



DAVID DERRICO

Do mankind's past
sins merit the
ultimate punishment?

DECLINATION

THE SEQUEL TO RIGHT ASCENSION

On the bridge of the *Apocalypse*, multihued status lights blinked their variegated chorus, tactical display consoles streamed data garnered from the enemy vessel, and the ship's computer silently tended to a myriad of pre-programmed functions. The ship was seven short of its normal complement, leaving only one man—Daniel Atgard—but his attention was not concentrated on blinking lights or scrolling read-outs. Daniel Atgard's attention was, instead, focused rather intently on the viewscreen, which displayed an image that was, though from a decade ago, hauntingly familiar.

Suddenly, the viewscreen changed, resolving to show the bridge of the alien ship. Every detail of the bridge was exactly as he remembered it: hovering light-beings clustered around indecipherable patterns of light, flickering and changing shape seemingly at will. In the center was a being more brilliant than the rest, and the Admiral was forced to squint in order to prevent the entire scene from merging into a single luminous blur.

"Yes, Admiral Daniel Caesar Atgard," came the being's delayed response. "We do indeed remember you."

The words—or, more accurately, the thoughts—of the creature were not spoken aloud, but instead reverberated only in Daniel's mind.

"Good," replied the Admiral, leaning forward in his command chair, uncomfortably aware that he was alone on the ship. "Then you remember what happened the last time you killed innocent people without provocation."

"Yes," replied the being, in the same manner as before. "We do indeed remember what happened."

"Yet you destroy entire planets," spat the Admiral, only peripherally aware that his emotions were threatening to overcome him. "And you come again to destroy another. Must we trade death for death? How many will be enough? How many humans do you have to kill before the 'justice' you claim you seek has been meted out?"

The aliens appeared to ponder this for several moments, flickering in unison as they presumably discussed their response. Abruptly the flickering abated, and the light-being in the center seemed to float slightly closer as it spoke.

"All of them," it said.

The viewscreen suddenly went black.

PRAISE FOR DECLINATION

"I enjoyed my hours in Captain Mason's company quite thoroughly. The Vr'amil'een make me hope to meet more Derrico-created alien species, **his human characters have more depth** here than in his first novel, and he brings his tale to a wrenchingly ironic (and surprising) conclusion. He offers **a morality play transformed into high adventure and that's a working definition of science fiction at its best.**"

- *Nina M. Osier, eBook-Reviews.net*

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A NOVEL BY DAVID DERRICO

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PUBLISHING HISTORY

First digital edition published, Oct 2002

First paperback edition published, Oct 2002

Second digital edition published, Mar 2007

Second paperback edition published, Aug 2009

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v. 2.11

ISBN: 978-1-4486-8914-9 (print version)

ALSO BY DAVID DERRICO

**RIGHT ASCENSION,
THE PREQUEL TO DECLINATION**

For my mother, Debra Derrico.

CHAPTER 1
16 NOV 3050

The bridge seemed cold, Anastasia thought, though she distantly realized that it was probably just her nerves. The chair she sat in—the captain’s chair—felt uncomfortably new, and she could not help but fidget self-consciously. Though the memory-gel cushion had quickly adjusted to her form, it somehow lacked the comfort of her previous command chair, which had, through years of use, totally adapted to her. More importantly, she thought, she had totally adapted to it.

Anastasia fought to suppress a shiver, something in the back of her mind preventing her from getting comfortable on her new ship. The hairs at the nape of her neck tingled, thankfully hidden from view by the long black locks that trailed down her back. She made a conscious effort to push her impending mission from her thoughts, with little success.

Unconsciously, Captain Mason ran her slender fingers over the chair’s armrest controls. Just about every system aboard the magnificent ship could be controlled from there, though Anastasia certainly did not doubt the need for the vessel’s other seven crewmembers. After all, she remembered, she had been one of those crewmembers on a similar ship not so long ago.

The Captain gazed at the ship’s familiar bridge and thought how things had seemingly come full circle. Yet, though she had sat in a chair just like this one on a ship almost exactly like this one many times, this time was undeniably different. Whereas, a decade ago, she had only sat in the chair as the ship’s First Officer, now the chair was rightfully *hers*. And, whereas, onboard the *Apocalypse*, she had served under the legendary Admiral Daniel Atgard, this time, this ship—*this crew*—was her responsibility, and hers alone.

Anastasia inhaled deeply, her lungs not yet accustomed to the ship’s recycled air. Though oxygen, pressure, and humidity were all theoretically maintained at levels that precisely reproduced conditions on Earth, Anastasia had always felt that canned air had a funny smell. Scientists and technicians would swear that there was no noticeable difference between pure air and the manufactured variety, but Captain Mason could sense the tinny, artificial quality of shipborne air.

She would soon get used to it, however. She always did, after a time.

The Captain looked around, finding that the bridge layout was just as she had remembered it, and for a fleeting moment it seemed as if it was just yesterday that Captain Mason had spent most of her waking hours on just such a bridge. She looked to the First Officer's chair to her right, and an unconscious smile found its way to her lips.

"Captain?"

Anastasia blinked to find that she had been staring curiously at Commander Victor Zeeman. The Commander was middle-aged, his kindly face topped with a short crop of graying hair. He returned the Captain's gaze with an inquiring look of his own.

"Sorry, Commander," she replied, "I was just reminiscing for a moment."

Victor smiled, chuckling lightly. "*The Apocalypse*, eh?"

The Captain nodded, clearing her mind and bringing her full attention back to the present. "That was some ship."

"And some crew," the Commander replied. "You all seemed to do pretty well for yourselves after the *Apocalypse* was retired."

Lieutenant Matthews, seated at the pilot's console in the front of the bridge, turned to the two officers and added, "I guess the least they could do was promote everyone after that Lucani Ibron thing, right, Captain?"

Anastasia's eyebrows arched upward. *That Lucani Ibron thing.* "Well, if you wanted to get yourself promoted, the best way to do it was to get yourself on Admiral Atgard's crew."

Commander Zeeman looked to her and smiled. "If you were good enough to get on his crew," he replied, "you were good enough to get yourself promoted anyway."

Anastasia smiled, but said nothing. She didn't really know which theory was right.



The transport shuddered violently, and the restraining harnesses were the only things that kept the soldiers in the back of the vehicle from being tossed around the cabin like toys. The transport was filled with its normal complement—12 soldiers—and space aboard the vessel was tