk about..."

"His death was not in vain, my lady," he continued. "Far from it. I am alive because of you, just as Captain Po and countless others are because of your direct actions. We are living testaments to the sacrifice this man made and how perfectly justified his decision was."

He brushed a lock of brown hair from her temple over her ear.

"I hope that when that when my time comes, my death may be one of such meaning." She looked away as his words pierced her.
"No one can live up that," she said as she walked away. "No one."
Delvin Garrett watched her disappear, her scent still lingering in the air around him.
"No one, my lady, but you."

* * *

Gaylon Fox took his customary spot in the briefing room of *Royal Vengeance* that sat across from the large viewport. Filling his view now was the layered green and grey disk of Yomothall whose horizons were so expansive that the space beyond could not be seen.

The deed had been done. Solee Marines had purged the system of its unclean elements and Fox could only say *good riddance to bad rubbish*. Ships were refueling, repairs were being made. The fleet was coming together and readying themselves for the Battle Royale that awaited them.

It would be a glorious thing to see, Fox had come to realize. Whole fleets of ships vying for dominance among the stars, coordinating strikes and broadsides, shielding each other with countermeasures and point defense – it would be a spectacle unseen in scope since the Third Imperium.

Though, if he did his job correctly, the operatic climax to their campaign would be short and sweet. Victory of another kind awaited all of his Solee brothers and sisters.

That left a duty for him to discharge that should've fallen to Admiral Alcantara to execute. Few of them had been trusted with the knowledge of what the Queen wanted from this outing, the key to which was even now sealed in a specially-constructed chamber aboard *Royal Vengeance*. It had always been her plan to use his cruiser as the primary facilitator, which was why he knew the details when her flag Captain did not.

The doors opened behind him, casting Jamar's shadow across the table.

"You wanted to see me, sir?"

"I did," Fox motioned towards a chair. "Take a seat and get comfortable."

Jamar did as ordered, placing his hands on the table. A question burned behind his silence, which Fox was quick to detect.

"You have something on your mind, Commander?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then let's hear it before we begin."

"Yes, sir," Jamar said, gathering his thoughts. "The crew doesn't know what to make of your reaction to *Hornet's* escape. They were expecting barely-contained cold fury, but your, if you'll forgive the expression, cavalier attitude towards what happened is puzzling them. They wonder if your obsession with that ship has finally gotten the best of you, or warped your judgment somehow."

Jamar spoke his mind and was never intimidated by Fox, though always respectful, one of his more salient qualities.

"And what do you think, Commander?"

"I don't know what to think, sir," he said, "which is why I'm asking you."

"Very well, perhaps I can shed some light on the situation before we give *Royal Vengeance* the new name, *Pequod*. I am, as you might imagine, distressed at the loss of our comrades, but aside from a few damaged hulls, only one of which flies a Solee banner, the situation will wind up working to our advantage in the long run."

"How so, sir?"

"It was possible that we could've achieved complete strategic surprise on our attack to Aubaine. Great pains have been taken to ensure that no ship could betray our presence, allowing us to exploit that age-old advantage and catch the Aubani sleeping, blissfully ignorant of the sword hanging above their collective heads, correct?"

"Yes, sir. That was the plan, which *Hornet* could single-handedly disrupt, assuming for the moment that she didn't Misjump and makes it to Aubaine at all."

"She will, I have no doubt of that. She's not destined for that kind of death," Fox said. "But consider this, Commander. Our delay here, coupled with their advance warning will make sure that Aubaine will be at a maximum state of readiness when we arrive. They might even have time to call for reinforcements or drag ships out of the mothballs to counter the threat we represent."

"Yes sir, but isn't that the opposite of what we want?"

"On paper, yes, that was the best approach, but in practice it will force Aubaine to put all their pieces on the board and hold nothing back, so that when we crush them, there will be nothing left. In the long term, that will serve us better than a short burst of surprise, an easy victory and the tedium of hunting down those reinforcement elsewhere. I'd rather we take them in one fell swoop with no further argument."

Fox sat back, a cold smile growing at the corners of his mouth.

"So, the irony of the situation is that *Hornet* believes she will be the salvation of Aubaine, when in reality, she is helping to bring about its fall. *That* is why I can't help but wear my heart on my sleeve for all to see."

It also means that I'll get to see her in action on more time, he thought hungrily.

"I can understand that reasoning, sir, but won't that mean that our causalities will be much greater than if could play divide and conquer with their forces?"

Fox's smile deepened.

"An interesting choice of words, Commander. Your powers of perception do not fail you, though there are critical pieces of information you are missing that I will address in a moment. To answer your question, however, we will, indeed, take more punishment from a concentrated, prepared force that knows we are coming, and that is what we want."

"Sir?" In his mind a shadow of fear fell across Jamar's mind. Was there some truth to the crew's apprehensions? Had their beloved Captain lost his grip on reality? Had the turn of events thrown something off kilter in Fox's brain?

"You have a good poker face, Commander, but I see what you're thinking. Allow me to fill in the blanks for you."

Fox brought up the mission plans on the main display and let Jamar mull over it for several seconds. His XO's eyes darted from the executive summary to his Captain. He was beginning to understand the method to the madness.

"I thought that would get your attention," Fox said. "Now, let us discuss the finer points of Operation Tempest."

* * *

"Sir," the aide poked his head in, "The Sergeant Major is here is to you."

"Thank you, Joseph," Hayward said without looking up. "Please show him in." Music began to filter into the office at the Admiral's command. It was the same patriotic piece that played after the official broadcast, a tune largely modeled after the original Terran music, *La Marseillaise*. The sound system delivered it with incredible fidelity, as though an orchestra sat just on the other side of the walls.

As the music began to climb, the square frame of Boris Seitzmann filled the doorframe. Heading quickly for the space in front of the Admiral's desk, the Marine braced to attention.

"Sergeant Major Seitzmann, reporting as ordered, sir!"

"At ease," Hayward said, waving him towards a chair. "This isn't a business call, Boris." Removing two ornately frosted tumblers, the Admiral poured them both a glass of fine Oriflammen bourbon.

The Marine sat down and accepted the glass, but waited for the Admiral to give a toast, or drink first.

"I love this music," Hayward said. "I could listen to it for hours. Would you mind terribly if we listened to it as we toast the health and success of the Revolution?"

"No, sir, not at all."

Hayward raised the volume of the music. The strings sang their beautiful tune, backed by soaring flutes and noble trumpets, rolling drums and the crisp crash of cymbals.

Setting his tumbler down, Hayward motioned for Boris to lean in closer. The Marine noticed the change in the Admiral's expression, enough to know that things were not what they seemed. A small device slid from Hayward's pocket that began to flash a pulsing red, its low hum hidden by the music.

"What is going on, sir?"

"A precaution," Hayward said. "We may have a bug infestation here," he said glancing around the cabin. "What the music doesn't drown out, my little friend here should take of the rest."

"I'm not sure I like the sound of that, sir."

"I know this is peculiar, Boris," Hayward said. "But recent events have proven to me that things are worse than I thought."

"Is this about the mercenaries?"

"Partly, though that is one only one symptom of the disease."

The execution of the mercenaries had confirmed for Hayward a growing fear that had been born from the destruction of RCC *Fougade*. Mestrovic had proven that he was willing to kill those that disappointed him, or failed to live up to the impossible standards he had. It had been Soleean Marines that had rounded up the motley band and stood them up against the bulkhead, but the order had been handed down by the High Technarch. If the list of names he had was accurate, then his wife and two daughters were prisoners of a man that had demonstrated that he was willing kill to prove a point.

Looking across the table at the puzzled Marine, he knew that Seitzmann would come to the same conclusion he would, especially when he found that his brother and wife were also unwilling guests of the High Technarch.

"You and I both have our reasons for bringing about the Revolution," Hayward said, "but I would like to believe that our intentions were noble."

"Now you're not so sure."

"You guessed it," he replied. "It doesn't speak well of our errand that the senior flag officer, *former* senior flag officer, that is, is having second thoughts on the eve of the final stroke. I've got to know whether we are crossing the Delaware, or the Rubicon."

What he had had just admitted to Seitzmann could be construed as treason. In these volatile times, Seitzmann could be well within his rights to carry out wartime punishment on the spot with his sidearm. Hayward could see all of that turn in the Marine's head, but those oversized hands remained on the table.

"Well, you haven't shot me, so I'll take that as a good sign," Hayward said.

"Be real, Shannon, we're all traitors here. What's a little more treason into the mix?"

"Do you feel the same way?"

"Do I even need to answer that?"

"Actually, yes," Hayward said a sharp look in his eye. "There's no room for ambiguity here, none whatsoever."

"Then your answer is yes, Admiral. Things are not as they should be," He said without hesitation. "It wasn't supposed to happen this way."

"Trust me on this, Boris, you have no idea just how much of an understatement that is."

"Ah?"

"There is something I need to show you, something that could test the limits of any man," The Admiral said grimly. "I need two things from you before you leave this room."

"Name it."

"One, that you will not go do anything rash. I can't stress enough the need to play this one close to the vest. Second, I need to know that you are with me, come what may, fire and darkness."

Hayward slid the data display, the only one in existence that contained the message that had so unseated him.

Seitzmann's eyes narrowed as he scanned the text. His eyebrows grew increasingly angled. The line of his jaw was taut. Hayward imagined that Black Bear's own journey down that road was mirroring his own.

"Do you know what this means?" Seitzmann said at length.

"Yes, I do."

"But, how can you be sure this is even accurate?"

Hayward told him the details of how his newborn daughter's name had come to be on the list, as well as what he intended to do about it. Even Seitzmann's resolve faltered as the thoughts and implications came crashing down upon his shoulders with the world-destroying force of a comet. It didn't take long before the rage began to boil up. Boris Seitzmann rarely got mad at anything, and now he had blood in his eyes. Never was he so dangerous or cunning.

"So the Revolution is dead," He said, teeth grinding. "Even if we win, the new order won't be the one we imagined."

"Perhaps it only existed in the heads of a few idealists," Hayward said. "Maybe Mestrovic planned this the whole time, who knows? If this is how he ensures loyalty in his officers, then I could never trust him with the reins of power."

"He can't be replaced, can he?" Seitzmann said with resignation, "It stands or falls with Mestrovic, doesn't it?"

"Pretty much, unless we want to install a military dictatorship, and I think that opens us up to all sorts of abuses we're both looking to avoid. Heap onto that my sneaking suspicion that our Solee allies are not just going to go home once the Aubaine is crushed. They have plans for this area of space. I've always suspected that to be the case."

Boris polished off his drink in a single, long drink, his mind already projecting forward based on the new information, running the numbers. His ability to accurately foresee the outcome of a particular course was one of his more admirable qualities.

"I take it you realize what will happen if we cross the Rubicon and fail?"

"In agonizing detail," Hayward said, "But we may not have a choice. The sad part is we might wind up becoming martyrs to a revolution we helped to counter. It seems there is no limit to the universe's sense of irony these days."

"Or its sense of humor," Seitzmann said dryly.

Hayward looked the Marine Sergeant Major levelly.

"I need to know, Boris, I need to hear you say it, are you with me?" He extended his hand across the table.

Boris looked at the offered hand and breathed heavily, rolling his eyes.

"I'm with you," he said returning the hand clasp. "God help me, but I'm with you, sir."

"Well then, let us toast to our success, Sergeant Major," he said, raising his glass and sipping its honey gold and brown contents. "Come what may."

* * *

The Jump had gone text-book smooth with no hint that it had been a Misjump, until about hour 142, when the Jump alert sounded a full day ahead of schedule. It was an ill omen that reminded everyone of the painful details surrounding their hasty departure from Phoebus. That warning might well prove to be the footsteps of doom.

Coeur had heard of Misjumps that had thrown a ship back into normal space after only twenty hours, told by spacers over a mug of grog, whose friend of a friend had been flung to the farthest corner of creation to return safe and sound. They all talked about that feeling of realization that either felt as though their heart had been frozen by liquid nitrogen, or as though it would burst like a dam holding back too much water.

When Coeur had heard that warning kick on, she felt both at the same time. Her ship was telling her that they were about to precipitate into real space, and it was anyone's guess as to where that would be. If they appeared in empty space, their lives could be forfeit either by starvation, dehydration or perhaps even by their own hand. *Hornet* carried only one low berth, which meant only one of them would have a chance at survival.

If it came to that, however, this time she would make sure she wasn't the one that got the best seat in the house. She'd already lived on enough borrowed time to try to tempt fate again.

Everyone was going through the pre-precipitation routine as though nothing were amiss, herself included. Once again she found that, even with the feeling that her heart was an icy lump that might explode, her mind was calm. She'd been here before, faced down this same demon, and she wouldn't let it consume her again.

Danger was an odd therapy, but it had the virtue of focusing one's attention down onto the thing that matter, of putting things into a proper perspective, of knocking things back into alignment.

All souls aboard her ship were in vac suits and ready for what fate had in store for them. It wouldn't be long now.

"We're green, sir," Sixer said from behind his oddly-shaped suit. "We have precipitation in 10, 9, 8, 7..."

It's time.

"6, 5, 4..."

But for the grace of God...

"3, 2, 1..."

...we go...

"Precipitation now!"

The strange mantle of Jump space melted away, replaced by an endless starfield that was endlessly tranquil. Moments passed as *Hornet's* systems reached out to probe the world around her.

It was as if the crew and visitors of *Hornet* held one collective breath.

"Report," Coeur said. "Are we in a star system?"

"Yes, sir," Sixer said looking over his instruments. "I'm running a comparison now, based on our position."

The INCOMING light burned on Sixer's comm panel as his tentacles raced across the interface.

"Captain, we are..."

"Punch it up, Sixer, full ship's speakers."

It was risk. If it was bad news, the whole ship would hear it, but Coeur discarded that idea of keeping it to herself. At this point, they deserved to know what was going on the same time she did.

There was burst of static, followed by a female voice.

"Attention *Hornet*, this is *Vezenia Victrix*," she said, and Coeur thought tears might stream down her face. "*Gaia*, you nearly precipitated on top of us! That has to be the single craziest exit vector I've ever seen in all my years. I think you gave our poor sensor operator palpitations of the heart!"

She cleared her throat with a soft *ahem*.

"Be that as it may," she said with a verbal smirk, "on behalf of Aubani FleetCom, welcome home."

Chapter 24

The golden glory of Halos shone down upon the bay in the distance, setting it on fire with sparkling gems reflected upon its wavy surface. A vast expanse of turquoise water shot through with violet and marbled with indigo spread out before the man at the window, its blue rolls playing about the glaring white of the beach. Seagulls seemed to hover in place as they flew against the wind, calling out to the sky, their voices mingling into a soothing avian chorus.

There where sailboats gliding across the surface of the bay. Aircraft glittered like burning silver in sky. An antique hot air balloon drifted lazily over the mountainous cliffs, drifting upon the air currents. It was a sight the man drank in. The beauty, the calm, the simple revels of living, it was all laid out before him like a banquet for the eyes. Search as he might, he couldn't remember a more beautiful day in all his years.

And that was the real hell of it.

It was hard to pull himself away from the view that the Secretary General's office commanded here, hard to resolve the calming beauty he saw before him with the dire circumstances that were unfolding in the stars above. How easy it would be to be lured by that tranquility, to place his head in the sand and deny what was going on around him.

As a father he couldn't do that however attractive a notion it might be. A part of him was thankful that one of his daughters was at Schall attending a xenobiology conference and not in the line of fire. His other daughter, however, was different story. Her position within the Marine Corps would put her in harm's way. What would become of her in the days ahead? What would become of them all?

Those were the questions that had sieged his mind in the intervening hours since the previous day when a tiny ship had materialized to tell them all that the sky, radiant as it might be, was falling.

"Mr. Secretary?" the voice of one of his guests said.

Lon Maggart, Secretary General of the Reformation Coalition, turned from the window to face his guests. His moment of introspection had nearly taken him. For a man known worlds over for his seemingly boundless energy, at the moment he felt the weight of his years pressing down upon his shoulder. The Reformation Coalition he'd helped build would be lucky to survive to see its upcoming birthday. That had a way of turning perspectives upside down. He caught the eye of the man who had brought him back to reality.

"Apologies, Commodore," he said to the Nimban as he settled behind his desk. "Let's return to the matter at hand. How much time do you estimate that we have?"

"Not nearly long enough, sir," Hammer Lathrop said, "a fleet that size doesn't turn on a dime without delays. Worst case, we assume that ships start trickling up in the next few days. More than likely, they'll coordinate Jumps together to keep from getting picked off before they can marshal their strength. So, we are looking at a solid week, perhaps two, before they start assembling on the fringes of the system."

In Maggart's mind, plans and contingencies were considered or discarded based on that timeframe. Before being elected to Secretary General, he'd served as the Director of Planetary Defense. Any number of scenarios had come across his desk, from Viral fleets to Guild-driven coup attempts. There had been a contingency plan for an all-out Solee invasion on the books, just as there had been one for an Oriflamme succession and resulting civil war. That had all been wargamed out by the military. Yet, a joint invasion comprised of both Solee *and* Oriflamme appearing one Jump away had not been among them. They were in unexplored territory at the very moment that they needed the reassurance of prior planning and preparation.

"All right," Maggart said. "I'm opening up the purse strings as of right now. I want your people down at the Auctions ASAP. Anything that could possibly be of use needs to be put into service."

He smiled, but there was no humor in it.

"And kindly remind the vendors that the government doesn't appreciate being gouged, especially under these circumstances. Profiteering of any sort will be severely frowned upon."

"They'll understand," Hammer said. "Once you declare a state of emergency they won't risk us appropriating their war goods. They might even cut us in for a discount."

"If my line of credit is still available, I would be willing to contribute that to the cause as well, Mr. Secretary," Delvin Garrett said from his armchair. "I understand that much of your fund and capital is tied up in expanding your infrastructure at the moment. Perhaps the purse of Phoebus can help alleviate that."

"Thank you, your lordship, that's very generous of you," Maggart said. It was true, the amount of cash they had on hand wasn't limitless. He would be trotting out war bonds for the Aubani elite very soon, assuming any of them decided to stick around.

"The least I can do, considering our shared circumstances."

That's an understatement, Maggart thought. He should be spitting acid and shooting daggers at the man seated across from him. The Regent had sided with the enemy now arrayed against them, given them a safe haven a parsec away from Maggart's home. Garrett had been most forthcoming with the details, and that should've alienated the two men. It didn't.

Garrett had seen the true face of the enemy and suffered the longest under its harsh yolk. He had been victimized, repeatedly, by these events, even if he had given them a foothold. Now the Regent would prove to be a critical ally just when Aubaine needed him most. Political necessity, Maggart understood, was a potent recipe for vindication.

"I think we can leverage those extra funds to keep some of the armed merchantmen in the system," Hammer said. "Every hull that has a weapon or the capacity to mount one will be sorely needed."

Maggart had toyed with the idea of confiscating the necessary ships, but Lathrop had given him a flat out *no*. Forced impressment into service had never been an effective tool for encouraging loyalty to the establishment. If the situation was truly as dire as he believed, as it had every indication of being, every ship that took up the call would need to be there voluntarily. It wouldn't work any other way. Ships that bolted at the first opportunity because they were pressed into service were no good to them.

"It may go without saying, but I'm going to say it anyway," Maggart said. "Whatever you need – personnel, weapons, equipment – if we have it in this system, I'll get it to you. Do what you have to do. You'll have my full support."

"I have a list of preliminaries, sir." Hammer replied, handing over a laundry list of items and requests. "Once we can get a better head count, I will have more for you."

A buzzer rang insistently on Maggart's desk.

"Yes?"

"Sir, you have fifteen minutes before you and his lordship are scheduled to leave for the announcement," his assistant said. "Also, your daughter is here to see you."

"Thank you," he turned towards his guests. "Well, gentlemen, I have to cut this short. I have some very bad news to deliver to the Aubani people this evening. If you will excuse me?"

Hammer and the Regent stood, exchanging warm handshakes.

"I'll be moving my flag to *Kukulcan* by tomorrow in the AM. I have a dedicated channel already set aside for you. I imagine we'll be chatting a lot over the next few days."

"Please convey my dearest regards to your daughter," Delvin said. "I will await you at the transport."

The two men exited the room. His secretary had allowed him just enough time to switch mental gears before a tall young woman in an Aubani Marine uniform came through the door.

"Hello, Susan." He said. "I'm glad you could come on such short notice."

"I got your message. What's this all about?" she stood not quite at attention. "And why have your personal guard been replaced by AMC regulars?"

Those eyes. So much like her mother's.

"Have a seat," he said. "I just wanted you to hear this from me before I announce it to the world."

"Announce...what?"

It wasn't going to be easy. Intellectually, he knew that his daughter was grown, an adult. There would always be that part of him that saw her as a child. She would always be his baby girl, even if she were old and grey.

Today he would get to tell his little girl that the sky was falling, that he had failed in his role as protector and watchman, and that the house he'd helped to build was rotting away at the foundations. He knew it was going to break his heart.

* * *

Crowbar walked hand-in-hand with Raven through the Auctions as the sun began its slow shift into evening. There were throngs of people here, businessmen, salvagers, free tradesman and now, lots of people in uniform of various types.

Word had come down from on high that the choicest bits of tech on the auction block were to be catalogued along with the vendor's contact information. If all went to plan, tomorrow would be filled with military transports by the dozen flying around gathering the tools to defend the system.

Crowbar had found himself tapped for this duty which he'd accepted eagerly. It was a chance to shop the Auctions without regard to the price tag. It put him in an almost giddy state of euphoria every time he talked to a vendor over a piece of relic tech worth ten to twenty, sometimes a thousand, times his salary.

The myriad people went about their business with the normal hustle and bustle, ignorant of the outside situation that was closing in upon them. Being in the know as he was, Crowbar knew that the official pronouncement would be coming down the pipe this evening. Only the shrewd businessmen, who noted the sudden appearance of so many military personnel, would nod sagely and whisper *I knew it* to themselves.

For now, the Auction still retained that carnival-like spectacle that beckoned to natives and off-worlders alike. What tomorrow would bring was anyone's guess. Crowbar, however, was more concerned with the here and now, and especially the striking young beauty on his arm.

"This is the bay where they filmed *There's No Tomorrow*," her green eyes beamed. "This is where the Guild agent tries to get the activation codes for those relic bombs. Mr. Bosley hid right over there, behind that sign, as he tailed him."

"If I recall, this is also where he first meets Ms. Cassidy Hunter, who just happened to be tracking the Guild agent for reasons of her own."

"Well, the Guild had killed her father," Raven said.

"Leaving her father's vast fortune to her alone, allowing her to avenge his death," Crowbar smirked. "Didn't she shoot Bosley when he got in her way?"

"Yeah, with a taser."

"Then he got off lucky," the engineer said deadpan.

She snuggled up to his arm like a cat.

"Oh, come on now. Tell me you're not still sore at me for that little old thing."

"I wouldn't be channeling my inner Ben Bosley if I admitted that I did, now would I?"

"Well, that did seem to be something that happened to our man Benjamin, *a lot*, so I suppose not."

Crowbar had come to realize how hard it must've been for his companion to have intentionally betrayed her friends for the sole purpose of installing herself close to the high command. It had been a gamble, one that could've gotten them all executed, flushed out an airlock or shot while trying to escape. She'd made them all believe her treachery was genuine, and she'd done her job almost too well. It had demonstrated to him just how far his girlfriend was willing to go to accomplish the mission.

The strange thing he found was that he was okay with that level of commitment to what needed to be done – not to mention that it was extremely hard to stay mad at Lauren Porfira. There was just that energy and charisma about her that she was not above using mercilessly to

keep her friends. Even Coeur, who had been perhaps the most hellfire and brimstone on the subject had mellowed once the situation had been fully explained.

For a man that intentionally kept himself scruffy and somewhat unkempt, he considered himself fortunate in the extreme to have a woman like her choose him as her own. Given that, what was one little bullet between them?

"You're going to make a girl blush thinking like that," she said playfully, sensing that his train of thought was no longer on the Auctions.

"Well I should say so."

Taking her hand, he led her into the alcove where the Star Spy had kept his silent vigil. Crowbar's arms curled around her slender waist.

"Tell me, am I the brightest star in that sky of yours?" she said breathily, quoting from the final moments of her favorite spy drama. He picked up on it immediately.

"The only star as far as I'm concerned," Crowbar said, just as Bosley himself had said while he and the heiress waited for rescue in a lifepod floating in space.

"Will you love me, forever and ever, Ben?"

Their faces gravitated ever closer.

"Like there's no tomorrow."

* * *

The sun was setting over Michael's Reef, a full half of its orb staring down on the horizon at a shimmering, watery double of itself. The equatorial waters began to darken, though their crystal blue surface came alive with brilliant reflected gold, indigo and orange-pink of a breathtaking sunset. The multitudes of recreational ships along the reef were slowly starting to turn their rudders towards the waiting docks.

One ship among them, a commercial hovercraft, remained in place, obviously in no hurry to get back. Sitting on the deck, stretched out comfortably on a lawn chair, was a tanned Marine cradling a noticeably pale-skinned redhead. Both wore swimwear, each tired from their previous exertions, but in a relaxed way, a 'good' brand of exhaustion that lent itself laying still and soaking up the atmosphere.

The RCMC had given each of *Hornet's* Marines a full day's furlough, including Hunter and the now-recovered Raptor. Given the situation, the service was being generous to have allowed them that. Drop Kick had taken full advantage of it. Even though the day was coming to a close, it had been one of those he was sure he would remember until the end of his days.

Near the pilot's station, a small holoivid player was busily displaying a police drama with the sound tuned down low. Scenes of cops leading a heavily tattooed arms dealer to a police transport were replaced with a black screen sporting the Vitruvian Man symbol of the Reformation Coalition. Gold letter scrolled along the bottom next to the Aubani Broadcast Network's initials.

A MESSAGE FROM THE SECRETARY GENERAL.

"It's coming on," he said, shifting his weight. Snapshot rolled over and leaned her head over the rail.

"Sixer, they're announcing it now."

A sleek form broke the surface of the water at her words. Tentacles snaked out to secure the Schalli to the craft to allow a view of the holoivid.

"Thank you for informing me."

"Sure, Six, no problem," Snapshot said as Drop Kick turned up the sound with the remote.

The man wheel faded to an image of the Secretary General standing at a podium that sat in front of a velvety blue curtain. Dressed in his ceremonial tunic, sash and half-cape, Lon Maggart made a statement without having to say a word. He nodded to the camera as though acknowledging the presence of a friend. His face was serious, bordering on grave, but when he spoke his words were clear and carefully enunciated.

"Good evening ladies and gentlemen. Tonight, I come to you, the bearer of dire news. A few hours ago, we have learned that a substantial fleet of warships, many of whom were recently part of the Coalition Navy, is assembling for a direct assault on the system of Aubaine. It is

believed that the greater part of this threat sails under the flag of a dissident Oriflammen faction, intent on bringing civil war to our fair nation among the stars. From what we understand from preliminary reports, the enemy has already attacked the Zloga, Spires and Phoebus system. We will not let this act of aggression stand, or go unanswered.”

He paused, his eyes intent, but calm as he resumed.

“There can be no argument that our people, our territory and, indeed, our very way of life are in grave danger from this uprising. Though great and looming as this new threat may be, the valiant men and women of the Aubani system defense force, in concert with the Coalition Navy and Exploratory Service, are already in motion to counter this threat. Every effort is being made that can *be* made. The next few days will require both fortitude and flexibility from everyone within the sound of my voice. Not one life in this system will be unaffected by this current state of events. The burden falls to us, collectively, to do what is necessary for the preservation of our freedom. Further instructions will be forthcoming after this broadcast and local leaders will post directions thereafter for their areas of responsibility. I cannot stress to you enough the need to remain calm during this crisis, and to remain in your homes unless instructed to do otherwise.”

He gripped the sides of the podium tightly, eyes breaking the imagined eye contact before re-establishing it a moment later.

“The question many of you must be asking yourself, the one I am asking myself at this point is simply ‘why’. Why is this happening? How did it come to this? At the moment, the answers to those questions are unclear. What is clear, however, is that the Reformation Coalition, its people, and the united will of its members will repel this threat and seek out the authors of this pre-meditated invasion and bring them swiftly to justice.”

His eyes searched the screen, as though the great man could look upon the worried and scared faces of all those that he addressed.

“It was once said that ‘the price of peace is eternal vigilance’. This time our vigilant eye was blinded because that our enemy is made up of our brothers and sisters, stirred into unrest by the contemptible actions of a very few. It falls to us to show them the error of their ways. This crisis has taught us this lesson, one which the Reformation Coalition, of which we all are a part, will never, *ever* forget. Thank you, and God bless.”

The Reformation Coalition emblem came back with the words at the bottom: STANDBY FOR FURTHER INSTRUCTIONS.

“Well, that went well.” Drop Kick said, turning the unit off. “I hope we don’t have a riot on our hands when we get back to port.”

“My concern is for any other Oriflammen ex-pats,” Snapper said. “He tried to deflect away from it, but there’s always going to be some idiot that starts himself a witch hunt of anyone associated with the object of their fear, no matter how thin or remote the connection.”

“I suppose it could be said that that is simply a part of your nature,” Deep Six observed from his spot in the water. “It is something of a paradox that the one thing that can stir your deepest soul to glory, or bring out your worst streak of barbarism is the unknown.”

“Yeah, I guess it all depends on whether it is the fear or the need to understand the unknown that either props us up or tears us down,” Drop Kick said. “Not that I’m a philosopher, or anything. I leave that to far more capable minds to decide that kind of stuff.”

“Probably a good idea, babe,” Snapshot chided him, placing a kiss on his cheek. “Now, if it’s not too much trouble, let’s wrap it up here. I’m starving. I would like at least one unnecessarily decadent meal before it’s back to carbo sticks and processed fish cakes.”

A few minutes later, the hovercraft came about and made its way to land, the sun finally dipping below the horizon, its light giving way to the first blinking stars of the evening. Each of them knew that that playtime was over.

It was time to get down to business.

* * *

The space around Aubaine seemed to be buzzing to the strange rhythm of a metallic beehive. Ships, transports, and a dizzying array of small craft went to and fro in preparation for the coming storm. At the heart of the hive, wherein all manner of small craft flitted here and there, was the hulking form of *Kukulcan*, the mightiest warship in the growing line of battle.

The monitor started her career as ISS *Vaward*, a modified *Zahvat*-class strike cruiser. Larger than her sister ships, she was equipped with additional armor, weapons and a first-rate command center that was purpose-built for the Imperial Admirals of old to use as a flagship. Unfortunately for her, a direct hit to her Jump drives trapped her in the system when the Imperium was forced abandoned the system under the onslaught of Solomani forces.

The Solomani had re-designated her SNV *Kukulcan*, named after the supreme Mayan winged serpent deity, who was not only the god of the four elements, but also of resurrection and reincarnation. In that sense, the 75,000-ton monitor deserved her namesake. She had been reborn twice, serving in three navies with distinction, now representing the cornerstone of the Aubani planetary defense. Her long-range Meson gun was a lethal deterrent that had for years held danger at bay from her planet of responsibility.

The threat on the horizon would challenge even her resolve. At the head of the enemy fleet was a relic dreadnought even larger and dangerous than *Kukulcan*. Once sisters in the Imperial Navy, *Relentless* had likewise been resurrected into the modern day and now flew a different flag. It was patently clear to everyone serving aboard the monitor that a large part of the conflict ahead would be decided by the meeting of those two titans.

In *Kukulcan*'s expansive CIC area, techs were swarming over access panels, accommodating the last minute upgrades and prosecuting diagnostics, checking and re-checking the results. Amid this blur of movement and uniforms was the crest and motto of the ship, painted in a colorful mural along the back bulkhead by the entrance. Those entering the sacred grounds would be greeted by a vibrant representation of the sky god in his feathered serpent form surrounded by icons of earth, air, fire and water. Below the image was a banner that read:

Watch Over And Protect Us, Your Children.

Sean "Hammer" Lathrop had seen that depiction any number of times, but today it was as though every line, every color was bold and new. Granted, there was no time today of all days to marvel at its artistry. Every few seconds there was a decision to be made, or something for him to sign, but he found when he had the chance, his eyes wandered to the protective avatar standing guard over his new home.

To his immediate left sat *Kukulcan*'s CO and his new Flag Captain, Manfred "Black Star" Aaron. Tall and dark-skinned, Manny's impressive build made him look like a giant compared to his senior officer. He wore his long black hair down most of the time which leaned in favor of his already archaic features. His strong face, coupled with those penetrating grey eyes seemed to belong more to an ancient general, overlooking his vast armies gird in mail and brandishing steel.

He was also one of the very best at what he did, and Lathrop was glad to have him. It was with a deep sense of regret that Lathrop had had to shake up his crew at the last minute by removing Oriflammen personal from key areas. It was not decision that Hammer had made lightly, but the hard fact remained that sabotage of their biggest fleet asset could not be allowed under any circumstances. Hammer was sure that decision side-lined many people that were completely innocent, whose only crime was being born around a certain star. It wasn't fair to them, and it pained him, but if even one of them was a sleeper, that one could bring *Kukulcan* to her knees at a critical moment if they knew what they were doing. Thankfully, there were only a handful of Oriflammen service men and women serving in the planetary defense forces.

Resentment and friction between the two great worlds of the Coalition was at the heart of the conflict. Would those disenfranchised crewmen go away from this carrying even more resentment as a result? It was certainly a possibility. Black Star had forgiven him for that without ever having to say as much, his only complaint being a quiet note to the Admiralty that he personally vouched for each Oriflammen removed from under his command. Lathrop could've taken that as a sign of insubordination, but that would've been a gross misrepresentation of the man and his intentions. Black Star cared about his people, plain and simple. It was repugnant to him, just as it was to Lathrop, that certain members of his crew should be singled out and offered up on the altar of political necessity, but that was, unfortunately, the way it had to be.

"Do you ever get the impression that he's watching us," Hammer asked as he took a clipboard from a Lieutenant. "*Kukulcan*, I mean." He nodded towards the captivating mural.

"Always," Manny said without hesitation. "There are times I have even seen him move. Once he even cried."

Hammer signed his name on the requisition forms and handed them back.

"What is he doing now, I wonder?"

"Waiting. He waits for the enemy to appear so he can strike them down. He is a patient warrior with an impatient heart. He yearns for battle, but counsels himself to wait for the proper time."

"Well, it looks as though there will plenty of time for both," Lathrop gave a reluctant smile "So, what's the word on those Wildbat fighters?"

"The ground crews believe they can work up at least three additional squadrons, perhaps four, in the next two days if they work around the clock. It also looks as though a large clutch of Rampart fighters was discovered in one of the warehouses. Seems they were mislabeled at battle-damaged G-carriers and forgotten. Those are also headed to the workshop floor for refitting."

"That's good news. Pilots?"

"We've already called in the reservists, and anyone that has fighter pilot experience that we can lay our hands on. We may have to steal a little from our small craft crews, but I think we can make it work without the wheels coming off of anything important."

"That's what I like to hear."

"Admiral," the comm officer said, and Hammer almost didn't respond. Maggart had given him the brevet promotion to Admiral for the duration of the crisis. It was still peculiar to reconcile that they were talking to him when someone referred to him as Admiral Lathrop.

"Yes, what is it?"

"Incoming transmission from *Apollo*, sir. It's Commodore Ramirez."

"Put through to my station."

The almost devilish features of Commodore Ignacio Ramirez filled his personal viewscreen next to the Admiral's chair.

"Greetings, *Admiral*," a smile grew beneath his pointed mustache.

"Yeah, yeah, the Secretary General has a sense humor," Lathrop said. "You getting settled in over there?"

"Yes, Captain Walker cleared everything in advance. All I had to do was show up and *viola*," Ramirez said. "What ships are you assigning to my fledgling squadron, dare I ask?"

"The short answer is the fastest ships we've got, with the most amount of guns for their size. The heavier units will be staying with *Kukulcan*. In any case, I'll be sending you my initial list here shortly. Right now we're still digging deep into the mothballs, so it's possible that a few other ships may come out in the mix. Until we can get a final count on combat-ready craft, that list may be turned on its head - just a word of caution."

"Okay, I'll try not to get too attached to any them right now."

"Good idea."

The battle plan as it stood at the moment called for the formation of three battle groups. The first, Alpha Squadron, would be led by *Kukulcan* and consist of the heavier units, such as cruisers and carriers. A large part of the overall firepower available to the system defense would be concentrated in that group to act as a direct counter to *Golden Flame* and the Solee relic cruisers. Following the naming convention, the second group, Beta Squadron, would be led by *Apollo* and the only other two *Aurora*-class clippers in the system, *Ra* and *Lugh*. Their speed and powerful armament would be closely followed by the patrol cruisers, destroyers, missile frigates and some of the more speedy SDB's.

Their formation was meant to intercept and disrupt. Indications were that the so-called Gold Fleet would be compromised of some ninety plus ships, of which some eighty-six or more were dedicated warships. The real prize of the system was, of course, the planet of Aubaine itself. If the enemy chose to disperse their forces in order to outflank the outnumbered defenders, it would fall to Beta Squadron to act as first responders. In the absence of that, they would harass the flanks of the enemy, driving or pushing them into the cannon of Alpha Squadron. Hammer would've preferred a two-pronged fast response, but the limited number of ships made it more feasible for one group to take advantage of shared point defense and countermeasures.

The last of the formations was Omega Squadron, which was made up of the armed merchantmen and the other ships they'd managed to cobble together that weren't appropriate for either Alpha or Beta. It was something of a mish-mash of ships, but it had the virtue of being

backed up by the orbital defense platforms and ground defenses that were able to reach into space. They were the last line of defense for the planet.

Many of the merchant ships had opted to Jump away to Schall than to stick around for the coming storm. Hammer couldn't really blame them. For many merchant crews, their ship was their livelihood. Risking everything they had on a pitched battle, when they weren't in a fighting ship in the first place, was not something that many of them relished. A few had stayed, however, many of whom were made up of prior service crews. This group would be the goalie for the planet, covering as many approach angles as their numbers permitted. Hammer had picked the relic survey cruiser *Altinak* to serve as the flagship for that group, due to her size and refitted armament. Aside from her new batteries and cannon, she had been modified into a serviceable light carrier. Hammer had picked Captain Sacha Po, newly cleared for active duty by Dr. Takagawa, to command her and Omega Squadron. He had toyed around with installing Red Sun into the position, but Coeur D'Esprit had flat told him that she wanted to finish this fight aboard her own *Hornet*, and that she would not consider it any other way. He could've ordered her to it, but after everything *Hornet* had done for the Coalition, almost all of which was still highly-classified, he couldn't split up a team that had proven they could produce results, even if that meant relegating one of his more capable commanders to the backfield. That was one of the reasons that *Hornet* was not leading the others around the planet. Resilient as she was, she was one of the runts of the litter, being equal in size only to the other *Jayhawk*-class far trader in the formation.

Coeur's recommendation of Po for the job had been glowing, citing her familiarity with the ship and her exceptional command skills. Hammer had read through that to some degree. Everything *Hornet's* CO had said was true about Po's capabilities. The unread subtext was that Po was a Captain without a ship, and one that could just as easily turn inward and devour herself over the loss of *Star of Montrose* and her crew. Giving her a new ship, particularly that one, as well as a squadron would be the impetus to get her back in the saddle again.

What Red Sun had asked for in return, however, was that *Hornet* be allowed to keep all her current gear, weapons and personnel, including one Vega Zorn. He'd balked at that request at first, given the space pirate's previous actions and affiliations. In a situation like this, reality had a way of completely upsetting the way things should be. Given her actions at Spires and Phoebus, Hammer was willing to commute her sentence until afterward.

It was a unique answer to a sticky situation. It allowed him to have an experienced space hand in a place where someone he trusted could keep an eye on her. Taken in that light, Hammer agreed to Red Sun's requests.

"Change is the one inevitability," Ramirez said, still on the line. "Just make sure that whoever you send our way can keep up. They're no good to me if *Apollo* starts outrunning her own formation."

"Duly noted." Hammer said. "Now I know Elsie runs a tight ship over there, but get everything tied down as tight as you can. I doubt the enemy is going to give us time to shakedown our formations, so we've got to get it right the first time."

"Understood, sir," Ramirez said. "You can count on me, Admiral."

"I know I can, Iggy. Hammer out."

The screen went blank and Hammer switched his attention to list of materials with estimated time for delivery. He soaked it all up. Each of his decisions would take into account that new information.

"I have an update on the new weapon systems," Manny said before Hammer lost himself in the report. "It looks as though they are being brought up this afternoon. It's going to take a small army to do it, but they think they can have them up and running in four days."

"I'm not sure that we have four days." Hammer said. "Is there any way they can expedite that?"

"I believe that figure is expedited, sir, but I will see if they can shave some time off of that. I will...reemphasize the need for quality haste."

"Do you think it will be worth the expenditure?"

"Oh yes, sir," Black Star said. "The enemy will surely have a profile on *Kukulcan*. They will plan on exploiting what few weaknesses she has to their advantage, no doubt. If they are

expecting to fight the *Kukulcan* in their profile, this will allow us to deliver a rather unpleasant surprise to them if they try to get close.

"Wheels within wheels, eh?"

"Yes, sir."

It was a rarity that Manfred Aaron ever smiled. He was not a humorless man, nor was he dour or boorish, it was only that his moods seemed to center around varying degrees of seriousness within a framework of professionalism. At that moment, his mood warmed greatly and his eyes were lit from within with amusement.

"We can't stop them from trying," he said, "but we can surely break them from the habit."

* * *

Once again, *Hornet* was on the ground at Aubaine, cradled in Berth 57 after her absence. Access bays were open all over her. Wires and cables streamed from hidden connections, making the ship look as though she were a patient in a hospital.

In many ways that was true. The difference was that her doctors wore overalls, wielding spanner wrenches instead of lancets. She was in pristine order now, and Coeur could feel it. Seeing her from the outside, there was something inherently noble in the lines of her tuning fork bow, her stream-lined airfoil, even with the power lines and umbilical lines corded and bundled about her. Occasionally, the whizzing hiss of an air ratchet punctured the air from underneath where one of her doctors plied their trade. Up on top, Newton with his strange six-eyed welding goggles was hard at work, the blue-purple light of his welder flickering up at him like the lights of a dance club.

With matters well in hand, Coeur D'Esprit had taken a moment to cast a fond gaze on the ship that had changed everything in her life. Never one for sentimentality, there was something deeply nostalgic about the sight of her ship that brought all sorts of mixed emotions to the surface. *Hornet* had given her back the stars, brought out the best in her and made her face her fears. She'd seen her share of death, but for every one that she'd buried, she'd saved hundreds, perhaps thousands more. For such a small ship, she'd made a disproportionately larger difference to so many lives, most especially her crew and Captain.

You are my friend, my teacher and my great love, Coeur thought as she stood there looking on. *They may remember us for what we did, but it's you that made it possible. It was you that kept us and protected us, gave us strength when we were weak and drove us to heights we couldn't imagine. We all owe you a debt of gratitude that can never be fully repaid.*

Thank you.

For everything.

Realization came to her as a bolt from the blue – she stood upon the very spot where she'd seen this ship for the first time, the day Cicero had offered her command of a glorified shop project. There had been no small amount of trepidation when she'd heard that the command the Hiver had in mind was an 80-year old transport.

But it was here, on this very spot, that she'd fell in love at first sight. It was only fitting that her break to reaffirm that love should be from the same vantage point. Regardless of what followed in the days ahead, whether their fortunes in space were won or lost, this view of the *Hornet* would be the snapshot she carried with her in her mind. If she was able to ever pick up a brush and easel again, this would be what she would put to canvas.

The hum of an approaching hover car brought her out of her reverie. Turning, she found a black limo coming to a halt at the mouth of the hangar, two small diplomatic flags fluttered from the each side of the hood. A large man wearing dark sunglasses emerged, scanned the surroundings, then opened the door for his charge to exit.

Lord Regent Delvin Garrett stepped out of the vehicle and gave a small tug at his dress tunic to smooth its lines. His lordship had obviously found a serviceable tailor. The old commando sweater had given way to a smartly-built black and gold uniform sporting a high-collar, golden epaulets, red piping and rich embroidery. A deep crimson sash hung at an angle over his right shoulder, matching the red pant stripe of his trousers. It had a definite military air about it, but largely served to drive home the high status in which he was held.

His long strides covered the distance where he came to stand before Coeur. His hand shot up to his right eyebrow in a crisp salute that Coeur returned, then bowed.

"Your lordship," she said. "I am glad, though surprised, to see you."

"Good," he smiled more with his eyes than mouth, "Then my cunning plan was worked perfectly, my lady." He lifted his gaze over her shoulder to the spectacle of *Hornet* behind her.

"A fairer lady of the stars I've never seen."

"You know, I was just thinking the same thing when you pulled up, my lord," she said. "So, may I ask what brings you here?"

"It is my understanding that you and your ship will be leaving for space within the next few days. Well, as it happens, I come bearing gifts to aid you."

"*Timeo Danaos et dona ferentis*," she said, adding a slight smile.

"Well, I had to ask myself, what should I get for the Captain that has everything?" The Regent reached inside his jacket pocket and withdrew a sheaf of hard plastic paper. "I think you'll find there are no giant horse statues on that list, so I believe the Skian Gates of Troy are safe, my lady."

Coeur unfolded the list to see an itemized list of equipment, shockingly laid out in black and white. Her eyebrows went up at what she found. The Regent's eyes danced.

"The look on your face is priceless, my lady."

"This must've cost you...."

"A small fortune? Yes."

"More like a large one." She said with disbelief. "Some of these items have to be recovered relic tech, Pre-Collapse, at least."

"It is my gift to you and your crew on behalf of a very grateful leader of a soon-to-be grateful planet," he waved his hand in a dismissing gesture. "It is the least I could do for all you've done for me. I only hope that you have time to install it before you launch."

"When will it arrive?"

The rumble of several ground transports rumbled in the distance, coming closer. Delvin's checked his chrome aviator watch.

"Right now, as it turns out. Is now a good time?"

"Yes. Now is good."

"Well then, I will leave you to your work," he said. "Be safe, my lady, and come back to us."

She started to shake his hand, but drew him into an embrace instead. She expected his arms to be stiff and formal as he reciprocated, but found to her surprise that they were relaxed and comfortable.

"I'll see what I can do."

The Regent turned and the bodyguard opened the door for him.

"Until our next meeting, my lady."

"Until then, my lord."

The limo lifted off the ground and sped away just as the first of three transports, all loaded with crates and modules, came to a halt.

"Please tell me you are going to date him when we get back," Gyro said, sidling up to her with a greasy wrench in her hand.

"Don't you start, too," she said as she went to meet the transport. "You sound like Physic."

"The best compliment I've had all day."

"As flattered as I am that so many of my friends are taking an interest in my love life, there's the small matter of the invading fleet that takes precedence. That's taking up most of my attention right now."

"And after that, if we live?"

Coeur sighed. "Then...we'll see."

"That's my Captain," he XO said impishly. "So, what did your dishy, planetary leader boyfriend bring us?"

Coeur handed over the manifest. A few seconds later Gyro had the same surprised look on her face as Coeur had. She whistled with what she found printed on the page.

"Most men settle for flowers or chocolates when they want to get their point across, Red," the young woman said. "It's a rare man that is considerate enough to send a brace of relic capital missiles with an external MFD, not to mention the other jewels on this page. Crowbar's going to have field day, I guarantee you."

"It looks like he really pulled out the stops, that's for sure. There's everything but a black globe generator on that list."

"Don't worry, Coeur," Gyro said with barely-contained laughter. "I'm sure he's saving that for the wedding."

* * *

Eleven days after *Hornet* first appeared to warn the system of the impending threat, remote sensor drones began picking up contacts on the fringes of the system. They were few at first, but as hours passed they spread like a leprous disease on the read-outs of the tracking stations. It was worth noting to FleetCom that the enemy fleet did not rig for silent running upon arrival as standard protocol would've dictated – each ship seemed to be at full power without bothering to hide their presence. As their numbers grew, it became obvious why. They wanted the system defenders to know what they faced, and feel despair. It was an unsubtle attempt at psychological warfare that was utterly lost on the resolute defense forces, who were stalwart now as ever.

Two more precious days came and went and still more of the enemy appeared. They registered the arrival of *Golden Flame* like an earthquake on a seismograph. A secondary ripple a few hours told FleetCom that *Phoenix* had also arrived. Combined, the two ships represented half again the tonnage of *Kukulcan*.

The Aubani defense force was on stand-by with orders instructing them to be ready to move at a moment's notice. They found themselves on firemen's time, sleeping in fitful shifts, waiting for the enemy to make their move.

Every spacebourne installation outside of the planet's direct reach had been abandoned, including the Fleet Base around Enderson's Giant. Anything and everything of value was being salvaged or removed to prevent it from falling into the hands of the enemy. It was unlikely the enemy would take detours around the system. When they came, they would head straight for the planet.

Shortly after the arrival of the dreadnought and light cruiser, the enemy formed themselves neatly into squadrons and got underway. Just as expected, their course would bring them directly to planet, though it would take the better part of four days for the fleet to cover the distance. Fleets were always at the mercy of their slowest ship.

The breath that the system had been holding for nearly two weeks had finally reached its crisis. The stage was set. Then enemy was on its way and the out-numbered defenders made ready to respond.

* * *

Admiral Shannon Hayward sat at his station on the CIC of *Phoenix*, the illusion that he was still a master of his own fate only thinly maintained. Mestrovic had finally locked him out of the decision-making loop in favor of his new best friend, Gaylon Fox. Hayward could only begin to imagine the dangerous implications of such an alignment of powers.

The good Captain of *Royal Vengeance* had dispatched his own executive officer to act as his liaison aboard the flagship instead of personally moving his command there. It seemed a bit on the preposterous side for the commander of the Solee forces to remain on a *Kinunir*-class cruiser when *Golden Flame* was where he should be. Hayward had met Jamar a few times, and while he seemed a decent fellow there was absolutely no question where his loyalties lie.

The worst part about the business was that Mestrovic had virtually unquestioned authority and command aboard the most powerful ship in the system. Whether he could manage the resources and capabilities of a ship that large and versatile was anyone's guess. The High Technarch was using the battle plan Hayward had developed, though the stakes were much higher now. With *Hornet's* escape, the system had come to full alert status with every unit available manned, armed and ready.

Hayward had wargamed such a scenario when he had planned the campaign, but his hope had always been to catch Aubaine sleeping, to overwhelm their senses and force them to quit with a minimum of shots fired and lives lost. Now, the bloodshed would be great on both sides. The Aubani might not have sufficient forces to ultimately defeat Gold Fleet, but they could make the Oriflammen fleet pay dearly in blood and souls to capture their prize. The current situation represented an escalation that Hayward had never wanted and had gone to extreme lengths to avoid.

Now they were here, ready to deliver the *coup de grace*, and Hayward was little more than a glorified spectator, not that victory would mean much to him now anyway. Two months ago he would've welcomed the close of hostilities and the establishment of the new government. Given what he knew now, the prospect of total victory with Mestrovic at the helm made his blood run cold.

Ockley and Paige were similarly feeling the pressure of the situation. The both of them had relatives and friends on The List. He'd brought them into the loop even before Seitzmann. They had carried on like stone troopers, but they were screaming inside, he knew they were.

It was a peculiar situation to be ostensibly at the head of an invading force, the vanguard of a Revolution, only to find your sensibilities aligning with the enemy. It was crushing to know that he had brought them to this. He had brought the sword to the people. It was unlikely that things would have progressed so far had he not been there to facilitate its every move. As such, Hayward would feel directly responsible for every death, on both sides, that was about to occur.

It was just like the old saying, "*The Revolution eats its children.*"

He had contingency plans in the works, but he wasn't in a position to put them into motion. With so many of their family and loved ones literally under the gun, it was doubtful that he could muster enough support to turn the tide. If that condition changed, well, that was another matter...

The doors to the CIC opened behind where Hayward sat. The ringing sound of many boots on the decksole drew his attention, along with the rest of the officers and crew present. Turning in his chair, he found a dozen armed Marines, each bearing the insignia of the Technarch's personal guard. The lead one even wore the gaudy golden robes that were a practically a staple on *Golden Flame's* CIC. Hayward was on his feet in an instant.

"What is the meaning of this?" he demanded. The arrogant man in robes looked around the room, intentionally avoiding the Admiral until finally his eyes settled on the enraged Flag Officer as though seeing him for the first time.

"Admiral Shannon Hayward," he said officiously, "By direct order of His Excellency, Lord Mestrovic, High Technarch of Oriflamme, you are hereby relieved of your command, and are to be remanded into custody immediately."

"On what charge?" Helena said with growing steel and anger?"

"Conspiracy, Sedition and, quite possibly, Treason. The latter will be for his Excellency to decide."

Fox, you're behind this aren't you? This bears your master's mark.

"And if I refuse to be taken into custody?" The man had to know that such a small force would never make off the ship alive if the crew didn't want them to.

The man made an expression that could only charitably be called a smile.

"Oh, I wouldn't do that, Admiral, for the good of your crew. I would hate for your crew to be made an example of due to misplaced feelings of loyalty to you. I'm sure you don't want that to happen, to say nothing of the personal repercussions."

Out of the corner of his eye, Hayward eyed three of his own Marines whose hands were slowly reaching for their own weapons, across the way two more readying themselves. He could feel the seething hate swirling around the compartment. On one hand he was flattered that their loyalty was to him personally, but on the other it was bringing the situation racing to a head.

"Okay," Hayward said. "I will go quietly."

His Marines were not going to take that lying down. Automatic weapons came to bear on the guardsmen with the speed of a striking cobra. Crewmen with side arms drew down on the arrogant man and his group of thugs. The CIC was big, but not that big. Some of the Marine were almost muzzle-to-muzzle to the enemy. The situation hung by a thread. If weapons fire erupted in this close of quarters, it would be a blood bath for both sides.

The man in robes laughed.

"Go ahead, shoot us," he said as though he were impervious to bullets. "Of course, you will be declared Enemies of the State and you will not be the only ones to pay for your lack of faith in our dear High Technarch."

"Meaning what?" Hayward said.

"Meaning that right now, each person in this compartment has someone they care about with gun pointed to their head. Your friends, your family. They will be executed without mercy or exception if you resist."

There was a moment where Hayward thought the Marines might open fire. It all hinged on whether they believed the man in front of them, and whether they chose to act anyway.

"Weapons down, *now!*" Hayward shouted. They hesitated. He could barely blame them for that. "On the deck. Do it!"

One-by-one they did as they were ordered. One of the guard stepped to the fore and produced a set of plastic shock manacles. Hayward thrust his hands forward to allow his wrist to be fitted.

"A wise choice, Admiral," his captor said. "You've just saved many lives."

"Including yours."

"I'm sure that will be taken into consideration at your trial."

Hayward spoke over his shoulder as the manacles clicked and locked together.

"Attend to your duty," he said to everyone, then fixed his stare on Ockley and Paige.

"Don't do anything stupid that will jeopardize the mission. Understood? Carry on as planned."

"Yes, sir," the two said in unison.

Three of the Marines roughly carried the Admiral out of the CIC. Two of the others gathered up the weapons on the deck.

"I will be assuming command of this ship," the arrogant man proclaimed. "Remember and heed my warning. Should anything happen to even one of us, it will be visited on your house many fold," he looked around meeting everyone's eye. "I trust that I will not need to repeat myself."

"No sir," Ockley said, who had, up to this point remained silent as the grave. He slowly removed his hand from the control panel which controlled the combat recorder and security cameras. The eyes and ears of the CIC had just recorded the whole event.

"That will not be necessary."

* * *

The first contact came when four modified *Valor*-class missile corvettes set out to harass then enemy formation. Their speed and acceleration were faster than anything the Coalition had identified in the enemy camp. The recent modifications had only served to increase that margin.

True to their names, *Courageous*, *Gallant*, *Dauntless* and *Intrepid* went out to face the enemy, just four small ships standing in defiance of more than eighty warships, all nearly as big or bigger than the four sisters. An engineer had once described the *Valor*-class as looking like a comical alligator that put on a suite of battle dress. The pronounced prow was spade-shaped with a small conning tower perched on top. Even with that less than flattering description, *Valors* were fine-looking ships. There was a quality to the eye that evoked a sense of heroism, and in that initial clash they proved how much that was true.

Like four knights of old, they had put themselves in the path of the dragon and rode unflinchingly into its maw. To the enemy, it seemed that the four ships were eager to throw themselves away, which they were too eager to oblige. Well outside of *Golden Flame's* particle accelerators, the four ships let fly with a raking barrage as they angled away. They were little more than potshots at that range, which were easily dispatched by point defense, but they did get the attention of the screening elements that were at the forefront of the fleet. Seven ships split off from the main formation to give pursuit, including the light carrier, *Marat*, which disgorged its fearsome Harrier fighters into space.

The *Valors* ran for a half-hour, staying just ahead of their pursuers until they were all out of range of the fleet's protective umbrella. That's when the corvettes cooled their engines, allowing their built-up inertia to carry them forward. Using their maneuvering jets they each

wheeled around to present their prows to the enemy while still traveling in reverse. That's when they showed the first of their modifications.

The enemy had expected the corvettes to fire as they closed in, but they were expecting salvos of two to four missiles from each ship, which was potentially dangerous, but ultimately manageable. When the attack came, their sensors lit up with a salvo not of sixteen, but sixty missiles dense. It was a one shot-trick, made possible by disposable missile packs that had been magnetically attached to their hull. It cost the *Valors* some of their speed, and the accuracy was far more than even their upgraded MFDs could handle, but that didn't matter at that range. It was the spacebourne equivalent of a shotgun blast, and the enemy hadn't seen it coming. Most of them were nukes, meant to take advantage of the close-in formations. Point defense lasers fired to thin their numbers, but some of them would get through.

Spheres of nuclear fire began to appear in space, a blinding white. Two of the nine ships, *St. Austin* and *La Rochelle* were destroyed outright. Four of her sisters were maimed nearly the point of ruin, the remaining three, *Marat* and her two escorts, escaped the apocalyptic wrath being well to the rear of the formation. The *Valors* had done this without suffering so much as a hit themselves.

The Harriers, which had peeled off from the escort at the first sign of nukes, rallied and gave chase now that the corvettes had shot their bolt. That was when the corvettes jettisoned their empty pods, turned back along their original course, and demonstrated the second of their upgrades, their advanced acceleration now unhindered, and shot away like an arrow from bow. The fighters, however, were relic space-superiority designs and surged after them, burning up their fuel to put them in range to attack.

The *Valors* stayed stubbornly ahead as they zigged and zagged in evasion. The fighters moved to cut the angle and attack their flanks when the trap was sprung. What the fighter pilots hadn't anticipated was that the frantic escape attempt by the corvettes had been a calculated ploy to lure them into a minefield. Bomb-pumped X-ray lasers lanced through their formation, casting aside their thin armor as though it were nothing. As fighters went up in a deadly fireworks display, the *Valors* turned back towards home, thumbing their noses at the remaining ships that had just been on the receiving end of the harsh lesson they'd dealt out. Of the twenty-four Harriers that had gone out to meet the enemy, only seven of them returned to *Marat*, and three of them would never see combat again.

As the enemy continued their approach they would continue to be harassed by the *Valors* even after they were gone. As they left, the corvettes had emptied their magazines in the path of the fleet, forcing them to deploy mine sweepers ahead of them, lest a stray nuke whittle their numbers down.

The first round in the Battle of Aubaine had clearly favored the bold defenders. The enemy, however, was still legion by comparison and they would not be deterred.

* * *

When the attack came, it was not with the ferocity that Hammer Lathrop had expected. Had the enemy been truly indifferent to casualties, they would've come down on the defenders with all they had. Bloody, but decisive.

As it was, *Golden Flame* advanced, but did not attack herself. Instead, the dreadnought covered some of her heavier units and let them do the talking, *Phoenix*, foremost amongst them. *Kukulcan* had brought its spinal mount Meson canon to bear, but found that *Golden Flame* was running with both incredibly powerful Meson screens and nuclear dampeners, allowing her to shrug off many of the attacks against her with contemptible ease. During the ensuing attack, *Kukulcan* did manage to annihilate the destroyer, *Burgundy*, which strayed from the protection of the flag.

Despite their earlier heroics, the defenders were becoming steadily pressed as the smaller units clashed in space. It was all they could do to repel the attack, and *Golden Flame* had not yet entered the battle in full. It seemed that the Solee units were also holding back their units, whether serving as a reserve, or just caution was unknown.

When the attack broke off, the defenders attempted to catch their breath and lick their wounds. They'd lost three ships, all from Beta Squadron, two patrol cruisers and *Fiery*-class

escort. Several more ships were already streaming air with burning fires that their crews were attempting to put out. *Kukulcan* herself had taken several missile hits, but her relic armor was holding true. Though, the engagement had not gone decidedly in their favor, they had held their own against a larger force.

It had been a probing attack, Hammer had come to realize and not a serious push, perhaps to give them time to reconsider their earlier offer of surrender that had been broadcast their way.

When the attack came a few hours later, Hammer knew that the enemy had learned all that they'd wanted to know about their defenses. The Solee units joined the battle and *Golden Flame* powered its weapons to full.

A sense of dread accompanied their approach, which was its intent. If this Mestrovic had the sense of personal drama that *Hornet's* intelligence officer had indicated, he was certainly playing it to the hilt now. He wasn't quite toying with the Aubani, but he was certainly going out of his way to show them how outmatched they were.

Outmatched perhaps, Hammer thought, but not outclassed. His own analysis of the Solee so far had showed him they were a solid fighting force, not counting the sucker punch that the corvettes had delivered earlier. Thankfully, they had, until now, remained on the sidelines. The Oriflammen units, however, were showing a trace of amateurism. They weren't quite coordinated the way that he would expect under the guiding hand of Commodore Hayward. It was a subtle difference, but one which Hammer had picked up on immediately. It could be a ploy, but somewhat doubted that. They had exposed several of their ships to too much danger for it to be intentional, and just wasn't really Hayward's style. The former RCN Commodore had built a fleet right under their noses and turned against his own government, so perhaps his assessment was off the mark.

Whether the Oriflammen were showing some greenhorn tendencies, or not, they had pressed them sharply when they weren't trying to go too far. Now they were bringing all their units to the party, and the defenders would be lucky if they survived the day, even with all the tricks up their sleeve.

The battle was finally and fully joined three hours later. Beta Squadron played the main-gauche to Alpha's rapier, Ramirez striking fast, opening holes in their defenses and setting up the kill so that Hammer could knock them down. Casualties began to mount on both sides as the two giants effectively neutralized each other, their Meson screens and dampeners depriving them of their main armament and any missile carrying a nuclear warhead. Unable to counter each other, the two titans focused their wrath on the smaller units which they smashed like ants.

Throughout this *Golden Flame* continued to plink away with her secondary particle accelerators, targeting the enormous monitor. It was an attempt to exploit a basic weakness that *Kukulcan* had, a lack of medium range armament. Her long-range Meson cannon had been countered by Meson screens. Her secondary armament had been modified with comparatively short range lasers, that had come to replace her original batteries, such as the ones she'd fired on *Lord Ryan*. Her own particle accelerators had been missing or inoperable when the Coalition put her into service. Repairing weapons of that technical sophistication had been beyond their capabilities at first before the Technical Academy had come along, so the parts were scavenged and missile tubes and magazines of Aubani manufacture had been put in their place. While sufficient for most of her defense roles, it had the side-effect of making *Kukulcan* weak in missiles for a ship her size. Certainly now that her Meson cannon was countered, as well as the Majority of her missiles that left her shorter-range batteries with little else.

Or so they thought.

Kukulcan waited for the right moment and eventually *Golden Flame* supplied them with the opening they needed. The dreadnought, convinced of its own invulnerability, strayed closer to the monitor, believing itself outside the effective range of the feathered serpent's lasers. The monitor dove at its enemy, and the foe once again mistook its intentions. Believing that *Kukulcan* sought to engage her with her laser batteries, the dreadnought made no attempt to move. It would be to her advantage to engage at such a distance.

Golden Flame's particle accelerator punched several holes in the advancing monitor, but still she came on, unflinching. That's when *Kukulcan* launched a salvo of missiles, well over two hundred, many more than the dreadnought would've expected. Still *Golden Flame* sneered at the

incoming missiles. Only nukes and X-ray laser heads would be of any use, and both of those were dependant on nuclear explosions to function, which were negated entirely by nuclear dampeners.

The point defense crews idly took at aim at some of them, but largely ignored the lot of them, to their peril. Even if the warheads had been conventional explosives, *Golden Flame's* bonded superdense armor would've shrugged it off. These missiles, however, carried high-powered capacitors that discharged on contact. Of the two hundred, a hundred and seventy struck *Golden Flame*. Their combined charge acted as a stun gun, paralyzing the ship with an overwhelming energy surge, overloading system after system.

Kukulcan's rebuilt fusion cannon, which had finally been repaired only two weeks prior, fired a searing beam of concentrated plasma at the dreadnought. It struck her port side, also dead amidships. *Golden Flame* reeled from the blow, and her Meson screens and nuclear dampeners went offline.

That's when *Kukulcan's* main armament was finally able to target her opposite number. An explosion appeared inside the armored skin of the dreadnought. A coordinated salvo from half a dozen ships in Alpha Squadron, including *Kukulcan*, followed soon after. X-ray lasers, now able to explode with impunity, rippled over *Golden Flame's* hull like a rain of arrows.

Marked as she was, the dreadnought was meant to withstand unimaginable amounts of punishment. Before a second Meson explosion could be decayed inside her hull, *Golden Flame* rallied, her screens and dampeners kicking back on. Directing her wrath on the ship that had wounded her, her larger lasers and particle accelerators concentrated on *Kukulcan*.

Multiple sandcasters launched, not just from the monitor, but from several other ships from Alpha Squadron, allowing their flagship to maneuver away, like a squid inking the waters to get away. A final parting shot from *Kukulcan's* fusion cannon, which scored a glancing blow across her pointed bow, persuaded *Golden Flame* to similarly back off to reestablish her position and bearings. She would remain largely out of the fight for nearly forty minutes, only occasionally lending fire support and continue to shield the smaller units from nuclear and Meson annihilation.

It was a godsend that Hammer and the beleaguered defenders were quick to seize upon, but ultimately it was not enough. The sheer number of hulls the foe possessed was beginning to show. Each ship the attackers destroyed represented an irreplaceable loss. Once the enemy found that all they had to do was aim for disabling strikes rather than outright kills, the momentum of the Oriflammen offensive seemed to grow. When *Golden Flame* re-entered the fray, things got exponentially worse.

The one saving grace the defenders had, the one thing that allowed them to survive the brutality of the day, was their coordinated missile defense. Ship formations responded to incoming missile threats as a single entity, rather than as individuals. Fewer hits got through. Damaged vessels could be more easily protected. The enemy was willing to toss missiles at them with abandon as salvo after salvo disappeared due to the defenders' expert coordination. As the day wore on, magazines began to run dry. Battle damage began to erode their ability to carry through. So it was that Gold Fleet once again broke off the attack, moving back to their battle train to re-supply and make emergency repairs.

Alpha and Beta had shown what they were made of, but in the reckoning, round two in the Battle for Aubaine had gone to the invaders. If Gold Fleet was willing to accept losses and attack without cessation, they would win.

And Aubaine would fall.

* * *

The crippled and damaged remains of Alpha and Beta squadron limped back to the orbit of Aubaine and the cover of its defensive batteries. *Kukulcan*, who was herself battered and bloody, had to act as a tugboat for some of the ships that would've never made it back on their own. Almost a third of his ships had been destroyed outright. Only a handful of his ships were not diminished in some way because of the damage they had sustained. A few of his line ships would soon be joining Omega Squadron in the backfield as they were no longer able to maneuver or function as required. *Kukulcan* was still combat ready and that would make further resistance

possible, but with a dwindling number of ships to support her, even the feathered serpent would eventually succumb.

The only bright spot came in the form of three ships added to their line of battle through boarding actions. The enemy had abandoned the patrol cruiser, *Lancelot du Lac*, previously RCS *Longbow*, and two *Gazelle*-class close escorts, *Montcalm* and *Moreau*, both of which had never sailed under the Reformation Coalition colors until now. In each case, Marines from *Kukulcan*, under the direction of Captain Maggart, had secured the three ships, taken their crews captive and set up prize crews to bring them into the defender's camp. None of the commanders had opted to scuttle their ships, which had the secondary effect of giving them an intelligence windfall, assuming they had time to process it.

Time, it seemed, was the one luxury they didn't have. Repairs to those new ships, and to the other damaged units would continue right up until the enemy was once again on the move. Factories on the planet had been running at every hour of the day for the last two weeks cranking out munitions, spare parts and electronics. The gigantic space station in Aubani orbit, whimsically called Big Top, would prove to be the hub for Hammer's wounded fleet.

As the monitor approached the spinning ring of steel, hovering as it was above the lapis sphere of Aubaine, Hammer's thoughts turned inward. They had lost a lot of good people today, many of them young kids. Even if they somehow turned the tide, the losses they had taken today would weaken the Reformation Coalition. If Mestrovic failed to topple them, he might at least open the door for someone else to finish the job.

He looked up at the mural of the feathered serpent, whose bright colors were unstained, unaffected and wished like hell that he could stand above it all like that. Looking around CIC, he could see defeat written on every face, except Black Star, who stood implacable as ever. Fear and desperation hung in the air like clouds.

Given the situation, Hammer's inner-realist told him, they couldn't win. He could put up the best defense he could, bleed them for each kilometer they took, but victory would remain elusive. Even if he crashed *Kukulcan* into *Golden Flame*, trading queens on the chessboard, *Phoenix* and the relatively untapped Solee forces would be enough to mop up what's left and brush aside Omega Squadron and the orbital defenses.

After this, the people of Aubaine, and even Lon Maggart might have to seriously consider the offer to surrender. If they didn't surrender once Gold Fleet held the high ground...

Don't let them read it on your face, Sean. You can't fall apart in front these kids, not after everything they've been through.. You owe it to them to be strong. They need you at your best.

"Admiral, you might want to have a look at this."

Hammer stood and went over to the young woman at the main sensor station. Through the thick network of sensor platforms and drones littered throughout the system, *Kukulcan* had an excellent idea of what was going on in the system, much better than the enemy fleet out there, poised to land the killing blow.

"What is it, Jill?"

"Sir, long-range sensors are picking up multiple Jump precipitations."

"Along the same entry vector as Gold Fleet?"

"No sir, on the far side of the planet."

It was possible that Gold Fleet had ordered a group of their ships to micro-Jump within the system to out flank them, possibly fresh ships that were picketing the occupied system to coreward. On the screen, the contacts were represented by a triangular icon in the amber of an unrecognized IFF contact.

"Do we have eyes on them?"

"I'm attempting to get that now. It appears that they are going dark as they are transiting, sir."

The young man at the communications board sat bolt upright in his seat. His surprised movement caught Lathrop's attention.

"Talk to me, John," he said. "What have you got?"

"I'm receiving a message from FleetCom headquarters, sir. The lead ship transmitted it to Aubaine via a tight beam laser. Audio only," he said. "It's for you, sir. Personally"

"Let me hear it."

A woman's voice, clear and beautiful began to speak, her words colored with an accent Hammer couldn't quite place.

"Attention, Commodore Lathrop, taccode Hammer, this is the courier boat, *Cyllenius*, Lieutenant Cassandra Mayfield commanding," she said. The communications operator punched up the file that had been attached as rider to the transmission. It was a list of ship names. "I've brought along some friends, Commodore, I hope you don't mind."

Lathrop's heart leapt in his chest as he read the names. *Highlander, Spahi, Suleiman Victrix, Lirgishkhunan, Maggart, Balder, Mississinewa, Alexander, Valley Forge, Hood, Mary Rose*, the list went on and on.

They must've cleared out everything from Aurora to Trybec, Hammer thought. Then he saw the last name on the list.

RCS Thunderchild.

"Well, hoss, the cavalry is here," the voice of Pat "Who Me" Ritter, *Thunderchild's* commander said over the speakers.

"Looks like we arrived just in time."

Chapter 25

Reinforcements continued to trickle in over the next few hours, bringing the system defense forces to a level well above where they started. Had the *Golden Flame* not been such a deciding factor, Lathrop could've held a measure of confidence in a favorable outcome, even with the addition of the Solee Navy.

Not only were the new units sufficient to replace many of the ones lost to enemy action in Alpha and Beta squadron, but they also allowed for the formation of the much-needed third prong, the newly-formed Delta Squadron. *Thunderchild* would lead the charge under Ritter's capable direction.

Delta Squadron carried one other very important attribute, its invisibility to the enemy. It was possible, even likely, that Gold Fleet had missed their arrival. Had Lathrop been over there,

he would have immediately attacked if he'd seen reinforcements of that magnitude about to relieve the forces he'd worn down. Gold Fleet remained anchored near their battle train without so much as peep.

A formation of *Fusiliers*, *Lancers*, *Auroras* and even one *Maggart*-class clipper and more were all moored behind the planet. If Hammer played his cards right they would be a nasty surprise in the offing.

Combat data from every ship available had been piped back to the Naval Intelligence branch for analysis. In turn, they ran the raw information through a number of models and scenarios, sorting and compiling it until they churned out reports based on their findings.

What they found was that even with their new reinforcements, the probability of a Coalition victory was still low, somewhere around twenty-nine percent, given the presence of the *Solee*, *Golden Flame*, and the damage Hammer's forces had already sustained. Be that as it may, Hammer would take those odds over what they were the day before. It wouldn't be the first time he'd bucked the odds, and that was especially true whenever Lathrop and Ritter worked together.

When finally summarized, the analysis had yielded four very important facts for Lathrop's consideration. The first was about *Kukulcan's* arch-nemesis and opposite number.

Based on what they'd seen, *Golden Flame* was apparently overly-sensitive to damage disproportional to her ability to take it. Even with *Kukulcan's* one-two punch, *Golden Flame* had been in a position to put a serious hurt on the Coalition flagship had she chosen to do so. The hits she'd taken were bad, but a ship of that size and toughness was meant to take it and keep going. Naval Intelligence concluded from this that Mestrovic was unwilling to put himself in real peril for very long. So long as he maintained a favorable position, he would hang in the lines, but when pressed he would seek to maneuver out of danger to continue killing with relative impunity. In that way, the so-called High Technarch's presence aboard the flag could have real strategic advantages. If they could bring him to task, create enough of a real threat, then they might be able to dislodge him at critical moment.

The second and third points dealt with the *Solee*. Point two was that the *Solee* had been pulling their punches whenever they had engaged with his forces, opting to hit and run while not exposing themselves too long to any kind of sustained fire. It was possible that Mestrovic was using them as a strategic reserve, but there's no way to be sure. A foreign navy, largely untouched by the ravages of the battle, just sitting out there, waiting, had a decidedly sinister characteristic. Point three only drove that home.

A few of the *Solee* warships, as many as four could not be accounted for anywhere in the system. It was doubtful they were using the sensor distorting stealth either as each ship in Hammer's fleet had been 'inoculated' against its use. Likewise none of the defending ships had copied the modified version of the stealth that *Hornet* had cobbled together. It had been used in action and, more than likely, countered in the enemy camp. So if these warships, which included *Royal Vengeance*, weren't under stealth or lying in wait somewhere, where were they? It was mystery that Hammer was sure would be revealed, and he was equally sure that he wouldn't like whatever it was when he found out.

The fourth point dealt with the overall leadership and coordination of the enemy forces. The conclusion was that Commodore Hayward was not in command over there, and probably never was. Either he was not in the system, was no longer alive, or was unable to lend his touch of professionalism to the events. Hammer was thankful of that. Hayward was one of the best that Coalition had had in terms of ability and natural instincts. It was a sad state of affairs to know that the Coalition as it was had so alienated a man like that and him an enemy of the state. Lathrop knew he was a man of honor. If he had decided to turn on his own government, that spoke very ill of the current state and government.

Whatever his reasoning, Hayward had turned traitor and many men and women were now dead as a result. If he was unable to contribute further to the treacherous designs that he himself had authored, Hammer was glad of it. He would take an ego-maniacal civilian over an experienced Naval officer any day.

"Admiral, sir," John interjected. "The Secretary General is on the red channel for you. He says it's urgent."

"It is at that," he mused more to himself. "Put him through."

* * *

Cyllenius detached herself from the docking clamps which held her beneath the spine of *Thunderchild*. The courier turned her wedge towards the Big Top space station and flared her engines. Around the courier ships scavenged from Trybec, Aurora, Fija and other systems hung in space like a school of fish frozen in place, their running lights a sea of white and green motes. Fireflies circled around them, ferrying personnel, equipment, tugging replacement modules into place in a graceful dance of activity. Seemingly 'above' them, dominating the sky, was the night side of Aubaine. Each of the new arrivals was in hiding, waiting in the shadows until called into the light.

Cyllenius had waited until Big Top had made its orbit to the dark side of the planet before she could dock. The little courier was due for a passing refit of some fire-and-forget missiles to augment the 120-mj laser she carried. While she was an agile craft, her small size and thin armor would find her a place among Omega Squadron, far away from the front lines.

There was another reason, however, for her imminent arrival to the station, at least in the mind of her commander.

As the docking seals hissed and synched into place, Cassandra Mayfield stood by the airlock with her pack draped over her shoulder, taking a moment to straighten the lines of her space black uniform. The light above the lock flipped from red to green and she stepped through into the roaring crowd.

The Kruytercorp crew under her command had told her that the space station was a wild and crazy place, but this, this looked more like the floor of an old-style stock exchange and alert status military base, crammed together. Uniforms, she found, seemed to be the exception rather than rule here with blue, black and green body sleeves, all with untold amounts of personalization, were everywhere. Her strange uniform, which was obviously not native to any of the service branches working here brought her any number of strange looks.

The sound in the docking area faded together in a roaring din that echoed in upon itself like an auditorium before a concert. It formed a kind of white noise in the background.

Negotiating through the wartime crowd, she set a course through the wavy sea of bodies around her. If she could follow the overhead signs, she hoped her efforts would deposit her near another docking port nearly halfway around to the other side. She wasn't sure how long it took her to make that route, but the relative peace and quiet of her ship was already calling her.

Then the crowd parted like clouds and there he stood.

"Alon!" she raised her voice. Hearing his name, he turned and his face lit up. He made three steps through the crowd and nearly swallowed her in a hug that would've shocked the folks back home with its unchecked familiarity.

"Look at you. You look great." He said into her ear.

"Do you always greet an officer this way, Corporal?"

"Sometimes," he laughed. "You'd be surprised what we can get away with in the RCES. How long do you have?"

"Not long. I have to report in for our situation briefing while the duckiest give me some extra warheads. How is everyone aboard *Hornet*?"

"Restless. I know all us Marine-types are going bonkers without something to do, especially Drop Kick. Coeur, too. We've been mainly watching at this point," he shook his head. "Things were looking pretty grim until you showed up. A real ray of sunshine, you were."

"Thank you. I'm just sorry that we couldn't arrive sooner."

"Don't be. I think you did just fine. I've never seen that many fishbone clippers at one place at one time. It's like an aquarium out there. We may have a real shot at pulling this off after all, largely thanks to you, Lieutenant Cassandra Mayfield."

"How did things go at Spires?"

Bonzo hadn't had time to share any details when he'd spoken to her over the comm. He'd called in every favor he could get, including the promise of several bottles of liquor, to get one the shuttle pilots to give him a ride over from *Hornet*. That meant that she didn't know any of the specifics of what had happened since their parting at Kruyter.

"Well, I'd be happy to tell you the whole story over dinner sometime, but suffice it to say that we got to see the enemy *really* up close and personal. It was quite a piece of business getting back here, let me tell you."

"Did you find the Alpha Bank?" It was sensitive question, fielded in the middle of crowd, but given the situation, it didn't seem to matter.

"Yep, but the Captain had to destroy it. Truth be told we weren't sure we were going to make it out of Spires, Coeur did what she thought she had to. Better to be safe than sorry on something like that."

"I would agree." She said. "Still, I would like to have known that the RC would benefit from its knowledge, given what it took to get it here. It is unlikely that the Federation will consider sending another."

"Then we'll just have to do our best without it." The Marine said. "First we have to get through this itty-bitty civil war we've gotten ourselves into. Everything after that is gravy as far as I'm concerned."

He looked at her a question forming in his mind.

"With respect, Cassandra, I have to ask – why are you joining our fight?" She raised a blonde eyebrow at that and he quickly continued. "Don't get me wrong, I'm glad you're here, but this isn't your government and the ship you have is a tin can. I would be lying if I said that our chances were good, even with the metal you brought."

"And you're wondering why a foreign officer would risk her life on a near-hopeless fight, is that it?" She said it with no trace of anger, merely the need to be clear. Her candor was refreshing.

"Uh, yeah."

"I'm surprised you have to ask, Alon, but I know you Marine types are all brawn, so I'll spell it out for you," she teased. "The enemy of my enemy is my friend, at least on the surface. Those animals on Lamda-3 were acting under the same direction as that fleet out there. That makes them my enemy in every conceivable way. Aubaine is the force opposing them, which tells me where my services are required."

"But it's not that simple, is it?"

She considered the Marine in front of her. He was surprisingly astute and canny at times. It was quality of his that she admired.

"No. What I told you was true. I owe you and *Hornet* a debt of honor. Where I come from, that debt tells me what have to do. If this battle is meant to be my last one, then so be it. I've always hoped that I would die in this uniform."

"Well, let's see if we can avoid that if at all possible." Bonzo said. "I'd hate for the reservations I made at The Vineyard to go to waste."

"Subtle, Corporal, real subtle."

"That's me in a nutshell, ma'am."

She glanced at her chronometer. She'd best get moving if she wanted to make her briefing.

"It's that time, isn't it?" The Marine asked.

"Unfortunately, yes. Duty calls."

He swept into another hug, this one tighter and even more personal.

Ah, what the hell, she thought, and as they parted she kissed him. Not a peck on the cheek, not a friendly good-bye, a kiss she knew he'd remember. He tensed at first, surprised at the gesture, but that lasted less than a second.

"See you at the victory party," she said and disappeared into the crowd.

* * *

Nearer to the system's primary, Gold Fleet made its final preparations. The enemy had defied them, put on a good show, but now the entertainment value had worn thin just as the mounting number of damaged ships and dead personnel had grown. The next time they went in, there would be no turning back. They would not stop until the enemy was destroyed or they no longer able to fight. It would cost them, but they'd always known that Aubaine would be their

single greatest challenge. Once the system fell, the Reformation Coalition would be truly and finally beheaded.

The battle train, which consisted of their two mammoth repair ships, refueling ships and seven mobile ordinance factories, as well as various transports, had set up a temporary base from which Gold Fleet could strike. Magazines were busily being refilled, spare parts distributed, and repairs effected. Ships were being sorted by whether they were now fit for guard duty or active line duty. Formations were reconfigured, fighters rearmed and all manner of the other minutiae that came with governing and maintaining a fleet of that size.

All the while, the ships were treated to a speech from their High-Technarch, though the antics of the old man did little to bolster the men and women with him on his Grand Endeavor. At times, the driving personality that had brought the Revolution to Aubaine's very doorstep was cool and collected, like a placid pool of water. Yet, between one sentence and the next, fire would seem to burn from his eyes as he began going on about destinies and ascensions, cleansing fires and dire punishment being handed down to the unfaithful. Those watching him on video instead of the audio-only feed couldn't help note that his hand was shaking at his side, going from a slight tremor when at rest to more pronounced as he became agitated. They would also note how much the man had seemed to age in the last three months. His excellent middle-aged good looks had withered. He'd lost weight and he looked more along the lines of a drug-user in the throes of an addiction than the Father of the Revolution.

As the ships of the fleet linked their computers together, information came shooting back and forth at the speed of light. Repair requests, requisition forms, personnel transfers, new orders, which were all very mundane and expected. There was, however, an incendiary charge that was forwarded as "eyes only" to the commanders of each of the key Oriflammen vessels in the fleet. It came directly from the Fleet Admiral's chief of staff aboard *Phoenix*. What they didn't know upon opening it is that every recipient had been carefully chosen. Those that were blind fanatics or devotees to Mestrovic's cult of personality were purposefully excluded.

In it was a simple order that read:

DO NOT ACT UNTIL ORDERED TO DO SO. NO EXCEPTIONS.

The file contained a video recording and a list of names.

* * *

Gold Fleet was on the move again, the sensor network dutifully reported to FleetCom, bringing the conflict inexorably to its conclusion. Harassing forces were dispatched as before, the enemy would not be taken twice. They moved slowly, clearing the way so that they could arrive unmolested at their appointment with Hammer's forces.

It was no secret to anyone that this clash would be the deciding factor in the conflict. The Reformation Coalition might stand or fall depending on their combined actions in the coming day. Where that might have weighed upon some, a large percentage of the defenders were Aubani. The head-in-the-clouds attitude that so many scorned or mocked gave them the positive outlook on the battle they so desperately faced. The arrival of reinforcements had buoyed their spirits and that bubbled over throughout the fleet. They were looking towards a new dawn that they themselves would create with anticipation.

Hammer could feel it in on the CIC of *Kukulcan*. It was electric and crackling in the air. If there was even the slightest chance they would win the day, it would be this fleet that would earn it. One-by-one, the ships of Alpha, Beta, Delta and Omega Squadrons reported their readiness. This time they would let the enemy come to them instead of going out to meet them. When the time was right, Delta Squadron would make its appearance and the empty gaps in the other squadrons would be filled. It was a gamble, but it was the best they could make given what was at stake.

"Incoming message, Admiral," John reported. "It's from *Thunderchild*, sir."

"Let's see it."

The main viewscreen switched from a representation of the system to the bridge of the clipper. Ritter's head and shoulders appeared larger-than-life. It was often said of this man that he was a firebrand. Lathrop knew that was something of a misnomer. His former XO from the most

celebrated ship in the Reformation Coalition's history was a wellspring of deep feeling, a kind and honorable man hiding beneath a sometime brash exterior. When it came to taking care of business he was a pit bull unchained. That was the side of the man that most people saw, and today the enemy would get to see it too.

To Hammer's eyes, he looked like a prize-fighter waiting for the bell to sound.

"Pat," Hammer said. "I'm glad you called. What's on your mind?"

"Well, before we light the fuse on this puppy, I just wanted tell you that it'll be an honor to ride with you into battle, Sean."

"Likewise," Hammer said. "Just try to contain your enthusiasm. Try not to let it get the best of you, okay? Leave some of the enemy for us."

"Who me?" Ritter feigned innocence. It was that exact response that had earned him his RCES taccode. The CIC erupted in laughter, which, by silent agreement between the two friends, had been its purpose.

"Lead By Example, sir," Ritter said, quoting the motto of the long-lost *Ashtabula*, the ship that had forged their friendship and created legends. His hand went to a pair of drop wings on his uniform, the only pair left in existence. The insignia bore the device of a golden eagle rising into the stars above Aubaine, its wings sweeping majestically out into space. In its right talon, the eagle clutched an olive branch, in its left, a two-edged sword.

"Lead By Example," Lathrop answered, lifting a black fatigue cap to his head that bore the same symbol in color. Below the phoenix-like eagle was the word: CAPTAIN.

Those simple gestures summed up what needed to be said. Those that watched looked on with something like awe. It was a vivid reminder of who it was that led them into battle.

"Good hunting, hoss," Ritter said.

"Godspeed," Lathrop said. "*Kukulcan* out."

* * *

Boris Seitzmann had taken it upon himself to assign his Marine contingent to repair duty aboard the wrecked destroyer, *Roland The Great*. The venerable warship had found itself on the receiving end of *Apollo's* Meson cannon and only a fluke of luck had carried her away from the trio of *Aurora's* that very nearly ended her. It was not mistake that she had been assigned to mind the battle train while her sisters went off to war, or that the Sergeant Major had decided to use her as a platform to launch Operation Unchained.

He would have to wait until Gold Fleet was well out of range to begin. When it came time to board that transport, the one with the fiery paint job, and liberate the men and women on The List, he couldn't afford another ship interdicting them or interfering. Gaia only knew what Mestrovic's personal guard would resort to when his team started to board. The Lord High Technarch would've placed his most ardent supporters in that post, Seitzmann was sure. They would not go easy. If they guessed who he was, it was possible that his wife and brother would be the first ones they lined up against the bulkhead.

He would have to be resolute. Nothing could stop him if this madness was to be brought to a halt. What happened after that? That was in the hand's of God and the universe.

Roland's Captain, had already found his recent missives from *Phoenix* most interesting. He would cover the boarding crew with *Roland's* batteries. The relic battle dress was already being readied. His hand-picked team were keeping track of the time with steady eyes on their chronometers. It would be a few hours before they could spring into action; it was going to be all broken glass and nerves until then.

One way or another, the chains of Mestrovic's tyranny were going to come off, and then there would be reckoning.

* * *

The heavens were on fire.

The stars themselves seemed to burn with the discharge of Meson fire, the fury of the missiles, the brilliance of lasers, the tenacity of striking space fighters. Every unit that that could

be accounted for in the enemy fleet was now committed to the battle at hand, Oriflammen and Solee alike. It was the most intense naval battle that Sean Lathrop had ever seen.

On the CIC of *Kukulcan*, Hammer was the calm at the eye of the storm as the battle unfolded around him. What his forces lacked in numbers, they made up for in cunning. The enemy had decided to throw themselves upon him. He was already manipulating the situation, a subtle shift in formation here, a repositioning of units there. Soon Delta Squadron would be the hammer to his anvil.

Deep down, however, Lathrop knew that something was amiss. Many of the larger units were still laying in for all they were worth, but the smaller units were proving gun-shy. The addition of the Solee, now fully engaged in the fight, was something at odds with many of the smaller Oriflammen units which now seemed reluctant to engage with the same ferocity. Was a fleet this size too cumbersome in the modern day for all their units to engage with the same zeal?

Or was it something else that stayed their hand?

His instincts told him that it was a result of currents running through Gold Fleet, of which he knew little. Even the captured Captains had proven extremely tight-lipped about what was going on over there.

Once again Sean Lathrop thanked whatever higher power watched over Aubaine. Had the enemy pursued him once with all their might from every quarter his cause would've been lost. As it was, there was some group that seemed willing to give him a reprieve for one reason or the other. He was quick to oblige them and cling jealously to that slender thread of hope.

On the main tactical display, Hammer watched as his stratagems came to fruition. He was giving just enough ground to turn their flank. *Golden Flame*, ever the brute, came in blazing and lethal.

That's it...they're taking the bait.

"Signal *Apollo* and Beta to fall back now," he said to John. "Give Delta the green light to engage."

"Yes, sir. Message away."

* * *

From behind the bright disk of Aubaine, Delta Squadron came soaring into the battle like a flight of eagles, *Thunderchild* at the fore. Where only a rag-tag band had defied them before, now dozens of ships, some of them born into the system by the *Auroras* and *Maggart*, appeared before the eyes of the enemy.

Those with a knack for subterfuge and timing in the enemy camp saw the trap they had fallen into immediately. The ships that had only a moment before seemed broken and panicked in full flight, now righted themselves, redoubling their efforts with renewed fire as the new arrivals roared in like shining cavalry.

The fighters and small fighting craft arrived ahead of Delta Squadron with a raking pass on the Solee lines before the warships behind them opened up with a coordinated Meson broadside. A swarm of missiles followed to cover the fighters' exit.

Crown Prince succumbed immediately, her reactor going critical as a particle-level event of decaying Mesons from *Thunderchild's* main battery materialized directly in her heart. Her death throes severely damaged her nearby sisters, *Falconer* and *Hand of Justice*. *Falconer* fell out of formation, her hull melted away in places as though she were afflicted with a pox of flame. *Justice* fared the worst of the two, surviving her sister's destruction only to be finished off by a concentrated attack by the SDB *Valley Forge* and the corvette *Lirgishkhunan*.

Many of the other Solee ships and their nearby Oriflammen collaborators groaned under the sudden appearance of so many ships savaging their flanks. They were unprepared for the attack, but now the Solee military ethic and discipline began to shine in contrast to the amateurs among the Oriflammen.

Follow up salvos began to meet with a greater density of defensive saturation fire. Counter missiles were launched. In mid-flight, the carriers *Exarch*, *Crown of Stars* and *Imperator*, recalled their fighters and sent them out to counter the new threat. The lasers of the *Kinunir*-class cruiser, *Glorious Reign*, and destroyer, *Tharn Hudanizan*, were already slashing into the ranks of Delta Squadron. Many more followed suite, spurred on by their sisters at arms. It was to be a

clash between elite units, both representing a top cut of their respective navies. It would be the master's duel.

In a very short amount of time, the largest naval battle in the Coalition's short history had amplified in scope and grandeur.

And it was far from over.

* * *

Captain Gaylon Fox sat comfortably in his command chair, the very model of focused control, of directed calm. It was a challenge to remain in one place for hours on end staring at repeater displays and waiting to bring your full faculties to bear at a moment's notice. To Fox that was merely part of his job, and he made it look easy. For someone about to strike down a star nation and decide the fate of millions of lives, he looked the same as any other time he'd been on the bridge during his tenure of command aboard *Royal Vengeance*.

The cruiser had not precipitated in with her sister ships or the rest of the fleet, nor fired one shot in the battle that she'd watched from a distance on passive sensors. *Royal Vengeance* had been in the system almost a week now along with her silent escorts, *Divine Right* and *Sovereign's Orb*. They had exited Jump Space to the far fringes of the system where the Aubani sensor network was threadbare or wholly non-existent. For nearly a day the three ships had redlined their drives building up as much speed as possible so that they could pursue a ballistic course across the vast expanse of megameters to the planet. With no power signatures to betray their presence, they were all but invisible as they coasted through the system.

Gold Fleet had the foe's attention diverted in space, all the while death was coming to stab them in the back. Fox had mused that his ship might have been more accurately named *Royal Assassin* considering the nature of her mission, though her existing designation suited matters just fine.

Royal Vengeance had been slated for this mission since the inception of this charade of an alliance. Her speed, mobility and firepower, coupled with her advanced and upgraded systems had made her an ideal choice. But it was her master and commander that had caught the attention of Admiral Monique Alcantara when she had developed the plans for Operation Tempest.

It was a bold plan even for the late Admiral. It also deserved the label 'decapitation mission' more than any other operational plan Fox had seen. The Solee commando cell had been biding its time on the planet for more than six months now. The only time they'd been tapped at all had been during Zorn's pet project to extract August Delpero. After that, they had melted into the masses, lying low so they could get close to Aubaine's lifeline.

The key to the operation had been unsealed from the ship's vault and distributed among the drop troopers. They had only to link up with a sleeper cell once the walls were down and the planet Aubaine would be removed from the grand stage in a very spectacular and permanent fashion.

It was with no small sense of pride that Gaylon Fox knew that he'd been the one to retrieve the silver bullet. He had risked it all that day amid the debris and vacuum of Barnet, and now the dividends that gamble would yield would be astronomical.

When that blow fell, the farce of a Solee and Oriflammen alliance could be finally cast aside like the lie it always was. The Empire could then continue its ascension to dominance without interference or rival.

It all started today.

* * *

Coeur D'Esprit sat in her customary pilot's couch just as she'd done the last few days. The battle raged on the far side of the planet and *Hornet* had not been in it all – which was good. The intense combat over there was pushing warships to their very limits; it would make short work of her ship.

It wasn't boredom she was feeling at that moment, quite the opposite, she was very much alert. After everything *Hornet* had done, everything she had endured to come to this point, it was

odd to stand aside and watch as a spectator to events that would determine their fate. It had stung a bit to watch Ritter and his Delta Squadron power up and head towards the battle while she remained behind.

Initial reports were encouraging. It looked as though *Thunderchild* and the others were cutting a bloody swath through the Solee and their ranks. The battle was still any one's game, however, and that was never very far from her thoughts. If things went poorly *Hornet* and the small detachment of second-tier ships would be all that was between the planet and the Revolution of Oriflamme. It was a sobering thought.

Raven's holographic face appeared on the ship's comm. Confusion and concern were both worn with equal severity.

"What is it?"

"We've got a problem, a big one. I'm monitoring some frantic comm traffic groundside, Red. It appears that one of our ground control stations is under attack."

"What?"

"I heard what sounded like small arms fire in the background, an explosion and yells. Now it's just static," she said grimly. "There's no response."

Wheels began to turn in Coeur's head. It was one thing to put saboteurs in place ahead of time, but quite another to assault a military installation during a time when it would've been at full ground alert. If they were willing to do that, there must something worth taking – something worth the risk.

"Which ground station?" she said quickly.

"Checking," Raven looked off screen, her eyes growing in horror. "Oh god, Coeur, they were locked into the orbital defense for this side of the planet!"

Coeur felt her heart freeze in her chest. They could launch their own warheads against Omega Squadron, or worse the planet's surface. There were two platforms on the night side, each of them bristling with nukes and X-ray laserheads.

"You and Newton override the platforms. Lock them out! Do whatever it takes," Coeur said and Raven nodded. "Sixer, advise *Altinak* of the situation..."

"*Ee'Ka'a PooEE!*" Sixer burst out before she could finish. "Sir, I'm reading an explosion on the planet!"

"At ground control?"

"No, at the Hyperion Power Station," he said as two more explosions went off kilometers away from each other. "There's another one! And another! It was two of the main data nodes for this hemisphere, sir."

"Data nodes," she said the word. Hearing herself say it seemed almost alien to her ears. She could understand the power station as a target, but data nodes? There had to be literally dozens of strategic spots on the planet with more military value than data nodes. The planet-wide infonet might falter, but that was hardly decisive at a time like this. They had been perfectly timed to go off within mere seconds of one another, and that meant a high degree of coordination, which also meant professionals were at work.

All of that went through Coeur's head in less than three seconds. As Sixer advised *Altinak* of what they'd found, three more explosions went off, this time at three different transmission towers, two of which were civilian broadcast stations.

"What in Gaia's name is going on down there?" Sacha Po said on the main viewscreen, sitting in *Altinak*'s CIC. "Why are they going after civilian targets? Wouldn't they be better served hitting PDM silos or more orbital platforms?"

"I can't say for certain, Boots," Coeur said, "but they're being too specific and coordinated for them to be random attacks to throw people into a panic," Her thoughts were racing, trying to make sense of the pattern before her, "which means that if they aren't meant to cripple our forces or create mass confusion then...they must be doing it to clear the way for someone, or something."

"Ground troops?" Po offered. "I'd think they'd wait until they cooked our fleet before sending more people down there."

"They've already got people down there," Coeur replied. It was working to talk this out with Po. They needed to make sense of the situation, and fast. "Apparently, there are dozens of them at various locations. I doubt they could manage more than a few strike teams at this point,

so it would be pointless to drop an army down there until they've taken the stars. They already have teams in place, so their targets tell me that they are clearing the way for something coming from the outside."

"But what?" Po pondered as seconds ticked by. Then it struck her. "I have an idea, Coeur. I need *Hornet's* eyes and ears for it."

"What do you mean?"

"You said yourself that they are waiting for something. Taking over that platform leaves a gap in our lines on the side of the planet where our forces are thinnest. They might be trying to sneak a ship in through that gap. Maybe park it over the capitol and force a ceasefire or something like that."

"So where do we come in?" Coeur said.

"I'm going to switch our sensor drones over to active sensors and scan the area for any ships we can't see. I think we both know that just because we can't detect a ship doesn't mean it isn't out there," Both women's thoughts went to the ambush at Carlyle. "*Hornet's* got the best sensors of anyone here, so I want you to switch over on my mark."

"Roger that, on your mark." Coeur said. It was always a dangerous game when you played with actives in an unknown situation. If it was worth it to do so, it could be a godsend. If not, it could, and probably would, be a death sentence. Omega Squadron was firmly rooted with Aubaine at its back, so maneuvers would be much more limited than in deep space. If someone wanted to know where they were, it would be difficult if shooting started, especially if they now had access to a ground tracking station.

"Coeur," Raven said, her image reappearing in channel display. The young woman looked as though she'd just stared into the Pit itself. "I've analyzed the sites they've hit, about a dozen in all. I see why they chose those targets, but I can't understand how any sane person would even attempt something like this."

Both Sacha and Coeur caught the incredulous, yet ominous note in the intelligence officer's voice.

"Like what?" Coeur prompted.

"They've just blown all the security interlinks between most of the Major hubs on this side of the planet. The dividing walls that keep those systems bottled up are currently down. If they bridge those security gaps, they could inject a live strain of Virus that would have no trouble reaching nearly every critical system on the planet. Those they couldn't reach through the hard lines could be accessed wirelessly through the broadcast stations. There would be no stopping it at that point."

"*Good God!*," Po said. "Are you serious?" It was a rhetorical question, there could be no mistaking what Raven meant. Coeur felt light-headed.

Virus had been the worst catastrophe in human history. The number of dead from the spread of Virus was over a trillion, unburied on a thousand ruined, lifeless worlds. It had scoured whole sectors of space clean of life, and left many more to wither on the vine to die slowly in agony and darkness. It was the greatest enemy imaginable to Humaniti, or any sentient race. It was the Bane. It was the Scourge.

The idea that someone might attempt to weaponize a strain of Virus and willingly throw human beings into its path was practically unthinkable. What kind of mind would even conceive of such a thing now knowing its unthinkable potential? It stunned the senses. It staggered the mind. Coeur fought against the surging tide that threatened to lock her down.

"That's what they are waiting for, Boots," she said. "A ship bearing Virus."

"Switch to actives now!"

Hornet, and every other ship in her proximity went to active sensors, along with the host sensor drones. The overlapping envelopes of their combined arrays immediately nailed the three ships bearing down upon them like silent birds of prey. Coeur swore under her breath as she recognized the rounded delta profile of the *Kinunir*-class ship. The other two were modified *Fiery*-class escorts by the look of them.

It's him. It's got to be. He could get in this close, despite the statistics that say it should be impossible.

Having been pegged by enemy sensors, the three ships powered up, their running lights, engines and weapons coming to bear. *Hornet's* computer matched the emission signatures from the *Kinunir*, making a positive identification.

Royal Vengeance.

That's when the enemy ships began to open fire.

* * *

Lieutenant Commander Darmane sat at her weapon's station busily acquiring firing solutions. She might be acting as the ship's XO while Jamar was away, but no one could set up a broadside or direct the laser crews like she could. Right now they were too far away to be effective with the two 700-mj lasers, but the gap was closing with every second.

"Well sir, it looks as though the shooting gallery consists of a Scout/Courier, a *Beowulf*-class free trader, two *Jayhawk*-class far traders and old *Magellan*-class survey ship," she said, designating each target. "They really did a hatchet job on that modified *Magellan*, sir. Her profile is way off for her class and she appears to be missing some tonnage in the aft section of her hull."

"Not one true warship among them," Fox mused. "What have we got on those two *Jayhawks*?" He could see the question in Darmane's eyes as he spoke.

"Well, come on, out with it. What's on your mind?"

"Captain, do you really think that *she* is one of them out there?"

"Can we afford not to know?" he returned. "To answer your question, though, it would only be fitting if Captain D'Esprit was over there. It would certainly make things interesting, in that special Chinese curse kind of way."

"Um yes, sir." She keyed in queries to her computer panel. Data began cross-referencing, updating and indexing."

"At any rate," Fox continued. "Our first priority is to deliver the package to the ground teams regardless of who is standing in our way. Blaze us a path through this rabble and bring us into a close orbit. I want those capsules deployed ASAP. Signal *Divine* and *Orb* to coordinate strikes with you."

"Yes, sir."

Someone over there had figured out his merry trio was on the way before the curtain was supposed to officially go up on *Tempest*. All they would've had was a few seemingly random explosions to go on. The only truly sensitive target the commandos would've hit would've been the local weapon's platform controls. If they had deduced that a ship was creeping into their midst, they have similarly guessed why.

Is that you Captain? Has God and Fate set us against each other once more? There are no coincidences in this universe my dear lady, none at all.

The information he requested was piped discreetly to one of his chair displays. Both *Jayhawks* were greatly customized and departures from their original class specifications. Only one of them had displayed a much greater than normal active sensor flare. Only one of them had the distinctive sculpted airfoil and sensor dampening skin.

Ah...so it is you, Captain. You know why we're here, don't you? How fitting that you should finally fall defending your beloved Aubaine. This is how it was meant to be.

He leaned forward in his seat, his gaze moving to the tiny red blip on his targeting grid.

When they ask me about this day, I will sing your praises. I will tell them how you were brilliant to the last and that you died a death worthy of the life you lived. I will give you the greatest gift anyone could ask for in this life. I will make you immortal.

"Well Lieutenant Commander, I believe you know what our first target should be."

"Yes, sir," Darmane said, targeting brackets appearing around *Hornet's* tactical icon. "I do."

* * *

The Marine boarding craft had detached itself hours before and began lazily drifting in the direction of the mystery transport.

It had taken an aching slow time to get this far without raising the transport's sense of danger. A boarding craft full of Marines in relic battle dress was certainly enough to do just that. The situation weighed on him like an anchor, not only for the lives that might be lost when he finally attacked, but also for the lives that were being swallowed up even now as the battle raged in space many light minutes away. He steeled himself with the knowledge that Mestrovic's attention had to be totally focused elsewhere for this to work. That was cold comfort for the Sergeant Major as the disguised shuttle drifted closer to its target.

Boris Alexander Seitzmann was a man of principle, which had ultimately been to his detriment during this whole sordid escapade. The wife and brother which were imprisoned on the transport outside his viewport had been victims of this war long before the shooting had started, long before visionaries like Mestrovic and Hayward had proposed the ill-fated revolution to him.

Had the board of inquiry known what kind of monster they had unleashed six years ago? There were few things more dangerous than an enraged Marine that could afford to be patient. The seeds of his ultimate mutiny had been sown when the pilot had been given a reprimand, a mere *slap on the wrist*, for destroying, or ending, the lives of his thirteen passengers. It was gross negligence on the pilot's part, to say nothing of his inebriation, anyone could see that, except, of course, the corrupt Admiralty that was in bed with the DynaSol Corporation.

The Aubani pilot, as it turned out, had been the spoiled son of a Senior Vice President at Dynamic Solutions, who just happened to be a Major manufacturer of military goods on Aubaine, and a chief supplier to the RCES, RCN and RCMC. Seitzmann had read the technical reports on the accident, and all of the investigators had ruled it a case of pilot error. Miraculously, the board had ignored those recommendations and ruled that it had been due to a critical malfunction in the guidance system after they had launched an 'independent investigation' to determine the validity of the information. They came to the conclusion for which they were no doubt paid a princely sum.

That had been during the Dawn League days before its reorganization. Now the names of the government were changed, but the social elitism, graft and the collectively lofty, self-righteous attitude endured such changes. The system was still entirely comfortable discarding the lives of non-Aubani if it suited their fancy or ego. His brother Greg had suffered severe brain damage due to near-death oxygen asphyxiation. The ex-scout that had served two terms in the DLMC could no longer speak or care for himself. His wife, Liana, would spend the rest of her life confined to a chair as a paraplegic. They were write-offs by a government that believed that keeping good relations with a corporation outweighed the six lives that were lost and the seven that were wrecked beyond repair. Under a feudal technocracy, where the taps on technology are maintained directly by the government, such alliances were wholly unnecessary, and therefore unlikely to exist at all, much less of that magnitude. Nothing had so demonstrated to him the ugly underbelly of the Aubani system as that event, and it had festered and germinated within him until Commodore Hayward had shown him a way not only to avenge what had happened to him personally, but to act as an architect of a new order where corruption like that could be utterly eradicated.

If they had been smart, they would've found an excuse to cashier him. His actions at Trybec, Vezina and Adrian, however, had proved to the almighty brass beyond a shadow of a doubt that he was worth keeping in uniform. When it came time to deal with Spencer, he had volunteered, though this time in the direct service of Oriflamme. He had been part of the initial pacifying force that brought that system into the fold, and the first to set up the scout base and garrison there.

That had put him in a unique position, one which had drawn Hayward to him when he began his silent recruiting drive. And now, years of planning had been turned on its ear because the civilian arm of the operation had turned into a madman and a tyrant. The proof of that was sitting right in front of him. He checked the time and the range finder. It was time to go.

"Signal the *Roland*," he ordered. "Standby with the magnetics."

A burst transmission shot out to *Roland The Great*. The destroyer had been waiting patiently with its finger on the trigger. Now its active sensors solidified their firing solution on the little transport. There was no way the crew of that transport could miss being lit up like that. As it was intended, there was mass confusion aboard the prison ship as they found themselves

suddenly in the crosshairs of *Roland's* laser and missiles. The comm channels began to buzz with chatter, to which the destroyer gave no immediate reply.

In those moments of confusion and terror, the shuttle fired its grapnels, which lashed out and struck the transport's hull. A powerful series of winches reeled the shuttle in close in a matter of seconds, allowing it to hover over the transport's port airlock. A docking collar, specifically designed for forced boarding actions, extended from the shuttle forming a pressurized seal.

The Marine sapper rushed in as the hatch to the collar opened wide. Standing at the mouth of the chute, Seitzmann could see the entryway into the ship, sitting among the licking prominences of the flame mural. The sapper hooked his mini-comp into the interface, but a shake of his helmeted head told Seitzmann that the jailors had not left the door to the prison open for them.

"She's locked up tight, sir," the sapper said over the team channel.

"Cut her open," Seitzmann said immediately. "I cannot impress upon you enough the need for speed in opening that hatch, trooper. Kostas, Brenner, get in there and help him."

Less than a minute later, three military cutting torches were reducing the metal of the civilian transport to slag. It would take a while to get through the airlock in such a way as to not depressurize the compartment beyond. It was going to be close and nasty. Many of them were armed with knockout gas, but there would be no way to board the ship without the possibility of some of the hostages getting hurt.

He would take every precaution, gladly accepting risk to himself and his forces if it could be diverted away from the living leverage that Mestrovic had collected to hold over his officers. Thankfully, every one of his eleven-man team knew the score.

The sparks from the torches fell like a long river of shootings stars before winking out as they touched down.

It won't be long now, Boris old boy. You've got at least one more SAG. Don't screw it up. Do what you need to, no matter what.

* * *

Brierly Naval Air Station came alive amid the wailing of sirens and flashing lights. All eyes had been directed to the heavens and the battle taking place there. Every military installation on the planet had been on standby alert, and now Brierly had been brought into the fight.

A mass of pilots roused from their uneasy slumber, immediately zipping up flight suits, slamming lockers and snatching helmets from racks as they sprinted to their birds in the pre-dawn light with the *hold-nothing-back* attitude of a hot scramble. Mechanics were already on the field making their last minute inspections. Mobile fuel tanks and ordinance dollies went about their work of preparing and arming the fighters for immediate take off. CAT officers were already directing the alert fighter squadron to their runway in a whirl of their glowing orange light sticks.

The first wing of Black Bird fighters were just lifting off, the purple-blue of their engine flare lighting up the dark, as Lieutenant Martin "Midas" Goldstein reached his Cobra. He noted with interest the clutch of Thunderhead warheads being loaded under each wing of his plane by the missile tram. A trio of heavy ripper bombs was being attached to the hardpoints under the main fuselage.

We must really be deep in it if they're loading me up with those suckers.

Scaling the nose ladder in a few bounding steps, he settled into the tight confines of the cockpit. The ritual of strapping in and getting wired was the same as other team he'd taken "Betty" into the air, but something hung in the atmosphere of the airfield that wasn't quite fear or excitement. Was it expectation, or anticipation? It was hard to tell now that the adrenaline had kicked started his mind faster than a pot of coffee.

The canopy lowered and sealed into place as his helmet connections hissed their readiness, piping the rubbery smell of filtered air to him. His heads up display flashed, displaying the readiness of his fighter. She was pristine.

As the fuel lines and missiles carriers moved away to find another fighter, Midas turned to look at his wingman, who mirrored his own state of readiness.

"Firebrand, you ready to get this show on the road?"

"You know it, brother," there came a chuckle. "Bout time they asked us to save the day."

"We're fifth in the queue. Standby,"

"Roger that."

Midas looked down the row of non-regulation good luck charms below the pitch regulators. Practically every pilot that flew these skies had them. He passed over the fire-blackened ace of spades and feathered dream catcher. He settled on a black sphere hanging from a silver chain. Taking it in his gloved hand, he turned it where he could see the white circle that surmounted by the number 8. Next to the miniature eight ball was a 2D snapshot.

Two pilots, fresh from their planes, stood in the foreground upon a sun-drenched tarmac in a sideways hug. They were clad in their olive drab flights and sporting dark aviator glasses, smoke streaming off their lit cigars. The Brierly Communications Tower could be faintly seen in the distance set against a perfect blue sky. One of the pilots there was Midas himself, his face much younger four years ago in flight school than the one he saw in the mirror these days. The other was Lieutenant Eric "Eight Ball" Pool. Midas squeezed the totem tightly in his hand.

This one's for you, Eric.

The Tower gave them clearance to take flight. Less than a minute later, the two Cobras soared into the air to join their brothers and sisters in the defense of their world.

* * *

The Solee ships descended upon the thin line of defenders with a decidedly predatory character. Now that the feeble ships had revealed themselves openly, the Solee went about their work. *Divine Right* and *Sovereign's Orb* went on ahead to clear the way for their leader.

Missiles and lasers were projected forward into the startled formation. A heavy laser caught the nose of the *Beowulf* while an X-ray found her flanks. Hull plating boiled away under the onslaught. One of the *Jayhawks*, the one that *Royal Vengeance* had chosen to ignore in favor of her sister, took three direct hits and was nearly holed completely without having the chance to respond in kind, or so they thought.

A wing of Rampart fighters, already on CAP, came streaking across the *Divine Right's* lateral lines, as more fighters launched out of the survey ship. A large support laser also beamed in their direction from the converted mini-carrier. The Scout/Courier moved to cover the *Beowulf*, and, to the Solees' surprise, answered their missiles with a volley of her own. A nose-mounted laser reached out and tore open *Sovereign's Orb's* side like a searing scalpel.

Now each of the escorts had been marked, but their armor had been thickened, their hulls reinforced. They shrugged off their wounds and swatted aside the missiles to engage their foe's more closely.

Behind them, *Royal Vengeance* took aim at the other *Jayhawk* with its main battery. It seemed like overkill for the warship to focus its wrath on such a small, fragile target. Those officers aboard *Right* and *Orb* that had read the after action reports of Mexit, Spires and Phoebus knew why Fox wanted that ship destroyed.

The first shots went wide as the gunners got their bearings. The *Jayhawk*, however, responded by deploying sandcasters, a defensive feature that had been hitherto unknown and undiscovered in previous encounters.

From where Gaylon Fox sat it was that barrier of laser-refracting sand that saved the ship when their port 700-mj laser scored a devastating hit before their countermeasure had fully deployed. The running lights of the ship blinked twice then went out entirely. Further shots, however, proved ineffective against the greater-than-expected density that *Hornet* had somehow managed to produce.

"She's covered for the moment, sir," Darmane said across the bridge. "Shall I continue firing?"

It was a choice he knew he would have to make sooner or later. *Hornet* was crippled and out of the fight. It had only taken one solid shot, just as he always knew it would. D'Esprit couldn't play to her strengths this time, but *he* definitely could. His missile capacity was tied up with the drop capsules, so he couldn't fire his missiles until they were away. That meant he would have to rely on his lasers, lasers which *Hornet* was protected from at the moment. That protection

wouldn't last forever, however. The sand would dissipate away and then Coeur D'Esprit would be defenseless, assuming she wasn't already dead.

So, what was it going to be? A personal vendetta settled, or a completion of his mission? Was he *Royal Vengeance* or *Royal Assassin* today?

Assassin.

"No, concentrate fire on the other ships. Switch our secondary batteries to an anti-fighter role."

"Yes, sir."

"If *Hornet* so much as blinks, however, I want you to dedicate one of the main cannons to her, sand or no sand, understood?" Darmane nodded.

In space, *Royal Vengeance* moved past her nemesis with casual disdain and slid neatly into an orbital path. A trio of planetary defense missiles on the ground rumbled from their silos as the cruiser put itself into position. All three were cut down by heavy laser fire before they could hit their mark.

An aft hatch opened in the sleek hull and a continuous flow of drop capsules began to spill out behind the slip, their silver skin turning an angry orange red as they began the plunge into Aubaine's atmosphere. A duo of Ramparts dove at the capsules, their rapid-fire lasers blazing away. One of them even managed to destroy a trailing capsule before Darmane's batteries blotted them both from the skies.

The rest fell towards their pre-assigned drop points and the commando teams that awaited them. There were three Major spots that had been selected for the Viral insertion, the rest of the strikes had been meant only to open up information avenues and crosslink systems. It would only take success at one of those points for Aubaine to die in the throes of a first generation strain of Virus that would wipe itself out along with most of the planet.

Having delivered its apocalyptic cargo, *Royal Vengeance* then broke orbit, circling around in a wide arch, doubling back to bring a conclusion to long unfinished business.

* * *

They had been lucky, in relative terms. The external sandcasters had performed just as they were intended, but *Royal Vengeance* had fired just a hair before they were most effective. The sand had greatly diminished the laser bolt, but had not stopped it entirely. What remained collided with the laser-refractive paint with a glancing blow, allowing even less of the beam to transfer its energy into the hull. Even with that, the hit would've been enough to spell disaster, but *Hornet's* temporary armor foam soaked up the rest.

Yes, they had been lucky that the beam had shot away the Majority of their portside airfoil and mangled more than half of their maneuvering drive. The stress and overload that had gone coursing through the reactor and forced it into emergency shutdown.

In one pass, *Royal Vengeance* had rendered the ship inert without them even able to respond. This was the kind of stand up, face-to-face fight that *Hornet* had always sought to avoid, and one in which *Royal Vengeance* excelled.

The lights had blinked and then plunged them into darkness. All of Coeur's controls went down and her only light was that of the planet and the stars. Everything else was dead for a full minute before the emergency power kicked on, bathing everything in a blood-red light.

Coeur's hands went to the simplified holographic controls. No response.

"Crowbar, report!"

"Emergency power only, Red," Crowbar replied. "Maneuver drive's toast. I doubt we could pull more than .25G."

"Can you bring the reactor back online?"

"It'll take time."

On the tactical display the sensor feed from drones and ships told the tale. *Royal Vengeance* was coming about, her turn taking her right by *Altinak* and *Hornet's* crippled twin, *Kingfisher*, before they came around and finished the job.

"Time is of the essence," Coeur said. "You have minutes at most."

"Understood."

A status report came up on her display, showing her the damage. She felt a twinge in her stomach at the sight. They weren't quite a sitting duck, but close enough to one. At the moment, their lack of movement was a boon – it meant that they would gain the maximum advantage from the sand shield that was slowly drifting apart. The barrier worked both ways, however, preventing them from firing lasers back at their attacker.

Her options for continuing combat were limited now, but not completely gone. Even on emergency power they could fire The Stinger given its independent energy source, but only once, perhaps twice, before that was exhausted. Their internal missile tubes couldn't fire at the moment, but their external missiles, the five capital missiles with a dedicated MFD, could target and fire on their own. At the moment, however, their enemy was too close to other friendly units to risk firing those. They would have to wait until *Royal Vengeance* was in the clear to let those off the chain.

We've got to buy more time.

* * *

Raven's hands flew across her computer terminal as Newton backed her up. It didn't require a lot of power for them to continue their hostile takeover of the weapon's platform, but the connection had been lost for precious seconds that they were only now recovering.

She was now finding, however, that someone else was attempting to the same thing. It was the first time that Raven had attempted to hack a computer system in direct competition with another hacker. Whether it was one of the Solee ships, the assault team occupying the ground control station, or someone else entirely, she didn't know. Whoever they were, they were good.

It was doubtful that her opposite number had a Hiver with such a keen knack for code-breaking. Newton was tearing down walls and overriding barriers as fast as they were being built. That left Raven able to assault the security system itself, with which she was very familiar. There were passcodes and protocols he possessed that become weapons in her arsenal. Raven had to figure that the other hacker was probably in close contact with the ground team, which would give them direct access to the installation's facilities and physical hardware.

That would leave the platform's computer with a decision to make. Did it believe ground control was its ultimate master, or an outside signal with greater authority? It was an argument that was playing out with algorithms, code and haste.

It was an argument they couldn't afford to lose.

* * *

Crowbar and Vega Zorn worked furiously in the engine room to restore power. It would take some coaxing to get the power plant fully into working order, but as his Captain had pointed out, that was the one luxury they didn't have. It was almost as if Crowbar could hear each tick of the clock going off in his head like a thunder crack.

Zorn, he'd found, had proven to be a great boon down here. He needed an extra pair of hands to breathe life into the ship, and she'd shown the same kind of proficiency in his quarter as she had at black ops or skippering a starship. Some part of his mind had to marvel at a space hand with that level of versatility. On one hand, it was a shame that they had decided to keep her aboard *Hornet* when she should've been in command of a ship of her own. But, if high command had overlooked her chequered past, then she wouldn't be here now. On that score, at least, he was thankful that fate had placed her here. Their task was not an easy one.

It wasn't quite like bringing the reactor up from a cold start. The fires had been stoked, they just needed to be reawakened. There was also the added complication of the reactor shielding. The force of the blast hadn't hit the reactor directly, but it had twisted and stressed the ship in a dozen places, including the protective wall that kept the radiation of the core safely bottled up. It wasn't as bad as he'd seen before, but it was bad enough to make bringing it back online potentially hazardous. Together, the two of them had applied a patch to the lining to keep it in place. It would only be a temporary measure, but it would have to do. It would take a yard slip

to truly fix what was wrong, and Crowbar intended to make sure *Hornet* survived long enough to see that eventuality.

"Okay," he said over their vac suit comm, "I think we're as ready as we can be. Let's see if we can strike a spark."

His hand came down on the plunger to initiate the start-up sequence as Zorn monitored the reaction. Lights strobed a warning in the compartment.

Nothing.

"Okay, take two."

Again nothing.

Come on darling, you've never let me down before, and I really need you right now. I know it hurts, but you're not out of the game. Show me you're still in there. Show me a sign...

"Third time's the charm."

At first there was darkness, but then power flickered on for less than a second, before blinking out.

That's it. Come back us. I know you can.

More flickers, this time in the form of three staccato one second bursts.

That's when Coeur came on the intercom.

"Zorn, Gyro isn't responding in the laser turret. Check her out."

The Marines were engaged in damage control in the cargo bay and upper level. Every one else couldn't afford to leave their stations either through necessity or a need to be there the moment the power came back on. She was meant to be the extra hand, but her hands were full at the moment. The ex-space pirate looked over at Crowbar who nodded.

"Go ahead. I can take over from here."

Zorn headed for the door, sealing the hatch behind her.

Hornet was now solely in the hands of the man who knew her best. If anyone could get her back in the fight, Crowbar could.

* * *

Zorn double-timed it through the long cargo bay, dodging past equipment like an obstacle course. Fires had sparked inside the compartment, rising in jagged pyramids here and there, their orange and yellow flames combining with the bloody red light overhead to make the largest space aboard *Hornet* seem like a scene from Hell.

The ship had unfortunately been under atmosphere when the attack came with no time to get everyone into protective gear. Zorn had hers on due to her engine room assignment, but some members of the crew, including her Captain, hadn't fully suited up yet.

The Marines were battling the blaze with wild abandon. The two lthklur were standing so close to the flames as to almost be in them as they fired jets of white chemicals to smother the fire. Drop Kick and Mercy were clad in battle dress, hosing down a weapons rack whose ammunition bin was dangerously close to the flames, while Bonzo and Whiz Bang were directing the ship's internal fire suppression system.

Zorn couldn't stop to lend a hand. She sprinted through the scene with flames licking at her heels at times until her long strides had taken her across the compartment's entire length, negotiating hatchways until she came to the sealed laser turret.

Palming the admittance key, Zorn was greeted with silence. Tripping the manual release lever, she reached into the panel and began turning the corkscrew shaped bar in a whirling blur. Slowly, the hatch opened, centimeter by centimeter, until it was large enough to poke her head through.

Hornet's XO lay inert at her firing station, her hands still at the controls and her head lolling heavily to the side. She wore the Majority of her vac suit with the exception of her gloves and helmet, the former laying on side panel and the latter still racked on the back of her chair. Her flight restraints, Zorn noticed, were not cinched down all the way to protective tightness.

"Gyro?"

Predictably, there was no response. Zorn disconnected her glove from the metal socket and placed it on the other woman's neck, seeking a pulse.

It was there, but faint. Her hand slipped to Gyro's chin, turning her head and revealing the reason for her silence. An ugly wound at her left temple had bled down her face, probably as a result of hitting her headrest at a hard angle when the laser struck.

Zorn quickly hooked her arms under the woman's armpits and drug her out of the turret. Walking backwards as fast as she dared, with Gyro in tow, dragging her heels, Zorn made her way to the sick bay.

As she arrived at her destination, she found that the door was similarly jammed, which led to another round of pumping and turning. The skin of her hands was starting to wear and friction burn, but she ignored it. The door cranked open a bit, and a set of eyes appeared behind them.

"Finally," Physic said. "The door's been jammed, and I couldn't get it open from in here. The comm hasn't been working, either."

"Gyro's been hurt," Zorn said. "I'm not sure how bad."

"What happened?"

"Looks like a head wound, possibly a concussion or worse," Zorn said as she opened the door enough for Physic's small frame to step through. The doctor knelt by her patient where she lay on the deck.

"How bad is it?" Zorn said in a strained voice as she worked.

"Not great," Physic said. "She was hit hard enough to be rendered unconscious. Gyro's not exactly the delicate type, so it must've slammed her pretty hard. We could be looking at skull fracture. Help me get her onto one of the beds."

Between the two of them, they placed the XO on one of the medbeds and strapped her down. Physic was already bringing instruments to bear on the injury.

"You might want to get into your suit, doctor," Zorn said as she turned to go. "As soon as the power comes back on, Coeur's probably going to drain the atmosphere."

"Where are you going?"

"To man Gyro's turret," she replied. "We'll need it."

"Thanks," Physic said, nodding to Gyro. "She wouldn't have gotten here on her own. Good job."

"Don't mention it, doc," Zorn said as she hit the door running. "I aim to please."

* * *

Royal Vengeance made her long turn out of orbit in time to spot a combined group of Cobra and Black Bird fighters slicing through the formation of their drop capsules in free fall. The cruiser had dropped nearly three dozen of those capsules and now a full half of their number had been destroyed before they could reach the ground.

Though *Royal Vengeance* was on her way out, she directed her fire into their formation. It had proven enough of disruption to ensure that the rest of the capsules made it through. Anti-aircraft fire had claimed a few more as the Virus-laden special agents had fallen from the sky, but what remained, the ones that would actually touch down, would be more than sufficient to the task.

Gaylon Fox knew the men that were leading the expedition, and their service record for pulling off difficult operations like this were the stuff of legends in the Empire.

Turning away, the cruiser now directed her batteries to aid her besieged sister, *Divine Right*. The close escort ship had been plagued by *Altinak's* fighters, though she had hewn their number down. The fighters managed to take some of the heat away from their mother ship, leaving the heavy laser free to target the agile escort itself. One battery had even scored a glancing hit on the *Fiery* that had rendered her missile barbette inoperable. The match, until this point, was undecided until *Royal Vengeance* cleared for action.

The cruiser started off by finishing off *Kingfisher* as she began her pass. The far trader exploded in a bright fireball that left only glowing debris and escaping gasses to mark to the passing of a starship and crew. It was unknown whether or not any escape pods were able to jettison. With one target destroyed, the cruiser turned her attention towards the converted carrier.

The main battery of *Royal Vengeance* scored two hits as well as a third with her secondary lasers. The lasers passed through *Altinak's* lightly-armored hull with relative ease, carrying all the way through its battered hull and destroying one its launch bays. Large spaces of *Altinak's* hull were empty, however, with all of its fighters now in space. The sudden attack wounded her, but didn't impair her ability to maneuver.

Outside of that tight engagement, *Sovereign's Orb* was busily grappling with a tiny, persistent Scout/Courier that was hounding them with uncommon tenacity. The missiles the little ship fired reduced the other close escort's maneuverability as well as glitched her targeting systems. Her gunners were now firing by feeling which greatly degraded their accuracy.

Cyllenius was quick to take advantage of that weakness, using her unhindered maneuverability to occupy the spaces that were hardest to hit. The *Beowulf* free trader, *Hygelac*, added what fire support they could, though they received another strike from *Orb*, this time to her bow.

Deft and adroit as *Cyllenius* was, there was only so long that she could play the role of matador to *Sovereign's Orb's* raging bull. One of the escort's lasers finally found the courier, causing it to belch fire and gas out into space. All it would take now was for the *Fiery's* gunners to get their bead and it was over.

Her response was immediate. Firing her laser ahead of her, *Cyllenius* dove at the escort, spinning along her long axis, her wedge shape turning like a drillbit, so as to present an ever-shifting aspect to their gunners. Power spikes appeared on the escort's sensors as the courier red-lined its drives on a direct collision course.

Too late, they divined what the courier was doing, but their confusion and halted maneuverability sealed their fate. Lasers fired frantically at *Cyllenius*, but they couldn't stop her suicidal advance in time. The courier rammed the escort just as her drives went into critical failure.

Both ships disappeared in a funeral pyre of fire and light.

* * *

"Sir, *Sovereign Orb's* gone," the sensor officer reported as the ship disappeared from the display. That quickly-fading explosion had taken with it more than twenty Solee service members.

"I see that," Fox returned. "Helm, continue our turn. *Divine Right* should be able to mop up the rest."

Darmane had heard that exchange, but her attention was largely occupied. She had given the gunners their targeting priority, but had left them to carry out her orders. She was after a bigger prize than even *Hornet* and realized that she wasn't the only one.

The computer she was using to claim control of the weapons platform was part of the advanced Tech Level-15 system that had been installed after Second Mexit. It gave the ship a faster response time and carried out complex tasks with minimal effort. The only thing keeping her afloat in the race was her ability to automate responses and commands, leaving her space to give it her best hack. She had a line down to the commandos, which had helped considerably, too. The contest would've been over minutes ago if she hadn't had that particular ace up her sleeve.

It was apparent to her that the opponent she faced was anything but ordinary, which made the challenge that much more exhilarating.

"We're clear, sir," she heard the helmsman say. "The remaining fighters are breaking off."

"Good," the Captain said. "Then we have only one more piece of business here and our dealings will be done." Darmane could feel Fox looking over at her. "Give me a round of Rattlesnakes if you please, Lieutenant Commander. There's no sense in belaboring things."

She tore her eyes from the silent war she was fighting. "Yes, sir."

"I want to compliment the salvo at the point of impact with our main cannons. Can you finesse that for me?"

"Of course, sir."

"Wondrous," Fox said dryly. "Proceed."

A warning alarm sounded with a high-pitched wail that made a horrid vibration upon everyone's eardrums. That sound signified that something was using active targeting and had them locked. But where was it coming from? There were no more ships in the area.

No, she'd only been away for a second. How did they....

Darmane's eyes widened in horror as the computer hooked into the platform displayed the flashing message: ACCESS DENIED.

Beneath those words a message appeared in bold letters. It read:

OPEN WIDE.

"We're being painted!" Darmane said over the alarm.

"Evasive action," Fox roared. "Standby point defen...."

The planetary defense platform, which was little more than a heavy laser turret crowned with missile pods, oriented itself and fired everything it had. The laser sent a powerful beam straight in the direction of the nearest hostile ship, *Sovereign's Orb*. It struck her squarely in the drive section, tearing a ragged hole through her underbelly and out through her roof. Two missiles also peeled away from the swarm and likewise struck her solidly, tearing her open and leaving her in the lurch. The remaining fighters converged on her making a final pass before *Altinak's* laser struck her directly on the nose of her delta-shaped hull.

Secondary explosions bubbled to the surface along her skin, ripping her apart until the escort was overwhelmed and blew apart.

The rest of the missiles that had launched went hurtling through space towards *Royal Vengeance*. Point defense lasers fired, but there were just too many of them.

A rippling series of explosions detonated against *Royal Vengeance* with an earth-shattering force.

* * *

Seitzmann and his team had finally broken through the airlock on the transport and proceeded with the boarding. They'd fought through compartment after compartment with as much momentum as they could muster. Now the fanatics that were in control had gone and welded themselves inside the aft compartment, leaving his men to take the cutting torch to hatch. They now occupied a compartment full of crates and plastic bins brimming with datacrystals, photographs and hard copied transcripts.

The transport had tried to call for help, but Seitzmann had foreseen that. His shuttle had carried with it the most powerful jammer pod he could lay his hands on out of the fleet's stores. Smaller units had been magclamped on to her hull to prevent the word from getting out.

That's when the threats started. The intercom in the compartment buzzed on and a voice had started to speak, a tinge of desperation apparent in it.

"Stop what you're doing out there," it had said. "You probably know what we've got in here. So let's not do anything hasty. Get back on your shuttle and get out of here."

Seitzmann had answered, his voice altered through a voice-distorting filter.

"Open the door."

"Forget it," the man had said. "I have my orders."

"So do I."

"Don't play games with me!" he had shouted. "I've got someone back here with a gun to their head, and you don't want to have anything to happen to them, now do we? This one especially."

"Who is it? Is it my wife, my uncle, or perhaps my father or mother? You don't know who I am, so what are the odds you have a hostage back there that I care about?"

"Ha! If you didn't care about them you wouldn't be here. Don't call my bluff. You won't like the result."

"You're probably right. However, I can guarantee you two things, the first being that I *will* open this door if you don't open it for me. You won't keep us out. Second, if you start shooting hostages that won't make you and your men any less dead when we cycle you out of the airlock – slowly."

Silence had been his answer.

"You think about that." Seitzmann had said and then smashed the intercom speaker with his armored fist.

That had been an eternity ago. The security door was holding steady for now, but it was only a matter of time. They had exhausted every other method that could be applied in this situation, but to no avail. Cutting through had turned out to be the most viable option.

Now the only way forward was through.

* * *

Hornet's power plant came back online, thanks to Crowbar's expert ministrations, and Coeur immediately ordered it to the lowest level they could manage to work with their base systems. Among the things she'd ordered was the draining atmosphere from the ship. That would help if and when *Hornet* took another hit.

There was no mistaking that *Royal Vengeance* was coming for them, but if *Hornet* couldn't maneuver, she would play upon the misdirection that they were dead in the water.

Raven and Newton had bought them the time they needed with that missile strike, but the sensor feed she was receiving showed her that the damage had not been fatal. A large section of the *Kinunir's* starboard wing was completely gone, its edges smoldering like embers in a fire. The silken smooth lines of her hull on that side were pitted and marred, streaming debris and fuel behind it like blood from a wounded animal.

Royal Vengeance was not defeated, nor was she unable to fight. If the commander was still alive over there, he would rally his ship in moments. The time that the platform had bought them would be tight, and now it was spent. *Altinak* was too far away, *Cyllenius* and *Kingfisher* were gone and *Hygelac* was all but dead in space. *Royal Vengeance* was now their problem. It was now her fight to the exclusivity of all else.

If she was lucky, they wouldn't notice the surprise the Regent had given them. It was now deployed between the two ships and carried the designation of The Aegis. The unit was so large that it had had to be towed from the ground into space for them as it displaced almost half of *Hornet's* tonnage.

For now, the best thing she could do was to keep that cruiser off balance and confused to what was really going on.

"Snapper, fire the capitals and activate the Doppleganger II."

"Right away, sir."

A burst transmission from *Hornet* reached out into space and found the brace of five capital missiles where they floated in space. The computers digested the message, turning the instructions into action.

The transports had deposited them in Berth 57 along with the externally functioning MFD unit. Crowbar and Newton had gone to work building a framework that would keep the five warheads in one place. Onto this frame they mounted the MFD. It had been Coeur that had had the idea of creating a new Doppleganger decoy and fixing it to this missile rig. If they timed things right, it would give create a convincing illusion that the missiles had come directly from *Hornet* when the real *Hornet* was elsewhere.

Newton had taken it one step further and programmed Doppleganger II to emulate a snapshot of *Hornet's* drive emissions that was transmitted with the instructions, mimicking the battle damage they'd taken.

The missile rig had been more than half the size of *Hornet* herself when all was said and done. It, along with the Aegis, had to be ferried into orbit and positioned with care. Now it used the targeting information Snapshot had sent to seek out its target.

The five missiles lit their drives and rocketed away towards the recovering cruiser, each carrying an X-ray warhead of immense magnitude.

* * *

The bridge of *Royal Vengeance* was filled with an acrid curtain of smoke, smelling strongly of burning electronics and insulation gel. Everyone was in their vac suits, so the grey obscuring mass hovered just beyond their visors.

"Damage report," Fox said, bringing his hand down on the controls to clear the air. Fans began to ventilate the area. Crewmen with hand-held fire extinguishers were putting out the flames.

"Heavy damage to our starboard side, sir," Darmane said as the smoke began to cycle away. "Starboard lasers are gone, including the main. Heavy casualties in that area. Thrusters are sluggish on that side."

The warning alarm blared again and Darmane updated her plot. Five *capital* missiles were headed their way. Her attention went to her pre-set command for all lasers to switch to point defense.

"Incoming birds!" Darmane said with volume and control. "Sounding collision!"

A new warning alarm sounded through the ship, like a demon alarm clock pulsing with an urgent tone. That told everyone aboard to brace for a possible impact.

To their credit, the point defense crew reacted decisively. It was now that all the hours of rigorous drills their Captain had drilled into them paid off in spades. Two of the missiles were destroyed before their spectacular quietus. A third exploded, but its resulting X-ray laser missed the portside profile of the cruiser. The remaining two, however, struck her dead amidships, lancing through her armor with sickening ease. One wrecked her small craft bay and wiped out the better part of her active sensor capability. The other one wiped out a mass of avionics bays, along with one of her flight computers, coming within a few meters of striking a magazine. The force carried through one side and exited the riven starboard side, widening the wound.

Fox saw the damage readout on his personal display. The affected areas lit up in red, its fronds reaching into many places like a metastasized cancer. One of the last hits had shut down her fuel processing plant and her reactor had begun to fluctuate under the strain.

Royal Vengeance had just been mauled horribly, there was no doubt. She was a warship, however, and her base systems were still intact. She was a hurt tigress, dangerous no matter her condition.

"Damage control teams are getting into position, sir," Darmane reported. "Several of our backup systems have been smashed."

"Can we fire missiles?"

"Yes, sir," Darmane said after a downwards glance.

"Very well, return fire."

The sensor feed that she received was distorted, but the computer was now telling her that there were two RCS *Hornets* in the vicinity, one in the place where she'd been and one in the direction of where the capital missiles had appeared. The *Hornet* off their port side, the one behind the missiles, seemed to be limping about with obvious damage. The other was showing even less of a power signature, a drifting hulk like the *Beowulf*.

It seemed obvious that the *Hornet* that had fired the missiles was a decoy of some kind, though it was a convincing one. It couldn't be totally ignored, however, as it might harbor more missiles. Behind her, the Captain read her dilemma. It seemed safe to believe that the real *Hornet* was right where they had left her, but that ship had played upon their perceptions and assumptions before. It was possible they could've switched places without them noticing, or not. She could be trying to fool them with the illusion that she'd moved when, really, she hadn't budged at all.

Darmane felt a headache forming at her temples. That was the difficult part of facing an opponent like that – trying to contend with the double and triple-think possibilities without blinding yourself. It was such an exercise in frustration and confusion. Fox operated on that level as well, and arrived there a few seconds earlier.

"Fire the missiles ahead of us, to the point where she launched the sand," Fox said without a trace of doubt. "Target the remaining main cannon at the decoy."

"Yes, sir," she punched in the order and clearance to fire as ordered. "How do you know which one is the real *Hornet*?"

"I trust my instincts," Fox said, keeping his eyes on the display. "Besides, we are hedging our bets by attacking both. We'll shake loose the truth one way or another."

"Missiles away, sir," Darmane said, adding, "Targeting the drone."

The functional 700-mj laser missed on the first shot as the gunners found their range. The second shot was dead on and the false *Hornet* was destroyed in a very unremarkable explosion. The lack of fireworks told the cruiser's Captain that they'd hit something of considerably smaller mass than the far trader.

Unless Coeur D'Esprit had pulled another disappearing act, that meant that the flight of eight Rattlesnakes were heading towards the actual *Hornet*. All eyes on the bridge tracked those eight missiles as they closed to the target with blazing speed. It would take only seconds before the Rattlesnakes converted their energy into killing javelins of focused X-rays.

Closer...

"Detonation...*now*." Darmane said.

On the sensor plot, the missiles continued on their way, heedless of the fact that they should have exploded. The power level of each missile fell away sharply as their drives failed one-by-one.

"What the...!" Darmane stammered. "What just happened?"

"We made the mistake of leaving Coeur D'Esprit alive, that's what," Fox said icily. "If that's what I think it is, then missiles will be useless."

Hornet had named The Aegis after the magical shield of Pallas Athena, the goddess of war. There had been no telling what Delvin Garrett had payed for this particular piece of equipment, but now *Hornet* found that it had been worth every credit. The Aegis was nothing less than an independent nuclear dampener that had been fitted with maneuvering thrusters and heavily stealthed. At more than 90-tons, it was obviously an imperial artifact. Coeur had recognized the serial number even before she'd read the name on the list and knew what it was that been bestowed upon her. There had never been many of these floating around, even before The Collapse. Coeur knew that made it a gift of immeasurable value, particularly now. The missiles had attempted to fire and found that they couldn't, reducing their systems to slag and ruin. Further missiles would suffer the same fate.

The ramifications of the failed salvo filtered in to the Solee officer's head.

"Bring the main cannon around," Fox said, but Darmane was already on it, hands flying over the controls like a concert piano player.

"Sir!" the sensor officer yelled from his station. "I'm detecting an energy surge coming from *Hor...*"

It was at that moment that a tremendous beam of golden light issued forth from *Hornet* and struck the cruiser like the spear of Pallas Athena herself.

* * *

Crowbar was in full engineer mode, never ceasing his efforts, a flurry of movement as he went about his work. Despite her damaged state, *Hornet* was responding smoothly to his demands for power. Coeur had begun to move them off at the best speed they could muster, and Crowbar had actually squeezed a full half-G of acceleration out her mutilated drives.

Every other watt of power that could be directed was being diverted directly into the weapons, specifically the Stinger. Coeur might try to flicker The Aegis in order to get some missiles away, but their real hope now rested on the laser and the last vestiges of the sand barrier that swirled about them.

It wasn't much, but it was all they had.

There was a side-effect, however, of bringing the reactor back on line so soon. The more power it produced, the greater the reaction, the more radiation was stacking up into the compartment from the hastily patched leak. At the rate it was building, it would be some time before it was enough to penetrate his protective suit and cause him problems. If they all lived long enough for that to affect him, then it would be because he did his job.

It couldn't be helped. The Stinger needed power, and he was the one charged with sending it Zorn's way. From what he was able to glean over the combat channel, the first shot had struck *Royal Vengeance* good and solid, demolishing her forward section. She was still coming at them, and Zorn's second shot had missed by a narrow margin. That was costly

considering the limited number of times the Stinger could fire on its own, which only underscored once again his priority of pouring all of *Hornet's* juice into that relic laser.

Zorn hadn't trained on the system like Gyro, nor been involved in the Bulls-Eye program from the ground floor. Canny as she was, she didn't have the XO's grasp of the system. But, she had marked the cruiser hard on her opening gambit, and it was entirely possible that she would...

Hornet pitched and twisted like she was caught in the epicenter of a world-shattering earthquake. Crowbar had enough time to realize that *Royal Vengeance* had finally found his ship as he was picked up and tossed across the compartment like a discarded ragdoll.

Pain shot through his body as he collided with the bulkhead. Had the artificial gravity been online he would not have survived, but that had been shut off once the atmosphere had drained away.

At first he thought he was dead, but the pain was what told him otherwise. The ship hadn't exploded or vaporized under laser fire. They were still here, for the moment.

A quick glance at his main display told him that the shaky reactor needed to be propped back up, and fast. It was already holding by a hope, a thread and love.

Crowbar moved away from the bulkhead to return his duties. His years in space and his instincts immediately told him something was wrong. It was something in the way his zero-g movement wobbled that raised his mental alarm. A glance at his suit's forearm display told him that his suit had been compromised and was leaking atmosphere. Thankfully, it hadn't been enough for him to decompress, but he would have to bring the atmosphere in the compartment back up to patch the suit and continue his work.

A sickening feeling came over him, filling his stomach with a glacier. Slowly his hand slid over his chest, probing the damage that his limited field of vision couldn't see.

His hand went down, passing across his abdomen to an area the size of a dinner plate where the protective radiation lining of his suit had been completely stripped away.

* * *

Seven hundred megajoules of energy had transferred into the hull at a downward angle relative to *Hornet's* profile. It had entered through the top level, ripping through staterooms, but losing some of its killing power due to the laser refractive coating and the armored layers both of foam and metal.

The beam had continued down at an angle as it obliterated most of *Hornet's* starboard side, exposing her cargo bay to open space down its length. Splinters of metal and equipment exploded through the heart of *Hornet* like an overlarge fragmentation grenade. The Valiant narrowly escaped destruction. A few meters to starboard and she would've joined the processing plant and virtually all of the fuel tanks on that side of the ship. There was no fire, thanks to the non-existent atmosphere, no superheated gasses to expand with the heat and burst the hull like a balloon.

They had lived, but only because the blast had missed her vitals. It might have been the equivalent of a flesh wound, but Coeur knew better as lighted panels winked out around her and didn't come back on. The wound had been mortal and her face grew grey at the knowledge.

Hornet was dying.

Another shot like that and it would be over. Thankfully, the Marines had been strapped down in the crew's lounge when the strike had hit, otherwise battle dress might not have saved them.

The controls were sluggish, the ship felt leaden to her commands, but Coeur had long known how to compensate on instruments. Her evasions, such as they were, had kept the gunner crews over there guessing, but they were learning, finding the range as *Royal Vengeance* grew closer. All she could do was try to present a miniscule profile to them and get the range as open as possible. The aces up her sleeve had been expended and death was minutes, perhaps seconds away, if something didn't change.

Her sensors, once bright and sharp, were blinking in and out. She watched as Snapshot fired the missiles they'd dropped whilst flickering the Aegis. Luckily they were out of the nuclear

bloom as the missiles fired their X-rays almost immediately before the dampener restored its protective aura about them. In turn, each of them missed as the MFD sputtered and choked.

Altinak's fighters had regrouped and were on their way, though Coeur knew viscerally that the battle would be over before they could intervene.

The ship lurched violently again as one of the enemy's secondary batteries grazed across the aft portion, most of its energy refracted back into space. The lights flickered, but switched back on just as fast.

It was that strobe effect that gave her the idea; something in her head that picked up on how the room had been lit up then was dark, and she kicked herself for not thinking of it sooner.

When *Hornet* had brought back the wealth of information on Gold Fleet, one thing FleetCom had done was 'inoculate' the ships that were vulnerable to the sensor distortion stealth that *Lord Ryan* had used during its escape from Aubaine. Since *Hornet* had found a way to mimic that capability and used it in front of the enemy at Phoebus, it had been the general consensus that *Gold Fleet* would similarly protect themselves. A few ships from Beta Squadron ships had tried to use it, including the four *Valor*-class corvettes that had made first contact with the enemy, but Gold Fleet had been able to see them with no problem at each instance, so it was ultimately abandoned.

This situation was different, however. The brilliant code that Newton created had been designed for *Hornet*, and Beta Squadron had used it against a fleet of ships, each with enough different points of view to filter it out.

Now *Royal Vengeance* was alone and damaged. That might be the deciding factor.

And if it didn't work, they were all dead anyway.

"Newton, bring the sensor distortion system online on my mark," Coeur spoke calmly into the intercom, switching over to Snapper. "I need you to synch a launch with Newton, using the same mark. When I tell you, fire a missile along our current flight path, not at *Royal Vengeance*. Have it run to the length of its endurance at a .6g acceleration."

"You realize it won't be a decoy, Red," Snapper said back.

"It won't have to be."

The timing would have to be perfect on all fronts, and *Hornet* might not take the sudden strain in her stricken condition. Those were variables that would just have to be tested.

Perhaps there's one more card to play after all...

"Ready..." Coeur said, watching their movement relative the enemy ship, seeing them align in just the right way.

"Mark!"

* * *

Sub-Lieutenant Hiram Westerfield of the Imperial Solee Navy, sat at his usual place at the sensor station. He had been with the ship since Norbert Estanzo had taken *Royal Vengeance* on a downward spiral in the Mexit system. As one of the few bridge officers left alive, he'd been there through it all, the escape from First Mexit, the return, Second Mexit, and the campaign leading up to this moment. Though he didn't share a personal closeness with the Captain, if, indeed, anyone did, he'd seen the man pull coup after coup on the battlefield.

Now, however, his Captain faced a commander and a ship that had bested them in some way at every encounter. That is, until now. It was common since the Age of Sail for sailors of all kinds to harbor certain superstitions, from the practical to the bizarre. The same line of thinking that acknowledged a cursed ship, left the door open for a ship that was blessed by the tides of fortune, or one that sailed under a lucky star.

RCS *Hornet* had come to be known as a lucky ship by Solee Navy, and those who served aboard *Royal Vengeance* in particular. Now, however, he was in a unique position to see first hand the will of his own ship finally put down their long held nemesis. She was hobbling around now with limited maneuverability with a large chunk scooped out of her starboard side. It was a credit to her commander and crew that she was still putting up any resistance at all. They hadn't attempted to surrender or call for help, which had impressed everyone that had witnessed the spectacle from the Solee vantage point. It had been known from the beginning that quarter of any kind would neither be asked for nor granted.

El Degüello

This would be their final confrontation.

Gunners were having a hard time locking the ship into their sights, it was true, but the tiny ship couldn't dodge forever. Now she was making a heroic, though futile, attempt to delay the inevitable.

For less than second, *Hornet* blinked out of existence on his scope so fast that he wondered if the ship's sensors were glitching from damage, or if he had imagined it. A surge of drive energy then flared to life as his ship's sensors reasserted themselves. Active sensors were down, and even their passive sensors had taken a hit, but he could still make out *Hornet* continuing on her evasive course. If anything, it looked as though she was finally making a run for it.

It was his job to inform the Captain of what he was seeing, so that he could make decisions and decide a course of action. Fox had been conversing with Darmane just then, outlining their inability to fire missiles and the nuclear dampener that was somehow causing it. If not for that, they concluded, *Hornet* would have been consumed by nuclear fire. He had missed the blink that now Westerfield had convinced himself was all in his head.

"Sir," Westerfield said. "It looks as though she's making a run for it after all. For all the good it will do."

The Captain's ice blue eyes shot from Darmane to him, then immediately to the plot. They narrowed into dangerous slits.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, sir," the Sub-Lieutenant said with self-assurance.

"She's trying to clear our firing arcs," Darmane said, examining the data. "Shall we come about to keep her fixed?"

"No," Fox said immediately. "Steady as she goes." He turned to Darmane. "She must know that she can't outrun us even with our damage. If she's altering course, then she's up to something. It's not like her to turn and run, especially here and now."

"I see your point, sir."

"That," he nodded to the icon on the display, "could be another decoy. If we change course to pursue, we'd be playing right into her hand. She'll want to put as much distance between us as she can to either effect repairs, regroup with reinforcements or, more likely, hunt us with a pre-deployed salvo like she did at First Mexit."

"But you think she won't run away?"

"You of all people can appreciate the difference between a full retreat and a break from the action to reset before continuing the fight."

"True, sir, very true," Darmane said.

"In either case, take whatever that is," again he indicated the single contact on the scope, "Out of my sky...."

A golden arrow of light struck them as though fired from the bow of Apollo, the god of the sun. It struck the ship dead on the bow, where the three fins of its rounded delta form converged together. The nose section of *Royal Vengeance* evaporated as a bolt nearly twice as powerful as anything they could produce on their own struck them, the energy it brought unbridled and undiminished in its purity and potency.

The bulkhead at the back of the compartment buckled and spewed razor sharp shards of metal across the bridge. Westerfield never saw the fragments that ended his life, leaving a nearly unrecognizable corpse in its place. The navigator howled in pain as the whirling blades severed his leg below the knee. His vac suit sealed the joint immediately to keep him from decompressing.

Darmane slumped to the side as one piece of debris struck not her, but a panel beside her. The side panel exploded outward, brutally slamming into her.

Fox saw this unfold, looking down to find to his amazement that he was unscathed. He flew from his seat to the Darmane's station. The slight rise and fall of her chest told him she was still alive. Leaning over her, Fox's hands were a blur over the weapons console.

Coeur D'Esprit hadn't drawn back like he'd thought, quite the opposite, she'd charged directly at him! To any normal person it would've been insane, suicidal, but to Fox it was brilliant.

However, she couldn't keep that up forever. She couldn't have many of those blasts left and *Royal Vengeance* still had room to take the punishment. *Hornet*, however, did not.

Priorities went out to the gunners, assuming that any of them were left alive and their batteries actually worked. If she was out there, he would find her.

The game's not over, Coeur D'Esprit, not yet.

* * *

Vega Zorn had blacked out when the blast had hit them. From her display of the ship's status, she had been lucky that the hit hadn't taken out the turret she now occupied. Less than five meter aft of where she was sitting was now open to space.

That had delayed her last shot by critical seconds, but seeing the damage she'd caused with it had shown that it was worth the wait. *Royal Vengeance* was still there, however, and she had been sure when she fired that it was the last time *Hornet* could handle firing the Stinger.

That is, until she watched the power levels recharge quickly enough that the Stinger was ready and primed to fire yet again. This one, she was sure *would* be the last one. She couldn't just toss it away, she would have to use it right. One shot, one kill – just like a sniper.

Lasers from *Royal Vengeance* were now firing at random in their direction and *Hornet* was proving to be a small target.

You only get one more shot at this. Make it count.

She took in a deep breath and held it. Her hands were still, her eyes took on an uncanny brightness as she sighted the ravaged cruiser. A strange feeling crept over her, like her every sense had ascended to become preternaturally sharp. It was though she could see the outcome before it happened, cause and effect turned upside down. In that moment of perfect clarity she knew how to kill *Royal Vengeance*.

And in that moment, she fired.

* * *

Gaylon Fox saw death coming for him as a second beam lit up the eternal night around them. It struck *Royal Vengeance* again on her prow, but this time the armor was absent and offered no protection. The laser bolt entered the ship holing her from nose to tail. Along the way it struck not one, but two magazines and the main reactor. That set off a chain reaction.

Hornet had just killed *Royal Vengeance*.

He kept his feet as the ship he loved died around him. He had seconds to act, and he was not idle. The port-side main cannon was damaged, barely able to match the power of one his secondary lasers, and the gunners were all dead, but it was still functioning and responding to his override commands.

Bringing up the targeting display, he fixed the spot where the beam had come from that had killed them. The laser was charged and had one last shot in her, which he fired.

Such a pity, he thought as he fired the last shot *Royal Vengeance* would ever fire. It struck the target squarely in the drive section. A cruel satisfaction lit his face, but was interrupted as a series of secondary explosions began to rip through the insides of his ship.

A minute later, *Royal Vengeance* became the center of new-born star which flared to life in a beautiful corona of light, like a sacred phoenix being reborn from its ashes.

The resulting shockwave reached out through space and smote RCS *Hornet* with a terrible vengeance.

Then, there was darkness

* * *

Coeur opened her eyes slowly, surprised to find that she was alive. The compartment was pitch-black again, save for the light of the celestial bodies outside. The otherwise breathtaking view of Aubaine below them was now distorted through the spider web of cracks

running through *Hornet's* main viewport. Debris and bits of control panels floated around them in the zero-g.

"Sixer, you still with me?" Her voice was rusty and coarse.

A faint clicking sound answered her followed by a groan.

"I'll take that as a yes."

Coeur wriggled out of her restraints, stopping to extricate herself from the ruined pilot's couch that had temporarily pinned her legs. Her suit was scorched in places, but otherwise undamaged.

Across the room, the door was being forced open through the winding of a manual override. Through the ever-widening crack, the white beam of a flashlight pierced the darkness. Large metal hands appeared, reached in and forced the doors wider apart with their servomotor-enhanced strength.

Drop Kick's armored form slide through the hatch.

"Good to see you," she said. "What's our status back there?"

"Bonzo and Whiz Bang are trying to get the doc and Gyro out of the infirmary," Drop Kick said. "Raptor's doing the same with Zorn in the turret. Mercy's in the Valiant trying to raise the nearest ship on the comm. Hunter got hit pretty hard by a piece of bulkhead. He's alive, but his suit monitor says he's unconscious and bleeding. A couple of bone fractures to boot. If he wasn't wearing his battle dress..."

"What about Raven and Newton?"

"They're in the corridor. They got rattled pretty good, but they seemed to have gotten through okay. Sixer?"

"Responsive, but I don't know if he's hurt. Stay here and check him out."

"Where are you going?"

"I'm going to check on Crowbar."

"Coeur, that last hit went straight to the drives."

"I know."

Squeezing through the burned out door, Coeur found herself in the corridor surrounded by several of her crewmembers floating about, going about their duties except for Raven who hovered there like a spectre.

"I'm going with you," Raven said, using a private channel.

"Raven, you probably..."

"I need to know," she said. "One way or the other."

Coeur nodded and the two of them set off swimming down the corridor, the ship, her home now dark and menacing like the inside of a cave. The straight lines of the hall had been twisted, giving it all a nightmarish quality. They made their way past the crew's lounge where scorch marks were evident as well as holes in the floor and ceiling that hadn't been there before. Components and wires streamed out of them, floating around like seaweed.

A few meters after that, they found Raptor clad in his towering battle dress, seeking to pry open the door. The door was wedged in place, which meant that they might have to cut Vega Zorn out of the turret.

"Report," Coeur said as the two women came to a halt.

"She is alive," Raptor replied. "The door has been heat warped, making it difficult force. I feel confident that I shall succeed, however."

"Good. How is it farther back?"

"See for yourself." His long, armored arm point in the direction of the cargo bay then he went back to his task.

Coeur steeled herself, and pushed her self through the next hatch.

Crates and equipment that had escaped or been forced from their stowage mingled with free-floating pieces of the ship, moving lazily about like an asteroid field in miniature. To her left, the greatest wound *Hornet* had taken was plainly visible like some kind of giant alien mouth viewed from the inside. It ran nearly the length of the entire bay, its edges black and buckled. The bright blue curvature of Aubaine, and the stars beyond shone through that jagged wound. The sight of it tore at Coeur's heart. She could feel it breaking.

In sharp contrast to the damage, the Valiant sat whole and seemingly undamaged on the other side of the compartment. The top hatch sat in the open position.

"Mercy, what's the word?"

A head in battle dress popped up, its visor turning towards them.

"*Altinak's* bay got hosed pretty badly back there, so it looks like *Apollo* is the closest ship that can extract us. They're making preparations to send a shuttle our way."

Coeur was quiet for a moment, the wheels in her head turning as she considered the situation.

"Tell them to send a Fury."

"An assault lander?"

"Correct, we're going down to the planet," Coeur said. "Can the Valiant make planetfall from here?"

"Um, yeah, I guess so."

"Then I want you and the Marines to load up as soon as we're secure. Those drop capsules have made landfall by now and we got a good look at where they went. It's essential that we get the word to FleetCom that those drop troopers are carrying Virus."

"Drop Kick, were you monitoring that?"

"Copy that, Red. We're on it."

"Coeur," Raven said to her right, "Crowbar's not responding to his comm."

"Let's get back there."

The two women pushed off the Valiant angling their flight towards the sealed door to the engine room, not knowing what they would find when they arrived.

* * *

It took several minutes to pick through the wreckage in the aft part of the cargo bay. The top deck had contorted and crumpled, falling upon itself, leaving a husk of burnt serrated metal jutting out from all directions. It was excruciating for both women for different reasons. Raven could feel Coeur's thoughts as they picked their way through the debris. Each broken plate could've been a broken dream, each ruined bulkhead a shattered hope.

Coeur stopped dead, her hand running over a beam that had no warps or blemishes, whole and perfect. That hand clenched into a fist. Raven nearly doubled over at the unintentional mental assault emanating from her Captain.

Floating over to her, Raven put her hand on Coeur's shoulder pauldron.

"They try to tell you that a ship's just a piece of equipment, a vehicle, pile of spare parts holding hands and nothing more, but it isn't true." Coeur said in a low voice over the comm. "They never tell you how you come to love it, how it becomes a home, or, better yet, how its loss can put burn a hole straight through your heart."

"That's because they, whoever 'they' are, never met a ship like this one."

"Come on," Coeur said, steadying herself. "Let's go."

Long minutes passed before they reached the sealed hatch to the engine room. It seemed still intact. There were no obvious punctures or breaches anywhere in sight. Coeur swept her glove over the transparency, wiping away the oil and ice crystals that had formed over it. A light burned from the inside, spilling out into the darkness where they hovered. Pressing her facebowl against the transparent surface, Coeur peered in.

There she found Crowbar working frantically on the reactor. There was an odd disconnection she felt as though she were seeing a moment frozen in time from the battle, somehow frozen and playing out after the events. She plugged into the intercom, praying that it still worked.

"Crowbar?"

He turned his head towards her as his hands continued their work.

"I can save her, Coeur, I know I can."

"What are you talking about? The fight's over. We've got to abandon ship." She nearly choked as she said the last part. The very words were vile and unnatural upon her lips.

"I'm not going anywhere," he said, continuing what he was doing, "and neither is *Hornet*."

"Glaive," she said, using his first name for the first time in memory. "I love her too, you know that, but you've got to let her go. We can't stay."

"You don't understand, Red. That last shot destabilized the reactor containment. I'm having to fight to keep her from going critical," he said with sadness. "I won't be able to hold her forever, but I can save her from the worst of it, I know I can."

"Help is on the way. *Apollo* is coming to pick us up."

"Then I suggest you and the others clear out. My place is here."

"I'm *not* leaving you behind. You've got to know that."

"I won't be going with you, Coeur. Not this time, Coeur," he said. "It's already too late for me."

He turned towards the hatch, revealing his breached suit and radiation badge, which was black as pitch. Coeur closed her eyes at the sight. She knew what it meant.

"I'm dead already." There was no self-pity in his voice.

"Crowbar..." Coeur said, then stopped.

"Get out of here, you and the others," he said looking her in the eyes. "I'll make you have the time."

Coeur floated aside for Raven to peer in. Even through her vac suit, Coeur could see her tremble.

"You're alive," Crowbar smiled as he saw her face. He felt a slight brush against his mind, a polite knocking at his mental door. He accepted the invitation.

Come with us, she pleaded. We can get you to a hospital. We can...

It won't do me any good, sweetheart. I've had enough exposure to take me down three times over. I'm gone.

No! I don't accept that! I'll never accept that!

I'm sorry, Lauren, that's just the way it is. I wish it were different, but it's not. I don't know how much longer I can hold her together.

So, you just want me to leave you here?

Yes! I want to know that you're alive and safe as much as I want to know that I saved what's left of my ship. I don't have much time left, and neither do you.

Raven swallowed hard, an enormous lump swelling in her throat. She blinked back the tears that had begun their rush forward.

"Coeur," Mercy radioed in, "The Fury is here. We're loading everyone else in before we launch the Valiant."

"Thank you," she said, cutting the channel and returning the favor to Raven by laying an understanding hand upon her shoulder. "It's time."

I love you, Glaive Ertani.

And I love you, too. He smirked at her, flashing his best roguish grin through his facebowl. *But how many times do I have to tell you – call me Crowbar.*

Raven placed her hand upon the transparency, as did Coeur. Crowbar returned the gesture with a salute followed by a hand over his heart. Then, he went back to his work of saving the ship he'd resurrected.

Stricken, the two women turned away and made their way back through the wreckage. Both of their hearts felt as heavy as lead as they assembled with the others at the port airlock.

On the other side, a Fury assault shuttle hung in space, its swept white lines like an eagle frozen in flight.

Drop Kick sidled up to Coeur as the wounded were being loaded into the Fury and the Marines were readying the Valiant. The small delay granted them a small pause in what was otherwise a unceremonious exit.

"Crowbar?"

Coeur shook her head and Drop Kick grimaced.

"Damn."

"Yeah," she said, almost a whisper. "Watch yourself down there."

"You too, Red," to her surprise the battle dress-clad Marine swept her into a hug, his armored arms embracing her fully. "Good hunting."

"Godspeed."

With that, Drop Kick turned and swam through the compartment towards the Valiant, disappearing through its hatch. The rest of the crew, including Raptor, filed into the shuttle with cautious haste.

Coeur was the last to leave. Turning back to the tattered remains of her once-proud ship, she swept her gaze around, seeing her all at once, the details of her dismemberment now obscure.

Thank you... for everything. You can never know what you meant to us, to me. Good-bye, my friend. May the heavens watch over you as you have watched over us.

Cave Aculem.

Coeur D'Esprit stepped into the docked shuttle. The door closed behind solidly behind her.

Chapter 26

Liu An-Wing Mestrovic felt *Golden Flame* shudder as another blast rocked her. The deck rumbled beneath her feet like thunder at intervals as the battle she could not see or hear, only feel, played out around her.

It was a sobering thought that a ship of her size and caliber was taking damage at a regular rate. Whatever *Golden Flame* faced must've been on par with her at least. From what Liu had gleaned from her wedding tour, the ship was far greater in size than had first thought. If she was up against something worthy of *Golden Flame's* personal attention, and worth the risk of her being damaged, that meant there was only place that kind of firepower resided.

Aubaine.

Mestrovic was making a push into the heart of the Reformation Coalition he so despised and they were resisting with all their might. She could see it unfolding in her head – the long lines of metal hulls arrayed against a similar line facing across from it in space, barely seen lasers tracing back and forth like a nightclub's light show, bombs bursting, ships exploding, people dying. At one time she would've harbored romantic notions about such a grand encounter, the majesty and awe it evoked in the imagination. Now, knowing she was in one brought that from fantasy firmly to reality. It lost something in the translation.

Aside from the knowledge that death could come at any time, she felt uncomfortable without suitable protection. She, along with her chambermaids, had been denied the use of vac suits, or any measure of protective gear should they be exposed to the cold void of space. Liu could only sit in her customary spot dressed in her Domina's mantle and wait, piecing together the happenings of the outside world from what little information and stimuli came her way.

She had been able to deduce that she wasn't the only one kept under atmosphere and left without that basic, life-saving precaution. The Royal Guards outside were similarly unprotected as they stood like grim-faced statues on either side of her chamber door. That meant that the corridor outside was still filled with air, along with at least a good portion of the entire deck. Unfortunately, she hadn't been privy to a deck plan since she'd been here, and the library she could access had been carefully scrubbed of any data.

So, she lived within her own head, placid on the outside, but her mind racing with thoughts, scenarios, plans and counter plans. Until and unless her husband decided to do away with her, or the battle they fought claimed her, she would remain alive, waiting for her moment.

There came a muted sound from the corridor, followed by a thump of something hitting the door. She turned to regard the door when it opened without an entry query or permission. A

tall Guardsman entered purposefully, dressed in the marigold and red robes of one of Metrovic's honor guard.

"What is the meaning of this intrusion?" she demanded, coming to her feet. If she was staring at her executioner, she would face him with the dignity she'd been taught to maintain.

"Apologies, my lady," the Guard said with a graceful bow, a softness about his eyes and face that Liu was unaccustomed to seeing in the fanatics that guarded her husband. "I mean you no harm."

"Domina!" her chambermaid shouted as the open door revealed bodies in the corridor. "Your guards are dead! He's killed them, he has!" Craning her neck around the man's broad shoulders, Liu could see the two men laying on the deck in contorted poses. They had died quickly and violently.

"No harm?" she said imperiously. "Explain yourself. Did you kill them?"

"Yes, my lady," the guard said sadly. "I had no choice. They wouldn't have let you leave your quarters, and it is most important that you do. It was the only way."

"What is your business with me, then?" she demanded.

"It's time, my lady," he said simply. "I am to convey you to your husband on the command deck who even now is overseeing the battle. When the signal arrives, I will leave you to act as you see fit."

"To what purpose?"

The Guard withdrew an advanced military pistol from its hidden place within the long folds of his robes, its shining chrome gleaming like the sun. It looked to be an extension of his hand and its long use was apparent in the way he held it. For a moment, a tremor of concern ran through her that he intended to shoot her, but then he reversed the weapon, handing it to her handle-first. The softness in his eyes vanished.

"Tyranicide."

* * *

In space, the Valiant and the assault shuttle wore crowns of flame as they entered Aubaine's atmosphere at maximum speed allowable for the respective vehicles. The Fury was purpose-built for this kind of expedited planetfall, the Valiant began to lag behind as the dark, glittering shroud of space gave way to the blue pre-dawn light of Aubaine.

The Fury's clean lines cut through the atmosphere, the air in front of her nose thundering as she went supersonic under the steady control of Lieutenant Lisa "Lander" Davies. The woman drove the craft down towards the chaos below with the resolve of one that seen much in her short years. Coeur could tell that the person that resided behind the green depths of her eyes was far older than the years of her age would suggest.

"Red Sun," she called and Coeur leaned into the cockpit.

"I'm reading all kinds of chatter on the defense channel," she said. "It's a mess down there, but it seems that the enemy is focusing primarily on three points Major points to the exclusion of all else."

A map of the land masses below lit up on her flight panel outlining the Hyperion Power Station, the Aubani Broadcasting Network, which as a civilian news station, and the coastal data node on southern tip of the Trantown Archipelago.

"The Marines managed to shut down the data node at Trantown," Lander said. "Whatever they were trying to do, it looks like they failed. The other two are more remote, and HQ is reporting that the Marines they sent in there have been repulsed. Reinforcements are en route, but it will take time to get there in force."

"Then we'll have to go in without them," Coeur said, studying the map. They were limited on resources when it came to a protracted fight. If they wanted to succeed they would have to hit them hard and fast, playing heavily towards their strengths. She juggled the tactical advantages and disadvantages in her head.

"Signal the Valiant to head towards the ABN tower. We'll take the power plant."

"Yes, sir."

It was tempting for her to send the Valiant to the more open confines of the power station where it could maneuver more freely, but that would leave her own team with the possibility of close-quarter combat with Solee commandos when only Raptor was wearing battle dress. It would be better for Drop Kick and his group to engage with a three or four-man light battle dress squad, using the Valiant as a hardened landing craft and artillery support rather than in the frontlines. They would use their speed to their greatest advantage that way.

The power station would be no cake walk for her team, which consisted of Raptor, Raven, Zorn, Snapshot, Deep Six and herself. Though, they had helped themselves to the weapon and body armor stores in the Fury, they weren't a Marine fire team. Raptor was their biggest gun, and the one most accustomed to that kind of fight, with Zorn a close second. Much as she did with joint ground operations with Drop Kick, Coeur would defer to his judgment when their boots hit the ground.

It was possible that the open structure of the building might allow them to have Raptor get their attention while they entered from the myriad entrances and came at that them that way. There was even a small reservist Armory next to the power plant that they might assist them in that endeavor, assuming, of course, that they could wrest it away from the enemy.

The Valiant acknowledged Coeur's commands, splitting off from the Fury and burning a path towards ABN Tower. With a deft command, the shuttle did a tight wing over put them on a least time course to Hyperion Island.

There would be no turning back from this course. They might have survived the battle in space only to perish on the ground in a last ditch effort to save the planet. If it came to that, Coeur was ready to do just that, just as everyone else would that wore the uniform.

They would put themselves in harm's way, come what may.

* * *

The Valiant descended from the skies over the Aubani Broadcast Network's tower facility like an angry god of storms. It was doubtful that the enemy forces below had any inkling of the foe they faced in the form of the diving hover tank. If that were not enough, this was the first time Drop Kick's four man team had been together as he originally envisioned, Mercy as the pilot, Bonzo on missiles and Whiz Bang on the main cannon. They would have to dismount at some point to infiltrate the ziggurat-like broadcast station, but the enemy's initial brush with them would find them at an optimal peak at every station.

After all, it was never a smart idea to evoke the wrath of a Marine, much less four Marines, much less four Marines in battle dress, much less four in battle dress with a *tank*. Each level of wrath jumped ahead in orders of magnitude, and the enemy was about to find out first-hand how true that was.

"Two minutes to LZ, Sarge," Mercy said as Drop Kick studied the layout of the building. The level-by-level floor plans were being downloaded into each of their suits, along with any other pertinent information Drop Kick could conjure up. Power conduits, entrances, exits, ventilation ducts, possible bottlenecks for ambushes – it was all there, allowing the Marines to wield information during combat as readily as their rifles.

The radio chatter told them that one group of Marines had already been wiped out on the ground, but they weren't sure how. The Sergeant Major had no idea of the numbers or armament of the forces he was about the face, only that the enemy was intractable and entrenched. Thoughts of the fanatics on Lambda-3 came to mind, of mad men running into the Valiant's guns in a near mindless abandon. The Solee forces represented a determined foe that would now face an even more determined enemy. There would be no holding back.

"All right, listen up," Drop Kick said over the team channel, "We don't know if there were any hostages in there when they took the building, so watch your fire. I'm feeding you target data now to blow the main tower before we land. If they do manage to plug a strain into the mainframe, we've got to make sure we contain it here, no matter what."

They each acknowledged.

"Once we're on the ground, we'll have to dismount. Bonzo and Whiz Bang, you're coming with me. We're going to be storming the place like the Devil himself was behind us, stabbing us in

the butt with his pitchfork. They'll want to maximize the Virus infection and it looks as though there's only one place they can do it to catch everything. If we know that, it's a good bet that *they* know it. Mercy, I'll need you to stay with the Valiant and pick off any support vehicles or perimeter guards that they have out there. Once we go in, it's your job to make sure they don't send in reinforcements behind us."

"Got it, sir." Mercy said, adding. "Thirty seconds."

The best LZ would be the main parking lot, which was sure to be under a field of fire. It couldn't be helped. The sensors of the tank reached out to the rocky peninsula that was home to the ABN as they made their approach. An armored APC sat next to the building's main entrance, a twin-missile launcher up high and a coaxial quad machine gun down low. There were also four hover trucks pulling long trailers behind them that were spread out in the front parking row. The covers had been thrown back by their crews to reveal their slender cargos.

The resolution of their displays showed them the sight with a flawless fidelity, just as it revealed the smoldering wrecks of a Firebird Marine transport chopper smoking next to the smashed body of a Thunderchicken attack helicopter, each surrounded by burnt and broken bodies. The first image translated directly to the second in Drop Kick's mind. He was seeing cause and effect all at once.

"We've got Falcons in the air!" Mercy said as three of the now-familiar missiles launched at them. Mercy brought The Valiant into a climb, banking away to clear the distance of the trio of anti-craft missiles streaking their way.

"Weapon's free!" Drop Kick thundered. They'd faced more than three on Lamda-3, but even one good shot could bring them down, just as it had done with the Marines that had come with the two wrecked helicopters.

Throwing the tank back into a dive, Mercy rammed the accelerator forward as the Falcons rose to meet them. The g-forces twisted her, as it did everyone in the cabin, but the two fast maneuvers back-to-back paid off as the missiles shot past them into the air, slowing their acceleration and angling off for a new approach.

Bonzo flipped open the Whistler missile racks, sending six of his own mini-missiles in an overlapping mass of puffy white contrails. Mercy had given him the perfect targeting setup. The Whistlers found their mark in each case, two little interceptors bringing down their much larger cousins.

On the ground, the crews had been busily loading new missiles onto their launchers using a series powered cargo loaders. Whether they were loading the launchers for the next aircraft to come on the scene, or as a follow-up for the tank would never be known as Mercy canted the Valiant on its side facing the landing zone. Bonzo flushed all but two Whistlers from each pod at the launchers. The main turret came around, targeting the APC and delivered plasma-driven doom.

Explosions rippled through the parking lot, throwing up pieces of ferrocrete and machinery many meters into the air. The APC became a molten puddle as were the fountain and fronts steps, though the glass-enclosed foyer remained intact. Whiz Bang had played the surgeon, even when wielding the sledgehammer. The turret then traversed around and took aim at the base of the broadcast tower. The fusion bolts collided with the tall wireframe structure that lurched first, its upper spire wobbling, then to the ground with a tremendous BOOM.

A thick cloud of smoke now hung over the area, whirling around the DZ. It was the perfect cover for deployment.

The tank plunged into the cover, hovering just above the ground. As the hatch hissed open, the three Marines cleared the vehicle and bolted for the entrance. Their armored boots crunched on the broken ground as they negotiated the terrain at a dead run. Behind them, the Valiant lifted off on its contra-gravs to begin its vigil.

Drop Kick, Bonzo and Whiz Bang crashed through the glass doors without breaking stride. The muzzle flash of small arms fire immediately greeted them from the upper level. The sudden fusillade had carried with it the expectation that the Marines would seek cover and trade volleys over distance.

It came as a surprise when the three Marines turned towards the incoming fire and came straight for them, weapons coming to life in their hands.

* * *

“Stop trying to convince me, Coeur,” Physic said angrily. “I’m coming with you and that’s that.”

“As am I,” Deep Six said, sloshing water on the deck of the Fury.

“I must accompany you as well,” Newton’s voder said.

“Have all of you lost your minds?” their Captain asked. “We’re headed into a firefight down there. That’s not a place for either of you. It’s not even a place for Raven and I.”

“Lander won’t be able to stay on the ground very long,” Physic said. “She’ll have to take off, which means she can get Gyro and Hunter to a medical facility – hopefully one that’s not under attack. I’ve already done everything for them that I can. I’m needed with you and any wounded Marines that are already down.”

“And I am the only other one with armor,” Deep Six said, indicating the armor plates that lined his roller chair. “I would place my level of protection in this above even your light body armor, sir.”

“My abilities can serve in a support capacity,” the Hiver said with a tick of his underside keyboard.

“Fine, all right, you can come,” Coeur said throwing up her hands, “but all of you keep your heads down and work behind the lines, don’t get into the fight unless you absolutely have to, is that understood?”

A hand and two different types of tentacle saluted at once.

Coeur’s drop team had just grown by three. She should be happy, but considering the three in question, she wasn’t. Physic could play the part of a field medic, just as Newton and Sixer could sap electronics, carry wounded or coordinate with the incoming Coalition forces.

They have a stake in this, too. Don’t forget that. All of them call this planet home, just as you do. Who are you to deny them this when chances are you’re all dead anyway?

“Hyperion Island coming up,” Lander reported from the cockpit. “We’re down in one-point-five.” A light started flashing on her flight display that drew her eye. “Uh-oh.”

“What does that mean, ‘uh oh,’” Snapshot asked.

“It means that someone is sending a welcoming party,” Lander replied, taking the Fury into evasive maneuvers. “We’ve got two SAMs coming straight for us.”

“Can you avoid them?” Coeur asked.

“Let’s find out,” Lander pushed the sleek craft harder still. It seemed almost as if the shuttle were a natural extension of her body, responding to her commands more like an arm or leg than a vehicle.

The two SAMs, identified by her tactical computer as Falcon anti-aircraft missiles, leveled off from Hyperion Island as they approached, their courses converging on the Fury’s position. They were contact warheads, not proximity. It would take some electronic sleight-of-hand, but it was workable – she thought.

Pulling back on the stick, she slowed the Fury’s forward velocity. The approaching Falcons slowed with her, widening their angle of approach to hit their moving target. That had the effect of widening the gap between the two missiles, leaving her a tight avenue to maneuver.

The range continued to fall as the missiles sped inevitably their way. Lander’s eyes tracked them on her scope, waiting...waiting for the right time to act. Waiting...

In the blink of an eye, Lander slammed the accelerator down and shot between the Falcons as they attempted to correct their intercept. As they had often demonstrated, the missiles cut their drive to turn and pursue. It was in that small window they were blinded, losing their lock.

That was the moment Lander had been waiting for.

Chaff packages and heat flares deployed from their hardpoints on the back of the Fury as Lander cut her own engines. When the missiles completed their turn, the countermeasures drew their attention as they attempted to re-establish their lock. Both missiles converged on what they believed was the Fury, and their speed made that decision difficult to reverse.

As the Fury flew unpowered, her drives silent, the Falcons collided together in an airburst of ear-shattering thunder and fire.

The Fury lit her drives in the aftermath, nosing towards the vaguely kidney-shaped island that was laid out before them upon a white-capped sea. The main power plant facility occupied the northernmost area with administration and storage buildings spreading out from it like a

spiderweb. The Armory was slightly south of that, surmounting a stony uprising at almost the geographical center the land. It also possessed landing pad behind the building that they could use for cover as they hit the dirt.

The scale of the facility grew from their vantage from that of a dollhouse on their rapid approach. The bodies of Marines lay strewn about the deck, tangled up in their rappelling cords like marionettes whose strings had been cut. It was a grim sight, though there was an edge of satisfaction to see just as many men in unmarked black tactical gear amongst them the fallen. The Marines had not gone without a fight as the bullet gouges, grenade scorches and mine craters decorating the scenery told in ample testament.

At the edge of the landing pad, a man appeared from behind a row of sand bags, raising a shoulder-firing rocket launcher as another opened up with a nested heavy weapon. The Fury's 5mm rotary machinegun swept across the deck, cutting the man down where he stood, but sparing the gunner.

The rotary gun continued to fire in growling bursts as the craft settled to the ground. The ramp lowered and Raptor was already moving to engage, the others a few steps behind him. The Fury continued to lay down covering fire as it hovered back into the air, ceasing only as the Ithklur reached the sandbags. Raptors over-sized gauntlets seized the barrel of the heavy weapon and wrenched it free, tripod and all. The operator of the liberated weapon stood, his black goggles concealing his horror at coming face-to-face with a battle-clad Ithklur. The commando brought his service rifle up and got off one ineffective burst before Raptor's heavy gauss rifle dropped him. His other hand relieved the dead man of his rocket launcher.

"We'll get your crew to the medics, Red Sun," Lander said into Coeur's earbug. "I'll see about getting you up some air support in here as well."

"Thanks, Lander," Coeur replied, sweeping her weapon across the strip. "Careful on your way out."

"Roger that, Red Sun," the shuttle skimming across the water NOE-style to avoid anti-aircraft fire. The Fury disappeared into the distance, leaving a mark behind in the churning water of its wake.

"Coeur," Zorn called to her from the Armory doors. "It looks as though they've thermite fused the doors shut. We'll need something else to get in."

The Armory would serve as their makeshift headquarters as they attempted to gain access to the Hyperion Power Station. Practically, it would take less time to go through the armor than around, and it would grant them cover from being fired upon, narrowing the open gap they'd have to cross to gain entry into the main complex.

The shadow of the Ithklur fell upon the doors and Zorn stood back.

"Allow me," Raptor said, drawing back his fist and punching a hole in the door, then ripping them off their hinges. At this sight, Coeur made a mental note that Coalition armories might want to further reinforce their doors. Having them torn away this easy was surely not what the planners had intended.

The doors made a metallic clang as they were thrown to the ground. Raptor, however, held his hand up.

"Wait," he reached into the door jam, removing a small black box a few seconds later. "Laser tripwire," he held it up for the others to see. "If we'd pushed the doors in, it would've set off the explosives."

"Watch out for booby traps," Coeur said, looking inside. Everything inside the complex was dark, the lights turned off. A whole army could be waiting for them in there.

It was a risk she had to take. There was no telling how far along the Solee were, if indeed, they hadn't already finished their work. Something told her they hadn't, else they would've been better served getting out of dodge rather than leaving a rearguard for the landing pad.

"Let's move!" Coeur shouted and they were off, Raptor in the lead.

Damn the torpedoes, full speed ahead...

They sprinted ahead following the outlined form of the Ithklur's armor, more by sound than sight in the near total darkness. His heavy steps never faltered, nor lessened their pace as his infrared vision and HUD led him unerringly to the other side of the building that faced the power station. The Ithklur came to a halt before the door, finding, and disarming another tripwire.

Coeur could barely make out the familiar curved shapes of four Longsword mines that were attached to the trap.

After Raptor gave the door one last sweep, he cracked it open just a hair, allowing a sliver of the lightening sky to spill in. The Marine snapped open a panel on his left forearm and withdrew what looked to be a length of optical cable. At its end was the small bead of a camera lens. Fishing the wire through the crack, Raptor streamed the feed from the camera to his helmet allowing him to see out while not exposing himself to fire. It was more than a hundred meters of open ground to the corner of the administration building, and almost double that to the main complex. In the space between were three Falcon launchpads, strategically spaced at intervals. Two were in the process of being reloaded. The third one looked as though it had suffered a catastrophic launch failure and reduced itself, along with its missile and crew, to smoldering ashes.

A flare of light from the top level of the main complex caught his attention. His sensitive external pick-up, which was sensitive enough to hear his companions' individual heartbeats, detected the tell-tale whistling sound of an artillery shell in flight.

"Down!" he ordered over his external speakers, pushing Coeur and Zorn out to the way. The door erupted inward in flames, catching the Ithklur in the blast and throwing him across the ferrocrete until he skittered to a stop.

The *ratta-tat-tat* of heavy machine gun fire rained down on the doorway, ricocheting off the deck. Coeur and Zorn crab crawled backwards away from the hail of bullets to cover. Little bits of ferrocrete particles and dust coated them.

"They've got us pinned down," Zorn yelled over the din. "We have to go back, find another way."

"No!" Coeur shouted. "There's no time."

One look into Coeur's eyes told Zorn everything she needed to know about the other woman's resolve. What's more, Coeur was right. If they didn't find a way to go forward from here, it was over.

"I was afraid you'd say that," Zorn said getting to her feet. In the space of a heartbeat, the ex-space pirate was running towards the heart of the storm.

* * *

Whiz Bang was the first to light off his suit's jump harness, propelling himself into the air towards the second-story balcony. Weapon's fire traced across his chest and legs, but his armor turned them. In mid-flight, the heavy weapons specialist thumbed the selector switch of his gauss rifle, activating the miniature flamethrower mounted beneath the barrel.

As he cleared the balcony's horizon, a tongue of flame enveloped the three men standing there, setting off a series of wails and screams as they collapsed in writhing heaps. Touching down, he thumbed the selector back to his rifle, firing off a burst at another man that appeared from the direction of the stairwell. He fell and lay very still on the floor.

If Drop Kick's prediction was correct, their destination was four floors up in the station's main data node. The open foyer had made the first floor jump an easy one, but it would be stairwells and corridors from here.

Whiz Bang pressed ahead as Drop Kick and Bonzo arrived behind him, guided by the exploded view map displayed on his HUD. Two halls and three turns later, the Marines found themselves at the door to the stairwell.

Drop Kick withdrew two grenades from the magnetic strips on his belt. Priming the first one, he kicked open the stairwell door. Gunfire answered from above, as he hurled the smoke grenade through the open space in the railings. A cloud of billowing red smoke filled the area as the fast-acting chemical catalysts went to work.

His second grenade, this one a delivery system for super-concentrated lachrymatory agents or "crye" gas, sped through air with the same accuracy as the first. The smoke covered the presence of the gas, just Drop Kick had intended.

This area was one he'd known would be guarded heavily, an ambush waiting to happen. Considering it unwise to throw explosives into a stairwell he would have to climb, and this had been his way around it.

Horrendous fits of coughing, hacking and moans told him that the Solee hadn't had time to don gas masks, which he intuitively knew they would carry. The smoke, which their suits could see through, would cloak their movements to any that remained on their feet.

At the sound, they pressed forward, their boots thudding loudly on the metal stairs with each hasty step. Two flights up brought them to the landing where four men lay squirming in pain, seemingly trying to claw their own eyes out. Drop Kick knew from his own experience with the gas, it would only take a few more seconds of that treatment before they passed out.

A tremor went through the floor as a muted crash was heard from outside. Drop Kick recognized the familiar vibration.

"Mercy? Was that you?"

"Uh, yeah, Sarge," Mercy said over the comm. "Looks like a bunch of them were bugging out in some kind of hovercraft."

Why would they be leaving, now of all times?

"And now?"

"There not doing much of anything now, sir."

"All right, keep on it."

Bonzo turned towards the stairwell door as Drop Kick cut the channel.

"I heard something. Sounded like whimpering," he said, pointing at the door. "Coming from in here."

"We're still one floor down, Bonzo."

"I know." The Marine kicked in the door, weapon at the ready. The sight that greeted him froze him in place along with his companions.

More than two dozen civilians were on their knees in the room, placed in tidy rows with their hands tied behind them and tape over their mouths. There were men in business suits, women in professional skirts, even a few children who'd had the misfortune to follow their parents to work that day. They were sweating and teary-eyed, a look of terror and fear on every face.

Standing towards the back of them was a tall blonde man in a black suit of tactical gear, a gas mask over his face. In his gloved hand glittered a fragmentation grenade with the pin already absent from the detonator. All that kept it from being fully primed was the spoon.

"Come in Sergeant Major," the man said and Drop Kick recognized the eyes behind his mask.

Mr. Halafast.

"I can't say that I'm surprised to see you here, but you arrived just a touch too late this time. A valiant effort, none-the-less."

Whiz Bang's hand flexed over his rifle's trigger, a gesture that did not go unnoticed.

"Now, now," he said with a scolding voice, "You know how this works. You shoot me, I drop the grenade. I drop the grenade, these people die. I don't want to harm them, but I will if you force my hand. Count on that."

"So you've already done it?" Drop Kick asked.

"About two minutes ago," Mr. Halafast said. "Oh, my drop capsule landed me five clicks away. I had to huff it all the way here, but my boys had the barn door wide open for me."

"Your boys are dead." As if to underscore his words a new tremor went through the ground, evidence that Mercy had just fired, and likely destroyed, something else.

"I'm sorry to hear that," Mr. Halafast said.

"Not as sorry as you will to hear this – we blew the transmitter tower as we came in, more than three minutes ago. You've got nothing."

"I'm not so sure of that, Sergeant Major," Mr. Halafast replied with a growing smile behind his mask. "A place like this always has a back-up transmitter, which I just happened to bring online before I delivered the package."

"If that's true, then why shouldn't I just take you down, grenade or no grenade?"

"Because I'd wager that you don't want anything to happen to these fine people here," Mr. Halafast nodded to the hostages. "And because somewhere beneath that armor and tough exterior of yours, you think you can salvage the situation no matter how hopeless it might be."

Make a last stand. Throw yourself into the jaws of death to save your fellow man, that kind of thing. That's the Star Viking mantra isn't it – where there's life, there's hope?"

"Something like that," Drop Kick said flatly.

"Well, lucky for you, I'm going to give you that chance. Call it the ultimate test of that creed. Let's see if any of that much-vaunted Aubani idealism translates into decisive action, shall we?"

"I won't let you off this island alive." Drop Kick hissed like the voice of Death itself. "And that's something *you* can count on."

Mr. Halafast sighed and shook his head a little, almost disappointed.

"I really wish you hadn't said that," the blonde man said, flinging the grenade into the middle of the terrified hostages with an almost casual speed. The spoon went shooting off of the black shape.

Bonzo moved forward, his submachine gun marking Mr. Halafast dead center as the taller man threw himself backwards toward an exit door. Now a few steps closer to the live grenade, Bonzo knew what the situation demanded of him.

His armor would absorb the explosion, he was sure it would. It would save the hostages, or save them from the worst of it. All it would take was this one sacrifice he had decided to make the first time he put on the uniform.

Shoving aside all thoughts of life and death, he ignored his own mortality and went for the grenade. There would be no time to throw or re-direct it, the only option was to throw himself...

A hand grabbed his armor, tossing him to the side. Confused, Bonzo thudded to the ground amid the wild-eyed hostages that were swarming around him.

Looking up, he saw Whiz Bang snatch up the grenade in his place, holding it to his chest, curling his body around the death he held so that he alone would absorb its fury.

Then it exploded.

* * *

Vega Zorn ran towards where Raptor lay on the ferrocrete, building up speed. As she neared the torrent of incoming bullets, she threw herself into a slide across ferrocrete, arms outstretched towards the Ithklur's fallen weapon. Her hands closed on the long green tube as the bullets flew around her, her momentum carrying her past the deadly area. Zorn tucked into a forward roll and came to her feet.

Now armed with Raptor's appropriated missile launcher, she stood back from the door at an angle. Clearing the space behind her, she flipped up the sights and targeted one of the Falcon launchers still visible. Squeezing the trigger, the disposable quad-firing launcher unleashed one of its mini-missiles screaming out of the door of the Armory. The nearest launcher disappeared in a pillar of flame and smoke after a terrific *KA-THOOM* split the air.

That ought to give them something to think about...

The machine gun fire ceased and Zorn ran to the door, dropping to one knee. The emplacement atop the building was now visible to her. The targeting system locked and fired again. The missile zoomed away, taking a little over a second to reach its target. The machine gun nest followed the launcher into oblivion.

There was a scraping of metal behind her as Raptor got to his feet.

"Anyone slated to tote a gun here better get going. Now's our chance before they regroup," Zorn said.

Coeur, Raven and Snapshot joined Zorn and the Ithklur near the door. Zorn handed the rocket launcher back to the Marine, who accepted the blooded weapon with a certain kind of pride.

"Move quickly," Raptor's sibilant voice said over the comm. "They still have an artillery piece of some kind on the roof. I will cover you as best I can."

The four women bolted from the door and down the ferrocrete steps that lead out into the open spaces beyond.

Raptor scanned the outside of the main complex for visible threats. The magnification of his visor showed him a trio of men that were moving tripod-mounted machinegun into place using a pillar for cover. There could be no question as to their target. Raising the launcher, he fired one

of the remaining rockets their way. To their credit, Raptor saw that they reacted to the incoming attack with skillful speed. Something told him that at least one of those men hadn't walked away from the fiery onslaught.

Raptor shouldered the launcher and brought his gauss rifle to bear. To his disappointment, no targets presented themselves, but he squeezed off regular bursts in the enemy's direction anyway. Whatever he could do to keep the heat off the four infiltrators, he would do.

A part of him wanted to insist upon taking the lead, leading the charge ahead and letting the others cover him as he descended upon the enemy. As attractive as that was, it wouldn't work, not the way this would. He would be the most adept at keeping the enemy occupied, and cutting them off at the legs should they show themselves.

Seconds ticked by and the four women continued get close the gap. They had opted, wisely, to head for the nearest form of cover – the administration building.

The long barrel of a sniper rifle slid out of the shadows as the women neared their first measure of shelter. Raptor aimed and fired, his enhanced vision showing him the immediate result. The sniper rifle fell from the upper level, making a lazy half-revolution on its journey to the ground.

That's when he heard it, a high-pitched hiss and whine, just like before, coming from the roof. What measure of grace Zorn's rocket had bought them had been used up. The enemy resumed their artillery barrage.

"Take cover," he cried to the others as he leapt forward from the landing, activating his jump harness as he did.

Coeur saw the scene unfold as she pressed her back to the wall, breathing hard from her all out run. The Ithklur leapt away from the door as another shell came down on his position. He was in the air when it exploded, a ball of yellow and orange licking at his feet. The shock hit him in flight, spinning him out of control on his descent. The Ithklur disappeared from her sight behind the bank of smoke from the ruined Falcon launcher.

Small arms fire began to burp and cough in Coeur's direction as their distraction vanished.

"Captain," the artificial voice of Newton said in her ear, "I have an update on our situation."

"We're a little busy right now, Newt," She said as Raven returned fire. Newton continued unperturbed.

"You'll be pleased to know that Doctor Takagawa has found several survivors among the Marines, which she is treating now."

"Good. Any she can patch up and send our way?"

"Negative. However, I am in contact with a wing of fighters from Brierly Naval Air Station. They are inbound now. They wish me to tell you that Lander says, 'you're welcome.'"

"Tell them we've got at least one Falcon on the ground that's hot. When they get into to striking range, pipe them through to me."

"Affirmative. There is one other thing, however, Captain."

"What?"

"We can't seem to account for Deep Six here. It seems that he is missing."

"Wonderful," she said sarcastically.

Where could he have gotten off to now?

"Am I to understand that you believe that to be favorable, Captain?"

"Sorry, Newt, that was a figure of speech."

"Ah, I comprehend," the Hiver's false voice said.

Coeur was unsure of Raptor's status. He could be dead for all she knew. Now that the enemy knew where they were, they would again attempt to pin her down, delay her until it was too late. They needed a distraction of their own before the artillery shells started raining down on them.

"Wait, Captain...something is happening," Newton said and Coeur's mind raced. Had the commandos done an end run around them, sent a clearing team into their rear? They would find a doctor, a Hiver, a Schalli and a bunch of wounded Marines. They wouldn't stand a chance.

A rumble came from the blasted area that had once been the Armory's door. Was it weapon's fire, she'd heard? Grenades?

Her eyes went wide as she discovered the cause a second later.

Stepping from the door was an armored giant, easily three meters tall, square and solid, with two long metal arms at its sides. A single blue eye that seemed to cover its massive skull glowed dangerously, the very image of Polyphemus rumbling angrily from his cave. It was a terrifying sight to see one of those this close – she could only imagine what the Solee thought of this. They had probably never laid eyes on Schalli battle dress before, certainly not with the business end pointed so obviously at them.

Where Poseidon's favored son had had only brute strength and thrown boulders in his arsenal, this child of the Aubani seas carried a squad support laser on his right shoulder and 'Nail-thrower' rocket launcher on his left.

Both roared to life, focused on the enemy's position.

* * *

Bonzo shook off the disorientation, bringing himself to a sitting position. His head rang, but he was alive. Around him the hostages lay on the ground, stirring and struggling to raise themselves up.

A metal gauntlet appeared before Bonzo's visor. He clasped it tightly, letting Drop Kick haul him to his feet. Memories came rushing back as his head began to clear.

"Whiz Bang," he croaked. "Is he..."

"Yeah," Drop Kick said, taking in Bonzo's shocked silence. "I know."

Bonzo closed his eyes and breathed heavily. *It was supposed to be me, he thought, I was the one. Why'd you do it, Rob? It was supposed to be me.*

"Come on, let's go." Drop Kick turned to the hostages. "All of you need to evacuate immediately. Move as quickly as you can down the stairs and out of the building. Carry anyone that can't make it on their own. I'll have our hover tank escort you to safety."

The open channel carried out to Mercy.

"I'm on it, sir," she said. "Looks like I'm done out here anyway."

"Not quite. If you have Whistlers left, I want you to knock down anything that looks like an antennae, back up or otherwise. Bonzo and I will go for the hardware."

Drop Kick moved to the door through which Mr. Halafast had made his retreat. Behind it was a posh corner office with a shattered window, the Venetian blinds tangled and swaying from recent movement through them.

"Look out for Mr. Halafast, too," Drop Kick said into his mic, "He's on the ground out there somewhere."

"Will do, Sarge."

"Okay, Bonzo," he got back to business. "Cut the hard lines down here on this floor." He marked the location on Bonzo's HUD. "I'll take the node. If we can't contain it, we'll have to blow the whole building."

The two Marines parted. Bonzo flew down the corridor with Drop Kick running back to the stairwell as though flames were at his heels. The Sergeant Major spared the unconscious commandos on the landing only a light glance before he ascended to the next floor, taking steps three at a time.

The door slammed open as Drop Kick kept moving into the rooms ahead. Overhead the loud report of exploding Whistlers told him that Mercy was carrying out his orders. Panels from the ceiling collapsed, glass office doors shattered, littering the ground in thousands of transparent shards. He kept his footing, pushing past the surreal scenery like a man possessed.

Up ahead, at the end of the hall, stood a simple wooden door, blank and unmarked, which housed the data node he sought. It was an unassuming sight, and hard to believe that the doom of the planet could be unfolding behind it.

It was entirely possible that the door contained some kind of booby trap or deterrent, but he couldn't stop to find out. The door busted off its hinges, crumbling inward in broken pieces as Drop Kick connected with his shoulder. There was no grenade trap, no flash of light or death that

greeted him upon his arrival. There was only the soft hum of electronics that hung in racked metal rows in the room where he now stood. The central access bay was open in the middle of the room. A rainbow of multi-colored wires spilled from the ports, each leading to a strange, palm-sized cube made of over-lapping circuit boards.

Drop Kick went to the access port in four long strides, his hand reaching to tear the shreds away, when his eyes caught site of the shiny dumbbell-shaped object sitting among a cluster of components and cables. His heart sank as he recognized what it was.

This is what Halafast meant by 'a chance?'

It was a suitcase model, which meant that it might only equal a few kilotons at most. The miniature tactical nuke in front of him was more than enough to kill him, his team, the hostages and anyone within a few kilometers. It was probably a dirty nuke too, built to take advantage of the prevailing winds coming off the coast. The fallout would spread across the island, contaminating everyone that wasn't incinerated in the blast.

But, it was either that, or let Virus continue to grow inside a system with that amount of memory, accelerating the rate at which it the strain would become intelligent.

Once it gained a certain level of sentience, it would be tied into a broadcast network, which was not as inherently dangerous as a weapons station or power plant. So, the Solee had supplied Virus a weapon to use in the absence of other options. Once it had replicated itself by sending its world-ending clones across the airwaves, it would fulfill its primary mission and kill as many people as possible. It made a made a mean dead man switch.

He had come in here, guns blazing, hoping to shoot the enemy dead before they could plug the slayer of a thousand worlds into the system. Now, he was being given a choice after the fact, kill a few thousand people, including himself and his team, or risk the destruction of the planet.

Given that, there was only one real choice.

Almost in response his thoughts, a timer lit up on the surface of the bomb, outlined in crimson digital characters. It read:

1:30.

1:29.

1:28.

"Hard lines have been cut, Sarge," Bonzo said over the comm. "How is it up there?"

"Not so good," he said removing the miniature tool kit from the concealed panel in his thigh. "We've got a nuke up here that's armed itself. Probably tied in with the hardlines. Get up here ASAP."

1:20.

1:19.

It was too late to run. He couldn't outrun a nuclear blast in that time, no matter what Ben Bosley the Star Spy would have his audience believe. He would have to disarm it. He couldn't afford to use the proper cautions that a regular bomb-squad would either. There just wasn't time.

1:16.

Think, Vin, think. The bomb's already armed itself. That means...

He yanked the bomb and Virus cube's connections out of the control panel, wincing behind his helmet. Nothing happened.

Well, there's that at least. I'm still here. Score one for the Marines.

As a Marine trained to operate in space, he had been trained on how to disarm a standard missile warhead. The differences between that and the suitcase version were staggering, he was finding out. Seconds ticked by as he stripped away the plating, revealing the innards of the weapon before him.

Heavy steps echoed down the hall as Bonzo shot into the room. He froze in place as he saw his commanding officer kneeling over a bomb and glowing timer.

1:09.

"Gaia, is that all the time we have?"

"Yeah, give me a hand." Drop Kick said motioning for him to join him. The two stared down over the chrome cylinder like two doctors hovering over a patient during surgery.

"Do you think it got out?" Drop Kick asked as they work to lay bare the inner workings of the machine. "Virus, I mean."

1:03.

"I don't know. It takes time for it to get its act together, from what I understand. I think we got it corralled in time."

Both of them stared at the bomb, beads of sweat trickling down their necks and in the spaces between their nose and mouth.

0:59.

"We don't have time to disarm the bomb, but we can keep it from going nuclear," Drop Kick said as an imaginary light bulb flashed above his head. There was nothing like a deadline to spur creativity. "We've got to pry out the core."

"It's using pure ithilite to drive it to critical mass," Bozo observed, nodding to the shaped polyhedrons of dull silver material in the casing. "Still very ugly."

0:48.

"It's either that or a mushroom cloud," Drop Kick said. "I know which one I'd prefer."

Both Marines worked their small instruments into the core at either end, gaining purchase little by little. It was excruciatingly slow and pulse-poundingly fast all at once. Drop Kick felt his heartbeat pulse in his temples like the crashing of worlds.

Come on...come on...

0:34.

0:33.

0:32.

0:31.

Snick.

"That's a good sound," Bonzo said breathily when no nuclear blast followed. "I welcome that sound."

0:29

"Okay, we've got to sever the connections and hope they didn't booby trap those too."

0:27.

"Anything else we can do?"

"Pray."

0:25.

"Way ahead of you on that one, Sarge."

0:24.

Taking a deep breath, which could have full been his last, he cut the connections as Bonzo did the same on his end. Their timing was spot on. The center of the dumbbell came away in his hand.

0:23.

"Evac!"

The two Marines were on their feet and running for all they were worth.

0:21.

"Mercy, we're on our way out," Drop Kick said as he reached the stair well door.

0:17.

They leapt over the rails, dropping through the same center gap in the rails that had allowed his grenades to come up. The commandos, he noted, were gone. Both Marines flashed their jump harnesses just before they hit, to lessen their fall.

0:13.

"Assume a blast shield for the hostages, ASAP. Explosion imminent." He said, as they exited the long corridor into the lobby.

0:07.

Broken glass crunched under their boots as they landed in the wrecked foyer.

0:04.

They were out of the building, legs pumping up and down. The Valiant hovered on the far side of the parking lot, canted on its side, creating a wall for the bedraggled men, women and children trying to evacuate.

0:02.

"Hit the deck!" Drop Kick roared.

0:01.

The two Marines threw themselves behind a row of parked hovercars.
BA-BOOOOOOOOM.

* * *

The appearance of an armored titan had shocked the enemy into reassessing the situation, giving Coeur's team a slight reprieve from the rain of death-dealing artillery shells. Best she could figure, the Solee had a forward observer position somewhere so they could keep the weapon itself out of sight and drop fire on them with impunity.

Deep Six was busily firing away with his shoulder laser, its light singing in harmony with the oversized gauss rifle he'd procured from the Armory. His shots bore the mark of one unaccustomed that level of firepower, but it did its job. It gave the enemy pause so they could maneuver.

Not every station the enemy held had ceased their attack. Raven and Snapshot were still trading bursts of sporadic gunfire with the Solee on the third floor. Twice they had launched a rocket propelled grenade in their direction, but the shots had both gone wide as they went for cover behind the administration building.

Raven looked over at Coeur as she dropped an empty magazine, replacing it with a fresh one. Grime and grit covered her face and hair.

"I think I got one," she said with a strange sort of battle calm. She had bottled up all of her feelings. Grief, fear, sadness, all walled away. "I think Snapshot and I can hold their attention here while you get in behind them. If you circle back around the building you might catch them napping. It'll take you a bit longer to get there, but they may not see it coming."

Coeur nodded as she rechecked the readiness of her SMG. Everything was in order. Removing one of her unused clips from her belt, she handed it over to Raven. Zorn followed suit with Snapshot. It was immediately evident who would be Coeur's designated back-up.

"Stay down and stay alive," Coeur said to her intelligence officer, sliding along the wall in the opposite direction, Zorn only a space behind. The building cut a long diagonal rectangle across the island, even at a run it would take precious minutes to get around. If they would shoot the gap between the administration and the storage warehouse, they could approach the power station proper from an angle of greater concealment. There would still be the danger of a running across and open patch of ground without cover of any kind to approach the main structure. It wasn't an optimal plan, but it was either that or try to run the gauntlet across 80 meters of prime kill zone.

Newton's voder began to speak to her as they neared the southernmost corner. Coeur put her hand to her ear. Zorn sidled up to the corner, checking the way with a pocket mirror.

"Captain, I have successfully linked up with an observation satellite," it said. "The Solee forces launched a sortie on a pair of inflatable landing rafts. It appears that two of the surviving drop capsules touched down a few kilometers out to sea near her. They are in the process of unloading them both now on the North shore."

Then it's not too late. That's why they're still willing to fight tooth and toenail – the cargo hasn't arrived in full.

Zorn nodded to her that the coast was clear. They made the corner to the back of the building.

"Okay, Newton we're on the move. Anything else?"

"Yes. The air wing is coming into range. I have them on the comm. Would you care to speak to them?"

"Yes, patch them through."

"Transferring over now," Newton's voice went off the air. A young man's voice replaced it, one which was familiar to her.

"Red Sun? You down there, over?" She couldn't help but smile.

"Roger that, Firebrand. Consider us boots in the dust."

"Geez, what have they got you in the Marine Corps now?"

"Not exactly. This is something of a 'come as you are' party."

"Isn't it always," he said. "Razor tells me you've got a slight artillery problem over your way."

"Yeah, it's on the roof of the power plant. I think it's one of the field pieces from the Armory. It's making things hot down here. *Really* hot."

"I'll see what I can do. We took a direct hit from orbit a while back, only four of us made it out in one piece. My wingman and I still have enough heat to cook 'em down for you."

"ETA?"

"We're supersonic now, but we're still a ways out over the big blue. Call it four minutes to eyes on target."

"Copy that, Firebrand. Don't be late."

"Trust me, Red," Firebrand said with a boyish chuckle. "Midas and I are never ones to keep the ladies waiting."

"I'll be sure to pass that on," Coeur said, switching back over her team channel. "Sixer, neutralize that Falcon launcher. We've got friendlies on approach."

A sibilant voice cut in as she spoke.

"Already done," Raptor said. "The missile crew is down. The air cover may proceed without further interruption."

"Glad you're still with us," Coeur made a silent sigh of relief. Today had taken too many of them today already. "You had us a little concerned."

"Unnecessary, Captain," Raptor replied. "Do you require any other action?"

"Yes, I need you to get in close to the structure and work your way to the main control room. Be as...menacing as you'd like. Zorn and I will try to hit them from behind." She then added:

"We know they have heavy weapons that could probably crack even your tin can, so don't overdo it, okay?"

"It will be as you command," Raptor said then went silent on the comm.

"The man loves his job," Zorn mused as they eyed the area ahead of them.

The whooshing shriek of the siege gun boomed from the roof top, terminating in an explosion that could be heard but not seen from their vantage point. Rockets, Nails by the sound of them, fired back in deafening response.

"Go!" Coeur screamed over the cacophony. They bolted from cover, heads lowered, legs pumping, hearts racing as they spanned the distance with a dogged determination. The enemy would have spotters in place, possibly snipers. The sky was lightening from a midnight blue, barely distinguishable from the dark of night, to a lighter shade. They would be hard to notice with the naked eye, but not with any vision-enhancing equipment the enemy might have. Considering the level of resources and preparedness they had shone thus far, Coeur couldn't rule out anything. The Empire of Solee had obviously gone to incredible lengths to bring the situation to its crisis.

The safety of the storage building's back face grew ever larger as they darted forward. Both of them pressed themselves against the wall, their breath coming in sharp gouts. Coeur could feel the muscle strain burning in her thighs and calves. There was no time to dwell on it. She closed it away in her mind as they took off again to the far corner.

"Looks like we've got about 60 meters to the back door," Zorn said as she withdrew her pocket mirror. With a twist, she pulled out the telescoping handle to its fullest length and eased the shiny surface around the corner to get a better look at what awaited them.

There were no sentries, no rearguard that they could see. The western face of the power plant jutted up against the dim horizon like a black mountain. Zorn turned the mirror slightly to pan her view over the upper heights.

"I think it's clear," Zorn said, then froze. "Wait..."

There was a yellow flash of light that carried no matching sound, like a willow-o'-the-wisp appearing then gone. Those honed combat instincts Zorn had told her to cover an instant before the mirror exploded in her hands.

"He shot it!" Zorn cried as she was covered with the puzzle pieces that had seconds before been a mirror. "He shot the fucking thing right out of my hand!"

"He must've seen our heat reflecting off it. It didn't take him long to clock it either. You okay?"

"Yeah," she said indignantly. "He's got our number, though. We poke our heads around that corner and we're as good as dead."

Coeur swore under her breath. They had been pinned down *again*. How many of them were there in there, a small army? Her thoughts went to Raptor. He was good, one of the best and his blood was up, but he was also alone. Sixer would support him as much as he could, but there were limits to that. As dangerous as the Ithklur was, his chances of wiping out enough of the Solee Special Forces before they got the Virus bomb into the system were slim – about as slim as bolting for the building while a crack sniper had them marked.

Is this how it ends? Has this, has any of it, meant anything?

“We’ll have to get at them another way, Coeur.”

“Hold on,” She said, a thought forming in her head. “Was the sniper on the roof?”

“Yeah, that’s where I saw the flash, why?”

A rumbling sound filled the air like distant thunder. Despite herself, Zorn smiled at what that sound signified. This was their shot.

“Get ready to run,” Coeur said.

The rumbling grew steadily into a roar. A voice spoke to Coeur from above.

“Hold on to your hat, folks,” Firebrand said. “Get clear. Rippers away in five, four, three...”

The roar intensified as laser-guided bombs descended from the skies seeking their target. Between them, the four pilots that had launched from Brierly covered every square centimeter of the power station’s roof with the blast. No living being that was on the roof at the time survived.

A wave of intense heat washed across Coeur and Zorn’s position, followed by the equally jarring return of cool morning air rushing back in its wake. Without a word, they dashed around the corner, greeted by the sight of the power plant’s burning mane.

They closed the distance, tapping those hidden reserves of body and will, pouring it all out, holding nothing back. Closer...closer...closer...

With a last burst of speed, the two reached a breezeway that ran along the ground floor. If there was anyone left alive up there, they would be rallying their forces back into a fighting force seconds from now. They would have to make take maximum advantage of the time they had.

“Here,” Zorn said opening a rust-tinged set of double doors to reveal a freight elevator. “We can get to the central control through here. If we’re dead lucky, they won’t have guards posted there.”

Coeur lowered the wire mesh screen as the lift took them up quietly to the sixth floor, where the master control room was located. The lift stopped.

Silent has two predatory cats, Coeur and Zorn crept forward, keeping to the shadows on either side of the pillared chamber. Ahead of them burned the harsh white light of a work lamp, pointed away from them. Across from Coeur, Zorn seemed like a ghost, barely visible with an ethereal air from the pale light spilling across her face. Moving forward, they crept towards the light source, using each successive column in the long colonnade as cover.

The sounds of battle could be heard still be heard, but the sputter of gunfire and crash of rockets seemed muted now. Voices came from the direction of the light. Zorn held up her hand and they both halted their forward advance, freezing in place behind the ferrocrete support.

“How many do we have here, Lieutenant?” a smooth male voice was asking.

“Teams from sites Jubilee, Python and Virtue made it in more or less intact, sir,” a deeper male voice said. “The initial Marines they sent whittled us down hard. That airstrike you just felt took at least seven more. We are holding against the current hostiles, but we have only about six of us unwounded left on the line, not counting myself, the Corporal here, or you, sir. How was your ride down?”

“As well as could be expected, I suppose. I do wish I had landed on the island instead of in the drink. But, all’s well that end’s well. I’m here.”

“Here is the relay we rigged, sir,” there was a note of pride there.

“I see. Well, you’ve done a bang up job, Lieutenant,” the first voice said cheerfully. “I’m going recommend you and your men for promotion directly to Her Majesty when we get back. You have my word on that.”

“Thank you, sir. That means the world to me and my men.”

“Speaking of worlds,” the smooth voice said. “Let’s go ahead and dispense with this one. Good riddance to bad rubbish, I say.”

Realizing their intent, Coeur and Zorn moved forward to get a closer look. The area ahead opened up to a series of metal railings that dropped several stories looking down into the power core area. Despite its name, Central Control was little more than a regulation center to monitor the power flows. It consisted of a large slaved in console that sat near the edge of one of the railings. The worklamp they could see was set on top of that console, oriented to face down into the open access panel where the wires and guts of the machine had been pulled out, spilling out in a sinuous river.

Three men stood there around the disemboweled console. Two were tall with the heavy, athletic builds found in most professional astroball defensemen. The third was shorter and slighter of build, but his movements were crisp, clean. As he turned slightly, the light illuminated his handsome features in profile. Coeur staved off a mental shudder at being in the same room with this man again.

Mr. Kim.

"You are sure it is ready to go?" Mr. Kim asked the man to his left. "You've made all the necessary preparations?"

"Oh yes, sir. The connection is green. Would you care to do the honors, Commander?"

"Thank you, Lieutenant, I would," he said setting down a strange cube of metal and circuits on the rim of the console. "You know, it's a pity at moments like this that life has a distinct lack of dramatic music playing in the background."

Coeur raised her SMG as did Zorn. Her finger curled around the trigger. An explosion, however, this one much closer than the others outside, drew their attention. All three men looked in that direction.

I bet that was Raptor's handywork, Coeur thought.

"Check it out," the Lieutenant said to the Corporal. With a grunted assent, the Corporal disappeared from sight, leaving the two men alone. As they turned back to their work, Zorn opened up from her position, catching the larger man squarely in the back of his tactical gear. He staggered forward, dropping into a spinning crouch, using the nearest ferrocrete support to shield himself. His rifle snapped up and squeezed off a burst.

Mr. Kim never changed expressions. His hand brought up a pistol and fired in Zorn's direction as his other hand reached for the connector cord. Coeur opened fire, a tight controlled burst that grazed Mr. Kim's side. He jerked as the impact reached him, but kept his footing.

"Deal with them," he ordered the Lieutenant as he turned back to his errand with a casual disregard for the gunplay going on around him. No sooner had Mr. Kim said those words than the Lieutenant flung something in their direction that clinked off the ferrocrete floor. It wasn't an explosive grenade, but its purpose became apparent as a curtain of thick black smoke welled up around them all in less than a second.

Coeur heard Zorn shout a battle cry. Lunging forward through the smoke, blind to wait awaited her, Coeur charged. Bursts of gunfire were exchanged around her. She could have sworn that one bullet went by her so quickly that the wind tousled her hair. She pressed forward, heading towards the seconds-old image of Mr. Kim that she held in her mind.

And then, as though stepping from night into day, the smoke disappeared from around her. Mr. Kim stood only a few paces away. Before her brain could get the signal to her hand to fire, Mr. Kim was in motion. She felt the SMG come out of her hands seemingly without effort, just as something hard collided with her right knee. Pain shot up the length of her leg as she went to the ground.

"Captain, D'Esprit," Mr. Kim said as he took the magazine from her SMG and placed it on the console. "You may not believe me, but I am glad to see you again. I found our conversations aboard *Golden Flame* to be fascinating, one-sided as they were."

"You'll forgive me if I tell you to go to hell," Coeur growled through gritted teeth. The blow had been a surgical one and the pain was a furnace.

"Of course," he removed a long wire from a concealed compartment on the cube. "I feel I should tell you that none of this is personal. As much as we find ourselves at opposites, I find your tenacity and resourcefulness a refreshing change from the norm." He raised an eyebrow as he noticed one of Coeur's hands slipping behind her. "I'd appreciate it if you would keep your hands where I can see them. Let's not do anything that only one of us will live to regret, yes?" The muzzle of his pistol stared her straight in the face.

A stray bullet from the nearby firefight caught the far edge of console, ricocheting loudly. Mr. Kim turned instinctively away from it, without so much as ripple in his calm demeanor.

"You're about to murder an entire planet," Coeur growled. "I can't see where it gets much more personal than that."

"There are plenty of other planets, Captain," Mr. Kim said non-chalantly, holding the connector up to his face for inspection. "The Empire would welcome you with open arms, I guarantee that. It would be a shame for a lady of your remarkable gifts to be lost along with the Coalition."

"Thanks, but I've had my fill of Empires for one lifetime."

"Fair enough. They're not for everyone, I suppose," he said, bringing the two cords together, one a jack and one a port. There was no doubt in her mind what would happen if that action was completed.

Throwing herself forward, her hand went for her old Imperial-navy issue gauss pistol that had come from *Altinak's* small arms locker in another world and time. Her unhurt leg whirled around and kicked at his weapon as she curled into a ball. Her foot connected with his wrist, fouling his shot as the weapon discharged away from her.

The connector was sliding into the port when her pistol came around, tracking not the operative in front of her, but the device itself. A dart propelled at hypervelocity collided with the jack, shredding the connector and the port for which it was intended. The next shot found Mr. Kim in the chest, piercing his armor. His gun fell to floor as he reeled backwards, against the rail. She fired again, catching him in the shoulder. The shock from the impact spun him around and fell into the pit, disappearing from sight.

The gunfire had tapered off. With the corner of the console, Coeur hoisted herself to her feet. Only two meters away, the smoke was still an inky wall.

"Did we win?" Zorn's voice said, disembodied. "Did you stop it?"

"Yeah," Coeur said wincing at the pain in her leg. "It's over."

There was a chuckle that seemed to echo in the room. It was impossible to tell how close or far away the voice originated.

"No, Coeur, it's far from over," she said. "I've seen a new side to your Reformation Coalition, Coeur, a new dawn – a future. But there is a dark side, make no mistake. Too many skeletons in closets, too many that believe themselves untouchable. Too many sacrifices left unhonored."

Her voice seemed to grow farther away.

"It's time their debts were collected," she said, now only barely audible. "The rest I leave to you."

* * *

Boris Seitzmann had been forced to wait as they slowly cut through a security door centimeter by agonizing centimeter. It was excruciating to stand around, knowing the woman he loved above all others in this life was in the next compartment, possibly dead or with a gun to her head. His mind went to all sorts of dark places as he contemplated that possibility. The things he would do to the animals continued to grow exponentially in his mind in brutality and barbarity. There were all sorts of ways a person could die, and he would find a particularly unpleasant one for them. The levels of humanity he was willing to give up to unmake these men was staggering. That little dark place in his mind that gave him such determination in battle, such will to overcome, also harbored a cold-blooded killer. If that part of him was given free reign, a chance to come to the fore, would he still be a man worthy of the love Liana had given him? In destroying them, would he become them?

These thoughts plagued him, though he fought to keep them in check. He had taken away the Guard's most powerful tool against them, the intercom. If given a chance the Guard could start shooting hostages and let them listen. That could weaken their resolve. They might be tempted to make concessions, give in into demands. Without a means of communication, the hostage takers couldn't threaten or cajole, or really use their leverage. If they were smart, it would

occur to them that they would have to face up to whatever extreme measures they'd resort to once his Marines breached their defenses.

There was, of course, no real way to predict what they would do. If they believed that they were all dead anyway, they might kill hostages out of spite. They might shoot themselves, it was anyone's guess. They wouldn't know for sure until they were in.

"We're on the last layer, sir," Valkovitz, his sapper said. "Thirty seconds max."

Boris watched as the sparks fell like rain as Kostas and Brenner helped complete the long oval they had cut in the superdense door. The edges burned orange like fire.

"Stand back," he said as they completed the last arc. "Forward!"

His foot lashed out driven by strength-enhancing servomotors and landed in the center of the oval. He felt the metal yield its last strength to his blow and come away. Light flooded in from the next compartment. Seitzmann ducked through his rifle at the ready.

People were packed together like cattle and chained in place, gaunt faces showing a distinct lack of nutrition and an overdose of neglect. A baby was crying somewhere. Whispered prayers were said from parched lips. Some seemed beaten and blue, with glassy-eyed stares, but some had held on and hope glimmered on faces as the clean-lines of Seitzmann's armor became visible to them. They stared up at him with something like awe, as though he were an armored knight stepping out of another age and time.

"Where are they?"

"Right here," the same male voice as before said. The crowd parted like a sea, and Seitzmann locked on to the form of woman with a gun to her head. She, like many of the others, looked somewhat starved, with deep set eyes rimmed in purple. Yet there was a dignity to her that could not be overlooked. Seitzmann recognized her face immediately.

The man hovered behind her, keeping his head behind hers to present a minimal target.

"Do you know who this is?" the man sneered.

"Yes." Boris said sliding closer. "Put down your gun."

"And just let you kill me like a rabid dog? What kind of a fool do you take me for?"

"A fool who wants to live," Seitzmann said levelly. "If you kill her, then I can assure you that it will be your last mistake. If you comply, that's another story."

"Tempting, but I think I'll just stick to the deadman switch I'm wearing. If I flatline, the compartment decompresses. These people die. You obviously care enough for them to have come all this way, otherwise you would've just destroyed us from the deck of the *Roland*. You can stop right there by the way."

Seitzmann froze in his tracks. Slinging his rifle he put his hands up.

"All right, you win."

"That's more like it," the Guard said. "Tell your men to stand down."

He turned his visor to his men. "Do it."

Cautiously, his men complied. Seitzmann's gauntlets went to his helmet, breaking the airtight seal. With a twist and hiss, it came away in his hands and he stowed it in the crook his arm.

"I did that to show you I'm serious," Seitzmann said. "You can put one right between my eyes, but don't shoot. You want off the ship? Done. You want out of the system? Done. You name it, it's yours. Just let these people go." Boris turned his address to the woman.

"Has he killed anyone?"

"N-no," she said in a cracking voice. "He's the only one left. The others are all dead."

"Shut up!" the captor shouted. "I'll do the talking."

"Okay, okay," Boris said, bringing the attention back on him. "Let's be calm. I need to know if these people are okay. Their safety is of the utmost importance."

"Oh, they'll live. We had our fun with them, so you're welcome to take what's left."

Seitzmann's jaw clenched, but he swallowed the bile back. Across from him, the woman caught him in her dark-eyed gaze. After a full second, she gave him a wink that communicated everything he needed to know. He nodded.

Wobbling in place, she went limp, her body becoming fluid and mutable as she fainted. The captor tried to catch her, to keep his human shield in place, but she was dead weight and fell to the floor.

Seitzmann cracked his arm like a whip, sending his helmet sailing across the room. It struck the man's face with a force that brought him to the ground hard.

The Marine was over him as though he had materialized there, kicking the gun from his hands. The man was crying as blood ran down his ruined face. His jaw was broken in several places, his eyes rolled back in his head. He could've snapped his neck with that blow, but he'd limited himself, applying just the needed force. Seitzmann grabbed the man's lapels as he lay on the ground.

"You have no idea how much I want to kill you," The Marine said. "Most of all I want to destroy what you represent. I want you to feel the life of everyone that's died today and for you to feel your blood vessels burst one-by-one as the pressure drops in the airlock."

His jaw was quivering with his anger. He felt like a beast, and that dark little part called out to him to visit upon the man every imagined horror, every kind of unconscionable torture.

"I could do that, but it won't erase the fact these people wouldn't be here if not for me. It won't wash away that I brought this about, that my hands are bloody, perhaps even more than yours. Even if I could kill you a thousand times, it wouldn't change that. But, it would be the next best thing to eating a bullet for what I've done."

The man went unconscious in his arms, passing out from the shock.

"So, congratulations, you get to live."

Standing up, he turned and extended a helping hand to the captive woman who was having trouble standing on her own. She took his hand.

"Thank you, Boris," she said with warm familiarity. "Well played."

"I'm glad to see you're okay, Laura," he said to Mrs. Laura Kiriana Hayward. He turned to his communications tech. "Harmon, get on the horn to *Roland*. Have them spread the word – the hostages are secure."

* * *

The Guardsman put his hand to his ear, listening. Those eyes of his became distant as voices spoke in his ear. Satisfied, he turned to the Technarch at his side.

"The signal has come, my lady. We may now proceed," he said leading her to the dedicated lift. The doors slid open and he beckoned her to follow him. She studied him in the silence. Mestrovic would've chosen the most loyal followers, fanatics more than likely, to protect him. Why would this one stray from that path to mutiny?

"Why are you helping me," she asked in earnest. "There must be a reason."

"There are many reasons, my lady, though if I had to give just one reason, it would be my brother," He paused, considering his words. "He was one of the mercenaries that the Lord High Technarch had slaughtered like cattle in Phoebus. You see, I was the one who drug him into this whole sordid affair, assuring him that the new government would be just and righteous, a fresh break with the old regime and bright new order to replace it. I was wrong."

"I'm sorry."

"The weapon you carry belonged to him, my lady. I wish it to fire the bullet that ends the Technarch's life."

"So this is simply a matter of revenge?"

"Revenge or justice. I'm not sure if I can tell them apart anymore. I have given my loyalty to man who has enslaved or murdered the families of those who pledged their fealty to him. I was blinded, as were many, by the promise of a better tomorrow."

She felt his pain that burned about him like the corona of star.

"That is no longer a concern, however. The surviving families have been liberated. He no longer holds his sway." The chime beeped as the lift car slowed to a halt. "We are here."

The doors opened onto the wide catwalk overlooking the flag bridge. Mestrovic was there, a quivering grey mass wrapped in the trappings of his self-assumed glory. He was screaming at the people around him, shouting curses and threats at the top of his lungs. Standing quietly next to him was a man in an Solee Navy uniform.

"Sir," someone said from below, "the remaining ships of the *Marianne* squadron have all ceased fire. *Bertrand du Guesclin*, *Charles Martel* and *Vercingetorix* have done the same."

"Traitors!" Mestrovic shrieked. "Tell the commanders of those ships to rejoin the battle or the consequences will be visited upon their own flesh and blood!"

The Guardsman stepped forward and cleared his throat.

"I'm afraid they are now beyond your reach, *my lord*." There was burning acid placed on the last two words.

Mestrovic turned, shaking uncontrollably.

"How dare you speak to me in such a fashion! Am I surrounded by traitors, even within my own Guard?" His eyes fell on his wife. "And do you now stand against me too?"

Liu stepped forward, radiating power and authority like an angry goddess.

"Vitali Fyodorovich Mestrovic, you are hereby charged with conspiracy, kidnapping, murder and high treason against the Council of Technarchs. The penalty for which is death. Do you have anything to say before the sentence is carried out?"

The old man laughed. It was a shrill soul-chilling laugh that made Liu feel nausea in the bottom of her stomach for the disgusting feeling it evoked. He motioned for his Guards, but only one stepped forward to raise a weapon. The other three stood still as statues. Sensing that something was wrong, the one Guard turned to see one of his remaining brothers pointing a pistol at the back of his head. It was the last thing he saw.

The Marines on the bridge came alive at this, but Liu's Guard produced a matching pistol from his robes and fired three times in their direction with perfect accuracy. They were writhing on the ground before Liu had been able to process that they were a threat. The well-built Solee officer put up his hands and stepped back against the railing out of the way.

Mestrovic turned to his remaining three guards with madness burning behind his eyes like a furnace. Another laugh escaped his mouth as he turned toward his wife, whose pistol came up to point at him.

"You cannot kill that which is immortal!" he howled. "Don't you understand, I *am* Oriflamme! She and I are one! We are eternal!"

Liu took the safety off, aiming directly at her husband's insane eyes.

"No," she said bringing the hammer back. "You are what Oriflamme could be – what she must never be allowed to become."

She fired until the magazine was empty.

Mestrovic was still laughing as he died, flames burning in his eyes.

* * *

Captain Helena Paige noted the personally encoded message on her terminal without any outward sign of the monumental significance it carried. Her back was to their collective warden in robes, the Guardsmen, which allowed her to make eye contact with Ockley. He blinked twice in acknowledgement. Her look sent out silent messages to five more crewmen, who signaled in turn. Keying in a final set of orders into her computer, she started the mutiny, or counter-mutiny of TSN *Phoenix*.

Reaching under her terminal, her hand closed over the cold metal of her service pistol. The weight felt good in her hand. Coming to her feet, she turned to face the Guardsmen whose presence in that chair was an anathema to her being. He barely looked in her direction...until the hum of the priming charge and the black oblivion of the shadowed barrel announced her intent for her.

Ockley brought his gun up on one of the two enemy Marines inhabiting his CIC. Others did the same. The scene looked remarkably similar to when Admiral Hayward had been arrested, only now the numbers were in their favor. The rest of the Guardsmen were spread throughout the ship, which would make them easy pickings for a crew whose rage had been bubbling and brewing since the change of command.

"Need I remind you...," the Guard began. Helena silenced him with a glare.

"You're about to remind me that if I don't comply, then I won't be the only one to pay for my actions, is that correct? Specifically, you would punitively kill or torture my mother, uncle, sister and husband that you have locked up on that ridiculously painted prison ship of yours, yes?"

She saw a seed of fear in the man's eyes. It germinated quickly, spreading its growing fronds straight into his heart and mind.

"Well before you regale us with a tale of what you hold over us, I feel I should point out that the hostages in question are no longer under your control. They were liberated a little while ago. Without that leverage, where does that leave you now, I wonder? Gunther, where does that leave them?"

"Pretty much fiked," The chief-of-staff said in cold, cold voice. Helena nodded at his words, but never gave the man before her a break from her gorgon's gaze.

"Pretty much fiked," She repeated slowly. "You Marines, hand over your weapons, and don't make a fuss, will you? I've given explicit orders that if you so much as fire a single round, *my* Marines will make sure that today is the last day of the rest of your lives. Hostages won't work either, so put that out of your mind right now. That said, it's time you made your choice. Don't make me wait for it."

The two Marines looked at each other and the gallery of pistols aimed at them, and the hard eyes the person behind each one. Two submachine guns clattered to the floor.

"A wise choice. As for you," her voice came back around to the robed man though her eyes had never left him. "You don't deserve to sit in that chair. The one thing – the *only* thing – that keeps me from ending your miserable life right now is that I don't want a coward's blood staining my CIC."

"Nor do I," a familiar voice said from the rear of the room. All eyes went to the CIC's hatch to see Admiral Shannon Hayward, alive and well, escorted by five of the ship's loyal Marines.

"Admiral on deck!" Ockley called and the company braced to attention. Helena did so, but sensing the Guardsmen's growing desperation brought the gun back on him with a *tsk, tsk* warning.

"As you were," Hayward said as his Marines covered their two wayward, and now disarmed cousins. Sealing up his tunic as he walked, Hayward came to stand beside the terrified man in robes.

"I think that's my seat," he said in a normal, almost friendly voice. The man stood slowly and put his hands up so as not to poke the lion anymore than he had. He joined his Marines against the wall.

"What's our status?" Hayward said to Paige.

"We're on pure defense now, sir." She said crisply. "We've been dodging around trying to minimize damages since you've left. Most of our other ships have as well, certainly now."

"Yes, the Corporal told me Boris came through."

"He does make a habit of that doesn't he, sir?" she said with a smile.

Looking around, Hayward took in every face of his crew. They all seemed so serious and young. They were with them. If he ordered them back into the fight, they would do it without hesitation, without doubt. Gold Fleet was still in fighting shape. It wouldn't be easy, but the battle could still be won. Aubaine could still be toppled. The Reformation Coalition could still be swept away.

"I want all of you to know that it has been the greatest honor of my career to serve on this ship with this crew. Right now you must be thinking that there's still time to finish what we started. I'd be lying if I said I hadn't thought about it myself," his eyes swept the CIC, taking in everyone into his confidence.

"Unfortunately, we've seen first-hand that the cause to which we all rallied was an illusion. A house built on that kind of lies, betrayal and death cannot stand, and, more to the point, *should not stand*," his face grew grim. "In every Revolution there comes a time when the revolutionaries need to ask themselves whether the cause that they fight for, that they bleed for, will birth a result greater than the establishment which made them take up arms in the first place. At what point does victory lose its meaning? If all we are able to accomplish is to sew the seeds of yet another Revolution, undertaken by future generations, against the house we build now, then the answer is clear."

Never forget, Shannon, they are here because of you. You are destroying their illusions, stripping away the situation to show its hideous, ugly core. Is there any greater pain than the death of dreams?

"It's easy, so incredibly easy, to delude ourselves and say that our cause is just, to intentionally blind ourselves so that we may arrive at a conclusion we have pre-determined, one that suits our ego or sense of righteousness. But that's a slippery slope. We've seen the path where blind fanaticism leads, and it must stop here or it will consume us in a blaze."

He paused, seeing the pain he was inflicting on the young faces around him, faces he loved as though a part of his family. It seemed that only Ockley and Paige were in a place of understanding that shielded them.

"This isn't what you want to hear, I know, but there's only one way for this to end," Hayward said, taking his chair at last.

"To that end, get me *Kukulcan*."

* * *

Admiral Sean "Hammer" Lathrop sat studying his master plot in consternation. Just what in creation were the Oriflammen *doing*? Many of their ships were positioned for an attack, but they weren't even firing anymore, concentrating instead on defense. They weren't fighting, but neither they weren't retreating or breaking off.

Since their return from out of the system, the Majority of the Oriflammen had been attacking with a strange sloppiness that stood in stark contrast to their initial devastating assault. More and more it seemed they were just going through the motions of an attack, one without fangs. Now, even *Golden Flame*, who had remained steadfastly on the attack, had ceased fire. Were they making themselves less of a threat, to lull them his forces into complacency or what?

The Solee fleet, however, was still at peak, fighting with a coordinated purpose and execution. Ritter and his ships were taking them to task, but it was a wrestling match between them with no clear outcome for either side. Reports had reached him of the closely-avoided Armageddon that had played out on the surface of Aubaine. Did that have something to do with what he was seeing here? If so, what?

Prudence demanded that he lend support to those areas of conflict that needed them the most, which meant throwing occasional fire in the Solee's direction without ignoring the Oriflammen threat in front of him.

What Hammer couldn't understand was the sudden dip in the will to fight. His instincts told him that if the Oriflammen and Solee had fought together, his forces would fall, even with the addition of Ritter and his reinforcements. It would be costly, almost to the point of mutual annihilation, but they could *win*. If they'd come all this way, why stop now?

"Um, sir," John said with confusion. "This is most peculiar, sir, but I'm receiving a direct communication from Commodore Hayward aboard *Phoenix*. He says he wants to talk to you, personally, sir."

"He *what*?" Hammer looked at Black Star, who shrugged. Hammer returned the shrug then turned to John.

"Put him on," Hammer sighed. "Could this day get any stranger?"

"Don't ask," Black Star said next to him.

On the main screen, an image appeared of Commodore Hayward sitting in his own CIC.

"Hello, Sean," he began.

"Shannon," Hammer acknowledged. "You want to tell me what this all about? The communication, I mean, I'm sure the story behind your invasion fleet will have to wait for another time."

"Indeed. I've been in my own brig since we arrived, but I'm back at the helm now. You've noticed that we're not shooting anymore, I trust?"

"Yes, and?"

"For reasons I will be happy to explain later, I'm ready to stand down and surrender Gold Fleet to you."

His words swept over *Kukulcan*'s CIC in a visible wave of unbelief and surprise.

"You *did* ask if things could get stranger, Sean," Black Star whispered under his breath.

"Quiet, Manny," Hammer said. "Surrender your fleet? Did you decide this before or after you found out your Solee ground teams failed on the planet?"

Hayward cocked his head to the side.

"What are you talking about?"

"The Solee commando teams," Hammer said. "There was an abortive attempt to Virally infect the planet's infrastructure. It almost worked, too. Would've murdered the planet, or made it uninhabitable."

A look of horror filled Hayward's eyes at the news.

"Can you honestly tell me you didn't know about them?" Hammer asked.

"You know me, Sean. You know I would never condone such an act."

"Well, I would've never pegged you as the one to invade Aubaine hand-in-hand with the Solee fleet either. I can't say that I really know what you're capable of anymore."

Hayward's horror hardened at the Solee mention into a keen razor's edge.

"Was *Royal Vengeance* involved in this attempt?"

"As a matter of fact she was. Why?"

"Then that confirms something I've suspected from the outset. The Solee are planning to turn against us as well. They must've been waiting for our fleets to rip each other apart so they could mop up both sides. Control of *Golden Flame* would be the key. They must've known that."

"Sir," John interrupted. "Now *Golden Flame* is calling us."

"Of course they are," Hammer said. "Sure. Why not? Patch them through so they can join the conversation here."

The main screen split in half, showing a tall, raven-haired beauty dressed not in a vac suit, but a court dress of all things.

"*Kukulcan*, this is Liu An-Wing, Technarch of Honefestung. I have seized control of this vessel from both its previous Oriflammen owners as well as its would-be Solee masters. I am willing to place it, as well as myself, at your immediate disposal and surrender unconditionally."

"What of Mestrovic?" Hayward asked from his sector of the screen.

"Dead by my hand." An-Wing replied. "The Solee elements have likewise been removed from key positions. I am now in unchallenged command of this vessel."

Hammer took a moment to consider the turn of the tide. If their offers were legitimate, then it was clear what needed to be done.

"All right, I'll accept your both your surrenders, but you'll need to stand down your commands as well as strike your meson screens and dampeners. Advise your other ships to do the same. I'll be sending boarding teams over which I trust will not be molested?"

"I give you my firmest assurances," said An-Wing.

"You have my word, sir," said Hayward.

"Good. Before we get to that, however, there is another matter where I need your assistance. Listen up, because I'm only going to say this once."

* * *

Delta squadron and the Solee continued to grapple at each other's throats. Both were in their finest form, ploy and stratagem, feint and counter-measure gave the contest an uncertain future, like two master swordsman engaged in a duel.

The Solees' attention had been so absorbed in the conflict that they paid little notice of the sudden shift in battlelines that occurred elsewhere. If anything they noted the Oriflammen heading in their direction, the Aubani fleet pursuing them closely.

Either their naïve, ego-centric 'allies' were coming to support them, in which case they could expect an amateur hour to ensue, or, more likely, they were coming to hide beneath the Solee skirt as they found themselves outclassed by the Aubani.

That *Golden Flame* seemed to be shepherding them along indicated that the zero hour for the spacebourne arm of Operation Tempest was close at hand. There were still too many Oriflammen ships left in fighting shape to act just yet, but there would opportunity enough for them to burn before the hammer fell.

It was then that *Golden Flame* and *Phoenix* entered the fray, leading the charge with the Majority of the remaining Oriflammen ships. *Kukulcan* and *Apollo* also cleared their main cannon

for action, each leading their own formations. *Thunderchild* and her group made a fierce push forward.

The Solee expectation was that they would only contend with their closest enemy. The reality that they were under fire from all three groups became immediately apparent as ships started dying around them. In the time it took for a single, coordinated attack to reach them, the Solee had gone from equally matched, to outnumbered.

Tharn Hudanizan, Crown of Stars, Imperial Throne and Hand of Justice, were destroyed outright, disappearing in fiery expressions of light, followed closely by *Glorious Reign, Emperor and Queen's Sceptre*.

The Solee shook under the punishment. They responded to the sudden turn of events by firing broadsides of nuclear warheads and planetary strike missiles directly at the planet, without regard to maintaining their magazine reserve. Hundreds of them hurtled directly towards Aubaine. They knew as well as the defenders that the possibility of even one such missile getting through the concentration of the fleet and their orbital stations was slim. That was beside the point, however, it would force the new combined fleet around them to concentrate their fire on the salvo, thus saving them from the flame.

To some degree it worked. Several Solee ships were able to use that broadside to withdraw, leaving their crippled sisters to fend for themselves. Some of them would even avoid the pursuing missile frigates and corvettes that would haunt them until the very point they transited into Jump. Many more, however, were blotted from the stars or left crippled. Of those that were disabled, some opted to scuttle their ships rather than allow them to be captured. Others, however, ran up a virtual white flag in surrender.

Once the Solee were no longer an issue, the long process of standing down the elements of Gold Fleet began. It would take days to even scratch the surface, and weeks or months to bring things fully back to what passed for normal in the space above Aubaine and longer still for the political and social repercussions to manifest themselves. That was all in the future, however, and the challenges it produced would be tackled just as they always were. For now, at least, the breath the entire system had been holding during these events could be let out. They could breathe easy once more.

The battle for Aubaine was over.

* * *

Coeur D'Esprit watched as a new day dawned on the horizon. The rays of Halos spilled in through the rents in the roof and shattered windows, filling the smoke-clogged chamber with light.

She gloried in it, letting it warm her skin. Aubaine and the Coalition had survived the night and she was alive. It felt good to be alive, to know the simple pleasures of breathing in sea air, of feeling your heartbeat sure and strong, of hearing the seagulls call and play in the distance.

Word had come down the pipe about the surrender of the enemy fleet, the defeat of the Solee and the events that transpired at the Aubani Broadcast Network's tower. There was a sadness that mingled with her delight at simply being. Whiz Bang had traded his life not only for those of his comrades, but also twenty-seven people who now had a new lease on life because of him. The others were already en route to Brierly for debriefing. There would be no time to rest for them either. Every Marine fit enough to carry a rifle was needed in space right now.

A transport was similarly on its way to pick her up along with her team. Raptor had joined her briefly, until he'd gone off to secure the area. The others had checked in over the comm, but she hadn't joined them in person since the crisis had passed. No, she'd been transfixed by the golden sky and the reflection of Halos on the water. It seemed fitting that she view the sunrise from here somehow.

Now that the sun was up it was time get back.

As she turned, the sunlight sparkled off something next to a pillar, drawing her eye. There was a small object there, covered partially by a piece of rough paper with writing. It simply said: *Coeur. This is yours now.*

Kneeling down she removed the paper to reveal the object underneath.

It was a small bronze mask about the size of her palm. The style reminded her of the comedy and tragedy masks of Dionysus, though it was neither smiling nor frowning, but somewhere in between. The strange thing was that it *felt* old and timeworn, as much as if she'd unearthed it from an ancient temple. The centuries this mask had seen with its empty eyes were weighty and full.

Turning it over in her hands, she found the inside was made of purest platinum. From the weight, it was entirely possible that it was made of the precious metal with only a veneer of bronze on the face. Carved into the silvery metal was an inscription in Anglic. It read:

Home is like the Mask.

Only when viewed from within is its true worth known.

Chapter 27

Coeur D'Esprit, and the survivors of RCS *Hornet* could feel the change in the air as the sun shone bright and clear over the green hills of the Horus Armed Services Cemetery. Row upon row of neatly spaced grave markers spread out over the grounds as far as the eye could see, interrupted at intervals only by a lonely rock or solemn tree.

Generations of uniformed heroes had been laid to rest here. Every star-shaped stone was a life, a story. The quiet whispers of the fallen could be heard in the gentle breeze and felt in the air. It was sacred ground they trode upon, something that was self-evident to anyone who had come to this place of rest. No act of man had ever consecrated this ground, no ritual or invocation had ever given this place its strange, awe-inspiring character. No, the men and women that slept below the ground had sanctified it far beyond what any other pale act by the living could equal.

Not everything about the place was gloomy, and that was the real. It staggered the mind to see the sight of so many white markers and know what they meant, but even in light of that, there was ray of hope that mingled with the sadness. Combined, it gave the place a beautiful, though haunting, bittersweet air.

Today, there were many new additions. Dozens of caskets awaited their final repose, draped in the Coalition's flag, mirrored by the flagpole which flew its colors at half mast. Individual services for the families and friends dotted the landscape as they each sought to cope with their individual losses. Many good-byes were said. Tears ran like rivers of remembrance.

The winds were changing as the people of the Coalition felt the fever break that had held them in thrall. There was lingering shock and outrage. The mourning for lost comrades placed here today had not even begun. There would be pain, and anger, and sorrow in abundance. In time, however, that would fade. Life would go on thanks to those they honored here today.

Coeur heard the chaplain speaking as he presided over three graves. She noted the carved names on each stone, along with the engraved insignia of *Hornet's* flight patch. They read:

Capt. Veranus "Striker" Ikythansii – IMC
Cpl. Robert "Whiz Bang" Ryan – RCMC
Lt. Glaive "Crowbar" Ertani – RCES

"Victory is not without its price. Let us never forget the sacrifice our brothers before us made on our behalf," the chaplain was saying. "Let us instead live our lives, guided by the light of their courage and the probity of their example. May we prove ourselves worthy of their gift, and may we one day find our brothers in the hereafter that we may embrace them once more with loving arms."

The bugler began to play and Coeur was nearly undone. Those twenty-four notes personified the grief they all felt. When at last the bugler lowered his horn, the Sergeant-at-arms ordered the seven-man honor guard to fire three volleys in the air. The sharp crack of the old-fashioned rifles split the air. The flags on the coffins were folded with ceremony and placed in the hands of their next of kin. Lirien took Veranus' flag, representing the Ithklur. Robert's flag was presented to his mother. Glaive, who had no family save his crewmates, had no direct blood to bear such a memento. It had fallen to Coeur to decide which of *Hornet's* crew would take up the flag. She'd picked Raven without hesitation.

When all was said and done, after many hugs and handshakes, after wiping the tears away, after final words were said in farewell, the funeral procession moved to the path and the waiting vehicles parked there.

Coeur turned to see Bonzo stop on the path as he hand-in-hand with Cassandra Mayfield. The Marine reached into the pocket of his dress uniform and produced a winged sunburst on a blue and white-striped ribbon. The Wings of Halos award with the double laurel leaf device swung like a pendulum in his hand. Walking to where Whiz Bang lay, he placed the medal over the highest star point, whispering words she could not hear.

Then he straightened, saluted sharply and rejoined Mayfield. Together they left the field.

* * *

Liu An-Wing Mestrovic, Technarch of the combined holdings of An-Wing and Mestrovic, gripped the edges of the podium, arranging her note cards. She'd only seen pictures of the Hall of Worlds where the Assembly made its home. Those captures had failed to express the sheer size of the structure, or how even more imposing it might feel when looking over the stadium seating and the assembled host. A carafe of water sat nearby and she reached for it thirstily.

The last day had been a whirlwind from the time that Marines had come to take command of *Golden Flame* and bring her down to the planet. The Marine commander had been none other than Captain Susan Maggart, daughter of the Secretary General. Whether by chance or design, it allowed Captain Maggart to examine the scene first hand, which in turn allowed Liu to explain the situation to a source that the Secretary General could believe. They had not clamped her in irons, but practically ever waking hour since then had been spent with the intelligence types trying to sort out what had happened. She had told them the truth – she had been taken prisoner and manipulated by Vitali Mestrovic's lies.

She had not been the only prisoner which came to light once Boris Seitzmann presented the transport he'd seized that was full to capacity with hostages. The List of officers' family and loved ones were all there, but there were a few additions to the captives that had not made it to the manifest. Namely, they had pulled her friend and companion, Bela Marsaryk, out of the living mass. He was exhausted, dehydrated and groggy, but her quick-minded companion that often balanced out her occasional bouts of pomposity and arrogance was alive. Though thin and pale, he sat close to the front of the assembly hall to see her speak. She could feel his silent support reaching out towards her.

Along with Bela, deep in the confines of the transport were five members of the Council of Technarchs that Mestrovic had kept alive. Their treatment made her thankful that her late husband had chosen a pampered cage in which to keep his prize. Three of them were recovering in a nearby hospital. The other two were weak, but stable.

Upon hearing the tale, the two Technarchs had elected Liu as the acting representative for Oriflamme for these proceedings. It was no secret that Liu An-wing, who now held the seats on the Council for both An-Wing and Mestrovic, would be a luminary when she returned home. The dynamos of power were already aligning around her. She knew this, of course, though her mind was focused on the matter at hand. Considering the subject matter, she felt both humbled and terrified at the case she would need to present to the Assembly.

The matter up for discussion was no less than whether Oriflamme would keep her member status in the Reformation Coalition.

Representatives from other worlds, particularly those still under Oriflamme occupation, had every right to want to boot Oriflamme and her jack-booted ilk straight out of the Coalition, to exile her entire world. She couldn't blame them, given the circumstances, but it was now her job to convince them that Oriflamme posed no further threat to the other worlds, even when she didn't know that for sure.

"Ladies and gentlemen of the Assembly," she said. "I come before you with humility and shame at the severity of recent events. I would be blind if I couldn't see the anger the member worlds, and particularly Aubaine, feel towards my homeworld right now. I know that no mere apology can make up for the suffering you have endured or the reprehensible deeds that were carried out in Oriflamme's name."

Murmurs ran through the crowd. Some cast daggers at her, which she had to pretend to ignore.

"The central point that you must understand, the one thing I must impress upon you above all else is this. The events of this conflict were not perpetrated on you by Oriflamme or its legitimate government. These acts were the work of a dissident faction, a technologically elevated dictator, that usurped the power literally at gunpoint. The overwhelming Majority of Oriflamme's people even now are ignorant of what has transpired here, just as I was. Members of my government were taken captive along with the families of those that took up arms. Obviously, these are methods that were employed by a small group, which, at a glance, would seem to embody the beliefs of my world. It does not."

She made direct eye contact with many of the more prominent members in the room including Regent Garrett and Lon Maggart. She would've expected the two of them to be founts of righteous rage, but they weren't. Serious yes, but vengeful no.

Whether the two men could appreciate her situation or not, they both had subjects and constituents to consider, which were burning with the fury of thousand suns. No matter what they did, or what was decided here, there would be repercussions and retribution visited on her countrymen. It was inevitable. The most she could hope to do was stem the tide of it.

"It would be foolish to deny the rivalry that exists between our two worlds, but I give you my most steadfast assurance that the Oriflamme of my birth would never condone such acts as we've seen here. We would never try to force our will on others."

That's not really true now is it, she thought. If there's ever another one like Mestrovic, you know there's only one planet he'll come from, don't you?

"History has shown us time and time again that forcing an ideology of any kind on people cannot bear fruit. Be that as it may, the matter stands before us on whether or not Oriflamme may continue on as a member world in the Reformation Coalition. The evidence is before you in detail. It is my most heartfelt wish that you will see the truth before you, which is *Oriflamme is not your enemy*. I beseech the distinguished members of this Assembly to reinstate Oriflamme immediately as a member world, and let us heal our wounds together."

When she'd practiced this speech, she had imagined thunderous applause following that last statement. Perhaps it had been wishful thinking on her part. There were a few claps here and there, but by and large, the Assembly was silent.

The severe-looking woman in a grey business suit, the representative of Fija, highlighted her marker on the podium, indicating that she wished to speak. It was within Liu's rights to refuse to yield the floor, but at the moment it would've been impolitic to do so. She nodded.

"Would you like to add something, madame?"

"I would," the woman said grimly. "I believe I speak for many of us here when I say that we sympathize with you and the personal implications these events had visited upon you and

your countrymen here. However, I also believe that there is a Major point that you have not addressed which has bearing on the decision you must make.”

“And that would be?” Liu felt the woman’s cold, dispassionate eyes upon her.

“You would have us believe that everything that has transpired has been the work of Vitali Mestrovic, who is now dead. The reality is that an undertaking of this magnitude would require vast amounts of other people working in concert to bring their plans to fruition, particularly within the military. Those ringleaders, who are due for their court-martial soon, do not neatly fit in with your description of one man bending the will of his subordinates to carry out his totalitarian agenda.”

Liu kept control of her features. *She’s baiting you. Don’t rise to it.*

“May I remind you that the ‘ringleaders’ as you call them were also responsible for bringing an end to the hostilities when they held the upper hand. If their integrity or honor had been lacking during that moment, I doubt we would be having this conversation.”

The Fijan smiled, but there was no color or emotion to it. The jaws of her trap sprung into place.

“Don’t you see that’s just the point. Those men and women are *not* devoid of honor or integrity, they are clearly people of *principle*. Though they may have found out about their families, they initially took up arms based upon that self-same sense of principle. If they felt they had a genuine disconnection from the current government, and that it could only be solved through revolution, then I submit to you that there is something deeply seated in the Oriflamme character that believes the Reformation Coalition is fundamentally flawed, and should be brought around to their way of thinking, by force if necessary.”

The Fijan looked about the chamber at the other members of the Assembly. “If we allow Oriflamme to continue in the Coalition, who is to say that this won’t just happen again a later date? Will we hear this same speech again after the next *coup d’etat* is attempted and repulsed? Or will the Hall of Worlds be emptied if they try again and succeed?”

Liu covered her clenching jaw by taking a sip of water. Fija was largely Centrist, which put them in Oriflamme’s political orbit. Here, the effect was a two-edged sword. If the Fijan could distance her own interests from that of Oriflamme, while bringing them in laden with sanctions or concessions, Fija could come out of the situation with a much greater standing. The other Centrist systems would probably do the same.

“If, by the judgment of this Assembly, Oriflamme is re-admitted,” Liu said. “Then I’m certain we will still have our disagreements. Reapportionment of the Coalition, for instance, is something we will push for because it something we believe in, but we will not resort to arms to bring that about. We will work within the system.”

The long-haired and bearded man that was the representative from Spires, keyed in and Liu accepted his petition. He adjusted his old-fashioned spectacles.

“With respect, Technarch, your world maintains a sizeable private navy, which my home, that is occupied even as we speak, discovered through first hand experience. While the philosophy of the Spiri is to accept people as they are, and not as we want them to be, Oriflamme has proven herself to be a threat to all of us. Would you ask the member worlds to simply ignore the private forces you maintain, whose control and direction could be swayed with the ever-changing political winds?”

“First,” Liu said. “I’d like to point out that nearly all of those forces are here in this system and control has been handed over to the Coalition Navy and the Exploratory Service. Second, Oriflamme is not the only system that maintains large private forces that have the potential for abuse. Third, the stereotype that Oriflamme is the bogeymen, perennially wringing its hands in the shadows and plotting the downfall of our neighbors is as ignorant as it is offensive. While the conspiracy did originate on Oriflamme, my world is also a victim of these atrocities. Don’t forget that.”

Liu leveled her dark-eyed gaze on the Fijan representative.

“Finally, if the current establishment has alienated men the likes of Shannon Hayward and Boris Seitzmann, then perhaps you should ask ourselves why.”

Murmurs ran through the crowd like turbulent water in an enclosed space. She would have to denounce Hayward and Seitzmann at some point in these proceedings. Whether their intentions were sincere or not, regardless of the courage they showed, they were still traitors. For

the good of Oriflamme, they would have to be offered up as sacrificial lambs. Liu found that distasteful in the extreme.

Amid the cacophony, the lead representative from Baldur, a serious man in his early sixties, asked for the floor. Once gain, Liu accepted his request.

“Say what you will about the members of the uprising,” he said sharply, “but what the Technarch says is true. The legitimate government was supplanted by force. That is the heart of the matter. The Oriflamme that has been a source of strength to the Coalition since its founding is an occupied territory just as much as Phoebus, Spires, Zloga or Helios. Do not presume to lecture the Technarch on the failings of her people. There is not one of our worlds, *not one*, that does not have some disaffected or disenfranchised group that might one day take a stab at overthrowing our respective governments. To pretend otherwise is hypocritical, not too mention inherently dangerous. I’d say this is a case of removing the beam in our eye before we try to remove the mote in our neighbors’.”

Calls and yells were cast in his direction. In true Balduri fashion, he didn’t flinch or give ground. Liu was surprised at his sudden defense of her case. Baldur could play the same game as Fija, but they weren’t. It was widely known that the people of Baldur never surrendered, never gave up. That apparently included friendships and long-held political alliances.

“Thank you for proving my point,” the Balduri said darkly. “It’s so much easier to sit in judgment, isn’t it? It much more comfortable to kick the Oriflammens while they are down so you can appear strong to your constituents,” he didn’t even have to look at the Fijan for his words to find their mark. “Wake up all of you. We *need* Oriflamme, just as much if not more than she needs us.” He turned to the Secretary General who had watched all of this without so much as a word. “We came here to decide this issue, so let’s get down to brass tacks. I motion that Oriflamme’s status as a member world be immediately reinstated.”

Lon Maggart acknowledged the motion.

“Very well, do we have a second?”

Liu felt her heart grow cold as silence answered the Balduri’s plea. With tensions running this high, it would be tantamount to political suicide for anyone to stand as a second.

That is, except for one man.

A hush fell over the crowd as all eyes fixed on Delvin Garrett. The Regent stood quietly, the very embodiment of nobility, and raised his hand.

“Mr. Secretary,” he said. “I second the motion.”

* * *

Shannon Hayward stood shoulder-to-shoulder with Boris Seitzmann as the panel of Admirals read the charges against them. For those that watched from the gallery, it was difficult to resolve the two decorated servicemen, resplendent in their Coalition uniforms, each with a chest full of medals and ribbons, with the scope of their crimes. Both men looked like a paragon of their respective service branch. Hayward was a commanding presence, wise and confident. Seitzmann was vigilant and strong, like a lion at rest. It took several minutes of constant reading for the whole list to be recited. Both men stood their ground with the looks of those that had resigned themselves to the worst.

Presiding over the panel was Admiral Lathrop, along with Admirals Hewitt, Goodwin, Nahjan and Perth. Just one part of the irony was that Commodore Hayward would’ve been due for promotion soon. His service to the Dawn League and the Coalition had shown that he was worthy. Had he not parted ways and sided with the enemy, he would’ve joined their elite ranks. He was their fallen brother. Though their faces were carved from stone, a secret pain dwelt within each heart at finding themselves across the board from a man like that.

Lathrop ran a hand across his forehead as he finished the litany of the top tier of crimes a uniformed member of the military could commit. He then interlaced his fingers before him on the table, regarding the two men that stood at attention before him.

“These are the charges to which you stand accused,” Lathrop said. “Is there anything you’d like to say on your behalf before the verdict is delivered?”

Hayward looked at him with an unflinching resolve, answering for the both of them.

“No, sir.”

"Very well," Lathrop said. "We have noted the rather strange and extenuating circumstances that surround the both of you in these matters. The fact that that hostages were taken to keep you in line is not lost on us, nor is your willingness to unconditionally surrender your command and give us your full cooperation. Because of this, we are inclined to extend a measure of leniency to your subordinates as you requested."

Lathrop shook his head, his weathered face looking years older.

"However, it remains clear, that, by your own admission, you joined a treasonous and revolutionary cause of your own volition. Your reasons for doing so are irrelevant, no matter how well-intentioned they might have been. The road to Hell, gentlemen, is paved with good intentions. Whatever you meant to do, you broke the basic oath you took when you first put on that uniform. You have brought war to our struggling star nation and now many are dead as a direct result of your involvement."

Hayward didn't move a muscle at the pronouncement. If anything he grew more still. Here was a man that had literally held the fate of the Coalition in his hands. As much as he had nearly destroyed it, he had also delivered it. He was traitor and a savior, an oath-breaker and a man of principle. Those things were supposed to be found at opposite ends of the spectrum. How could someone be both? Whatever the case, Hayward was here by choice, and Hammer couldn't afford to forget that.

"Frankly, gentlemen," Lathrop said. "You've left us with one hell of a mess to clean up. With that in mind, it is the finding of this board that both of you are guilty of conspiracy, damage to Reformation Coalition property, desertion of duty and treason. The death penalty has been commuted in light of the cooperation you have rendered. Furthermore, it is the decision of this board that the both of you will leave under armed guard to join the relief expedition to the occupied systems, there to stand down the forces formerly under your command. Once that duty is fully discharged, the both of you will return to Aubaine where you will be stripped of all rank and privileges. You will then serve a prison sentence of life without the possibility of parole."

Hammer looked at the other officers at the table. Their faces seemed carved from stone.

"Our business here is concluded," Hammer brought the gavel down and it boomed throughout the room.

"We are adjourned."

* * *

Once again, Coeur D'Esprit found herself in the palatial penthouse atop the Ambassador Hotel. Across from where she sat, on its toadstool-shaped chair, M. Genghis arranged its other limbs in comfort while six wizened eyes studied its visitor.

"I must tell you, Captain, you have succeeded beyond even our most optimistic models of success. The manipulation to ensure stability to this area of space has been restored to its original path, thanks largely to you. I am sure that the individual, or individuals, behind the counter-manipulation have been undeniably set back by the actions you yourself have orchestrated. Well done, Captain. Well done, indeed."

Coeur nodded in acknowledgement.

"Of course, the loss of the Alpha Bank will have long-term repercussions," M. Genghis said looking at the shattered bits of crystal and metal laid out on the coffee table between them. "I have confidence, however, that bringing the hostilities to a close between the two largest members of the Coalition will more than equal the absence of the Alpha Bank."

Three of his eyestalks lowered to the remnants on the table, while the others maintained their gaze at Coeur.

"Still, as you might say, it is a shame that the information itself was lost. I have sent word on one of our fastest transports to report this news to the Federation. Considering the dangers of transport, we can be certain they won't send another. Our ability to bring humankind to new levels of technological sophistication will have to adopt an even slower pace."

Coeur again nodded without a word.

"There is one point to which I need clarification. If you could satisfy my curiosity on one point, I would be greatly appreciative. As I understand, when you destroyed the Alpha Bank, you

did so to keep it out of enemy hands – a logical choice considering the danger of the situation, and the uncertainty of its outcome.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Here is the curious part, Captain. I examined the remaining fragments of its crystal core in greater detail, it appears that the Alpha Bank was not only dismantled, but it appears that is also *empty*.”

“Well, that *is* a curiosity,” Coeur said with a shadow of a smile.

“Would you care to comment on this phenomenon?”

“I’m not sure, are you sure you really want to know?”

“The reveal is the most important part of a manipulation, Captain,” M. Genghis said. “I sense that is what we are dealing with here. Please, enlighten me.”

“All right. Hammer gave me full authorization to tell you when you invited me to visit.”

“And what would that be?”

“My orders *were* to destroy the Alpha Bank so it wouldn’t fall into enemy hands, which I did. The information *inside* the Alpha Bank, however, was another matter. On my own initiative, I plugged it into *Hornet*’s canaries before we left *Golden Flame*. After all, canaries are vast, empty and self-contained memory banks to give Virus something to play around with in case of infection. *Hornet* carried three of them. They were unloaded as soon as we landed and are now safely in the hands of the Intelligence Branch.”

The Hiver stared at her.

“Extraordinary,” M. Genghis said through his voder. “Newton was entirely convinced you had destroyed it and that the information was lost when we spoke.”

“And that was the point. I knew Newt would tell you it was destroyed, and that you would be inclined to believe a Hiver more than you would me.”

“And now I cannot recall the transport which will deliver word to the Federation,” M. Genghis said. “You manipulated the perceptions skillfully to your advantage. Most Hiver-like of you, Captain.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment.”

“As it was intended. Does this mean the Coalition will now dissolve its relationship with the Federation, I wonder?”

“Oh no,” Coeur stood and smoothed the lines of her uniform. “The relationship between humans and Hivers will continue, but as allies, as *equals*. It may take us some time to make sense of it all, decades perhaps, but Humaniti’s course will be set by us, not you.”

M. Genghis paused for almost a full minute, its six eyes gazing out the window over the bay. It then turned back to her.

“I see that we have grossly underestimated you, Coeur D’Esprit. Clearly, you require further study.”

“That reminds me,” Coeur said. “I have a gift for you.”

At a nod, one of the lthklur guards carried a flat parcel to the sitting area and placed it front of M. Genghis with a bow.

“You continue to intrigue me,” M. Genghis keyed in his computer. “May I ask what it is?”

“Open it and see for yourself.”

A mass of tentacled appendages from its various limbs stripped the brown wrapping paper away to reveal a painting in a gilded frame. Six eyes studied the remarkable likeness of a yellow sun hovering on the horizon of a unbroken topaz sea.

“Did you paint this yourself?”

“Yes,” Coeur said. “Especially for you.”

“I thank you for the gesture. Curious, is this rendering meant to depict a sunrise or a sunset?”

“That, I’ll leave up to you,” Coeur said with a smirk. She checked her chronometer. It was time to get to her next appointment.

“Well, if you will excuse me, M. Genghis, I must take my leave of you.” She replaced the hat on her head that matched her dress uniform. “I have an appointment I have to keep.”

“Very well, Captain,” the Hiver said, rising from its chair. “Please take this.”

One of its tentacles reached down to the table and picked up a piece of hotel stationery that was folded twice in half. "Read it as you leave. I took the liberty of writing it before you arrived."

Coeur accepted it as she stepped in the hallway. One of the new Ithklur guards closed the door. As she made her way to the roof to her waiting speeder, she unfolded the paper. It simply said:

The future of the Reformation Coalition is assured, for now.

Chapter 28

It was Reformation Day, the dawning of the New Era Year 1204. This day had been chosen to commemorate the formation of the Reformation Coalition, in a tradition that started so many stellar and terrestrial nations that had come before. It was the nation's birthday, and the weather had cooperated beautifully.

This day would also carry another meaning to two members of *Hornet's* crew that was just as important as the founding. In the years to come, Vin Escher and Denise Valencia would remember it as their wedding anniversary.

The ceremony was held outdoors, overlooking a breath-taking cliff and a matchless expanse of the sea that stretched to the horizon. The Bride and Groom tied the knot on the steps of a quaint old gazebo. Both of them had opted to wear their respective uniforms for the service and had requested that any of their guests that were active or prior service do the same. It made for an interesting mix of guests with bow-tied tuxedos and sparkling courtly dresses rubbing elbows with bright aiguillettes and dress swords. Soft and stately music soared to the heavens off the strings of the violin and cello ensemble.

Officiating over the service was the same military chaplain they'd met at Horus. As was the Orriflammen custom, there were no bridesmaids or groomsmen. The two stood in front of their guests, love in their eyes. Vin looked especially handsome in his uniform, tall and dashing. Denise made her own uniform shine as beautiful as any wedding dress might have. It was her day to be beautiful and she was.

From the front row, Mr. and Mrs. Valencia, Snapshot's parents, sat holding hands with faces that looked like they could barely contain their joy. In a stroke of luck, the teacher and engineer from Dobroye had left on a leisurely star liner cruise that had left Oriflamme before the lockdown and traveled to Aubaine by way of Shenandoah and Lucifer. Their route had kept them out of the fighting and clear of danger. Having met them now, Coeur could plainly see where Snapper came by her strengths.

There were reporters from the Aubani Broadcast Network here as well, lead by ABN news anchor, Amanda Donovan, who had herself been one of the hostages rescued from the building. At Ms. Donovan's request, her team stayed respectfully to the fringes, making themselves virtually invisible to the assembled host. When word had come down that that an Aubani and Oriflammen were to be married on Reformation Day, both of whom had served

Aubaine during the conflict, the human interest angle was too good to pass up. Theirs was a symbolic union that showed a literal coming together of the two estranged worlds, a healing of the rift. Here were two lovers that crossed the stars, but had proven to be anything but star-crossed.

Had the reporters known the full extent of their contributions, it would've been a media circus with helicopters and contra-grav recorder bots blotting out the sun. But, that wasn't the case. The attempt to infect the world with Virus had been classified in heartbeat along with virtually all of *Hornet's* exploits since returning from Mexit. It was unlikely that the public or 99% of their service brothers and sisters would ever know the full story. Even Ms. Donovan had no idea that Virus had been involved or that a nuclear weapon had been disarmed by the groom in the ABN tower. That was just fine with Coeur, who sat watching the exchanging of personalized vows from her seat in the audience. Some things were better left hidden.

Still, it was funny to think that people might pass her crew on the street and not realize the courage they'd shown, nor the lengths they had gone to so that the Reformation Coalition would endure to see its latest birthday.

My crew...Coeur thought...I guess in a way I'll always think of them that way even when the times they are a changin'.

Now that *Hornet* was no longer in service, this wedding was the first of many changes that were leading its crew, or rather its *former* crew, in different directions in life. There were opportunities and duties that had come their way in the aftermath of events. She knew that the time she'd spent in command of *Hornet* had been a relatively short stint, but even as this era of her life came to a close, there would be a part of her mind where the ship and crew would live, untouched, just as they were, forever.

She turned to Gyro, who sat next to her wiping away tears of joy. As solid as she was, there was a streak of sentimentality to her previous executive officer. Orders had come down the pipe the day before that Johanna Solomon would soon assume command of the SDB, *Valley Forge*. It would be carried on the crooked spine of *Apollo* to the Spires system, a replacement for the fallen *Cervantes*. Coeur felt no small amount of pride at Gyro's promotion. Her student, turned XO, turned friend, would take up Mad Dog's old post. If anyone came to the Spires system with foul intent, they would have to contend with her first.

To the side of the rows of chairs Deep Six floated, ensconced in his water-filled roller chair. His barbells twitched with excitement at the ceremony. He had similarly received a new assignment. A navigator and astrogator of his consummate skill wouldn't sit on the bench for very long. In the re-organization of the fleet, a navigator's position had opened up aboard *Maggart*. It was not only the ship that bore the name of the Secretary General, but it was the first of the *Maggart*-class of larger more powerful clippers. She was destined to be a trend-setter.

Maggart was slated to leave the system once repaired and embark on the relief expedition. His book of poetry, *Reflections on the Void*, was currently enjoying large amounts of pre-order sales and was eagerly anticipated by the public.

Sacha Po sat on the end of the row next to the Schalli so she could more easily maneuver her mended leg. The current commanding officer of RCC *Altinak* was taking a short break from the ongoing repairs and modifications to her ship. Once believed to be good only for ersatz operations, the Admiralty had decided to fully repair the relic survey ship. *Altinak* would finish her conversion into a system defense carrier for which she'd shown a surprising aptitude. The woman that was the only living vestige of her original engineering crew knew her inside and out more than anyone alive. When someone spoke of a commander knowing every bolt, every weld of her ship, Sacha Po literally fit the bill. Her ship would be attached as an adjunct to *Kukulcan*, working in tandem to fill in the mighty monitor's weakspots with her wings of Rampart fighters.

On the other side of Gyro sat Physic and her new partner in business, the newly-arrived Tirese Serene. August Delpero's Lawyer, Karsten Vae, had found her after the cessation of hostilities, presenting a unique case to her. Her divorce from Novastar's CEO had come shortly before the assets of the company were frozen by the government. As such, she was entitled to a vast sum of shares in the company, which had been greatly expanded due to the doctor's place on *Hornet*. Virtually everything that belonged to Delpero now belonged to her, from money to mansions. In the absence of a clear successor to the corporate throne, Dr. Orit Takagawa now had the controlling interest in the megacorporation. Not long after, she announced that Novastar

would be merging with Kruytercorp, where she would head up an advanced medical research facility on Aurora. It was no wonder that their marketing department was quick to put both of their holoivid-perfect faces on their banners and promotions.

As Coeur watched, the chaplain pronounced the happy couple man and wife. Snapshot, in a fiery display, removed her hat and leapt into Drop Kick's arms as they shared a long, lingering kiss to the thunderous applause and cheers of the onlookers. The reception began with *Hornet's* Marines charging forward to congratulate their commanding officer. Everyone, that is, except Hunter, who had accepted the duty to remain behind and guard the cake with the same sharply-focused attention he would display if the triple tiers of chocolate cake beside him had been a Hiver dignitary.

Coeur got out of her seat and made her way to the line forming around the punch bowl. The blushing bride, she observed, was almost smothered by the press of Marines that surrounded her. Just this morning, she had accepted a position as a missileer aboard *Kukulcan*, whose armament would be revamped. As with the rest of *Hornet's* crew, this new job had come with both a promotion and a number of citations for serving far above and beyond the norm. Their exploits may have been swept under the carpet, but the Admiralty knew their story and so the fruit salad on her wedding uniform was full and overflowing. The post would keep her in the Aubaine system. It was a healthy arrangement for a newlywed because her husband would be only a shuttle's flight away.

Next to her, Drop Kick was surrounded by his brothers and sister-at-arms. With their customary knack for spotting team dynamics that produced results, the RCMC brass was keeping this battle-hardened group together for their next project. Impressed with his use of combined cavalry and infantry tactics, he had been approached to put together a Dragoon training program that would combine elements of both schools of battlefield doctrine. In effect, he would be developing a method where tankers would learn to dismount and ground-pounders would learn to mount up. Bonzo, Mercy, Hunter and Raptor would be his senior instructors, each bringing a wealth of experiences to the curriculum. The latter two had formally requested detached duty from the Hiver Guard to the RCMC as a sort of semi-permanent officer exchange program.

The two Ithklur were not the only one from the Hiver Federation that decided to stay. Coeur's gaze went to the blond woman on Bonzo's arm. Cassandra Mayfield had volunteered her services to the Admiralty to help stitch the patchwork fleet they possessed back into a fighting force. Her skills as an engineer were the rival anyone on Aubaine given her formal naval training, and she'd proven she could handle command of a ship under fire extraordinarily well too. There had been a few light-hearted jibs from Tirese Serene at hearing that her courier had been crashed into an enemy ship. She'd waived the bill, asking only that the young woman come to Kruyter at some point to get her other couriers back in working order.

As Coeur took a sip of her sweet punch, music from the erected sidestage began to play, beginning with a catchy guitar hook. Raven stepped up to the microphone and began to sing in a pure, silken voice. Coeur recognized the song she'd chosen to kick off the festivities. It was an old Terran classic that had been covered and reinvented over the centuries since its origin. It went:

*I've got sunshine
On a cloudy day.
When it's cold outside,
I've got the month of May.*

*I guess you'll say
What can make me feel this way?
My girl.
Talkin' 'bout my girl.
My girl.*

The intelligence officer belted out the song with note-perfect pitch. The crowd began clapping. Some even broke into dance. Coeur had initially wondered about how Raven tapped into the emotion of her audience when she'd given her performances aboard *Hornet*. Now she knew her telepathic abilities were much of the reason. The rest was that she played every role to

the hilt. In the coming months, the role she'd be asked to assume was damage control to the intelligence community. Somehow the revolutionaries had built up a fleet, been in contact with the Solee and got all the way to the RC capitol all without the Intelligence Branch getting so much as a whiff of what was happening. It was a monumental fumble that could not be repaired overnight. Raven would be among those taking a long hard look at the internal workings of the Coalition so that a situation like this would never have the opportunity to blindsides them again. It was a tall order, but one Lauren Porfira was infinitely capable of undertaking.

Even as she finished that song and jumped directly into *Open Arms*, an orchestral piece accented with a slow piano, the perfect compliment to her smoldering vocals. Only when she sang like this could Coeur detect the sadness Raven carried with her. It would be a long time in leaving, and would never fully go away, but Crowbar's final act had challenged each of them to make the most of their lives, a lesson Coeur wished she had learned years ago.

Opposite the stage was the snack bar. Platters of snackable foods were artfully arranged to tide the guests over before the main meal was served. It was there that Razor stood on four of its limbs chowing down on bits of cheese, champagne and the specially imported corndogs that Snapshot had ordered from the local Hiver stores. The Hiver had taken it upon itself to dress for the occasion by commissioning a specially made tuxedo to accommodate its six-limbed radial symmetry. As its prime limb was naturally assumed by many to be a head, it was as the base of that limb that it placed the white ruffled shirt collar and bow-tie. As odd as it seemed, it looked surprisingly good. Newton, or M. Newton, as it was now known for the manipulation aboard *Golden Flame*, had just accepted position within the Research and Development department of the Technical Academy. Given all the relic Imperial tech that had been a windfall of the battle, Razor would be on the team to study it to help improve the overall tech level of the Coalition. It was a prestigious position, but M. Newton had left the door open for further duty aboard starships should the need arise.

Couples were already dancing here and there as the bride and groom made ready to join them. One of the pairs already in motion was Liu An-Wing and a greatly-recovered Bela Marsaryk. Liu was no stranger to the dance floor and Bela kept up with her as best he could. As much as the two had been a pain in her neck before, Coeur knew instinctively that these two would be instrumental in restoring their homeworld. Liu's growing power and leadership coupled with Bela's scholarly mind and ideas would be a force for change, and change for the better. They were what Oriflamme needed right now, and their timing couldn't be better. As it happened, both were smiling as they engaged in an old-time waltz, and they had reason to be happy. Oriflamme had been accepted back into the Coalition. The word of the man standing next to her in his exquisite white and gold jacket had carried them through.

"My lady," Delvin Garrett said extending his hand. "Might I have the pleasure of this dance?"

"I think we can arrange that, my lord."

The Regent's stand behind the Oriflammen case had lent the necessary weight to bring them back into the fold. The other representatives found that if *he* could forgive them after everything he had endured, they would look like spoiled, squabbling children if they didn't do the same. It had been a master stroke. Opposition melted away and the decision was passed without the ruinous sanctions and strictures that Oriflamme could ill afford. Until Phoebus was reclaimed, he would remain on Aubaine, which would give them time to see more of each other. As they danced, Coeur reflected on what an odd pair they made. They came from two different worlds, had almost polar opposite views of politics and government, not to mention that he was a planetary leader and she was a starship Captain. There was, however a sense of synergy between them that was undeniable, but they were determined to take it slow.

His presence at the wedding, as well as the attention he was giving her, had been noticed by Ms. Donovan and the other journalists. No doubt speculation was already flying, but it didn't bother Coeur in the least.

As for her own plans, Coeur had her pick of assignments. She could take up her teaching position at the Academy again, which had a definite appeal to her, or she could choose to command a starship again. The *Suliman Victrix* was one that had recently opened up and was in need of a skipper as was the *Lirgiskhunan* and a number of others. If she did take another ship, she knew it would never be the same as *Hornet*.

Her ship had been brought down from orbit as little more than a burned out hulk. She had toyed around with going to see her, but hadn't. She much preferred to remember her ship as she'd been in Berth 57 before the battle. *Hornet's* fate was now uncertain. The ships of the fleet were badly in need of repairs along side with the mass of recovered Oriflammen and Solee ships that were being added to the Coalition order of battle. Resources were going to be stretched thin, which left the for the little *Jayhawk*-class far trader straddling the line between being brought back into service sometime in the future, or returning to the scrap heap from whence she'd come. As she danced with Delvin, she blinked back a tear at was had threatened to form.

If *Hornet* never took to the stars again, she had given her all in the defense of her country and lived up to her name; there was no better epitaph a ship could earn as that.

Really, the only member of *Hornet's* extended family not in attendance here was her sometimes friend, oftentimes enemy, Vega Zorn. Zorn, like many of the Solee operatives had vanished like a ghost from Aubaine. When word came down that someone had stolen the fiery transport rumored to contain August Delpero's library of dirty secrets, Coeur had known immediately who was behind it. It was unlikely that the Reformation Coalition had heard the last of her.

The music faded and the dancing ceased as the newly-minted couple came over next to her and held up there hands to gather everyone's attention.

"Coeur," Drop Kick said quietly. "I'd be honored if you would give the first toast. It would mean a lot to everyone."

He pressed a glass of champagne in her hand as white-gloved stewards distributed sparkling glasses to the guests from silver trays. Once Snapshot had everyone's attention, she motioned to Coeur who lifted her glass high into the air.

These people were more than her friends, they were her family. No matter where they went, what new horizons they visited, nothing would change that. They were all here, assembled in one place and their presence lifted her spirits to the heavens.

For all their friends now gone, this was what that they had fought and died for – a brighter tomorrow, a new dawn.

This was future they built.

Eric Pool, Errol Van Dorn, Kal Warren, Takari Bron, Desmond Pierce, Rikart Orlaf, Veranus Ikythansii, Robert Ryan, August Delpero, Glaive Ertani, and countless others.

This was their legacy. It would be a tough act to follow.

"Ladies and gentlemen," Coeur said as everyone lifted their glasses, "to absent friends."

Epilogue

It was midnight in the garden. The moonless night over Solee was illuminated by the dim stars and the many anachronistic lamp posts that had been installed by Her Majesty's command. Each black pillar cast ghostly cones of light among the thick trellises lined with roses, asters and violet orchids.

The Imperial hanging gardens were quiet at this hour, save for the chirping insects that were busily singing to the night. In the very center sat a circular stone fountain depicting five lions facing outwards. From their fierce frozen roars a never-ending stream of water issued, creating waterfalls that splashed and played upon the waters below.

It was here that Sir Amaraan Abas came to think. The atmosphere was clean, without distraction, somehow pure. This was his *sanctum sanctorum* where could he bend his every thought on matters of state, focus his singularly brilliant mind on the problems before him.

Tonight he had a lot to think about.

As he often did, Abas stood with one foot on the rim of the fountain where he could lean over and gaze at the surface of the water that mirrored the night sky. The tiniest disturbance could be observed and followed to its end. It was almost as if he could see those rings move across the very stars they reflected. It was a constant parallel of the duties he performed for Her Majesty. It was his responsibility to throw stones into the pool of the universe and use those disturbances to further his Queen's agenda.

He was not a spymaster, as such, but there was not an intelligence gathering organization in her Majesty's employ that did not genuflect when he entered the room. He more than just a spy, he was Her Majesty's silent general, commanding in his arsenal not only ships, weapons and men, but information, propaganda and subversion.

He was the hand that turned the wheel.

It was a job that he approached with a kind of skill unrivalled anywhere in the Empire. He was also a man unaccustomed to failure, which made the news he'd received that much more difficult to accept.

The hand-written letter he clutched in one tight hand had informed him that Operation Tempest had been a spectacular failure. Not only had it failed, but he had lost a key operative, instrumental not only to the mission, but to the health and well-being of the Navy. Only a few ships had returned home to report the disastrous about-face the Oriflammen scum had pulled on the Solee fleet. Somehow they'd known the Solee were about to turn on them and acted first, betraying the betrayer. Somehow they had seen through their mask.

Where had it gone wrong? They had found the perfect Oriflammen sap with which to eviscerate the Coalition from the inside out. This rogue Technarch was so convinced of his own superiority that the trusting fool had been willing to let the Solee play divide and conquer within his borders. It had been child's play to manipulate him. Everything his people had asked for the Technarch had provided, including valuable intelligence on the inner workings of his greatest foe. The hardest part had been finding him in the first place.

But somehow, their designs had been blocked, and it was unclear why. He would find out who was responsible; he would find out why the Empire's greatest nemesis did not lie in smoking ruin.

Those that had returned would know only bits and pieces of the story. They were a natural starting point from which to reconstruct the salience of events, to see the ripples in the water and understand their ends. Two of his greatest field agents had made it back, along with a few of the senior officers the surviving commandos had rescued. There was one among them that would prove very useful in the protracted struggle ahead, though Abas would need to keep him close. As much as the man could prove an invaluable resource, he could just as soon become a rival. Certainly the personal attention Her Majesty was paying him was proof enough of that.

That was a conflict for another time, however. For now, the Knight Defender of the Realm would regroup, and let the Navy lick its wounds. He would let the Coalition think they had won a great victory, that they had broken the Solee will or curbed their appetite for conquest. All the while, he would marshal his forces both conventional and clandestine.

Now the Coalition was unified, their carefully nurtured tension brought into the open and resolved, with possession of a fleet rivaling their own, or so they thought. In the interim, the stalemate between them would be reset, but it wouldn't stay that way. Relic ships continued to be discovered. New ships were being constructed. The eyes and ears of the Solee spread across space and their hand could be felt far from the lines of their borders.

Their day would come.

Sooner or later that troublesome knot of planets would fall, and when they did it would be by his hand. This round had undeniably gone to the Reformation Coalition, Abas conceded, but the game was not lost, nor was it over.

Crumpling the piece of paper in his hand, he flung it into the waters of the fountain. It dissolved into nothingness, leaving only ripples to mark its passage.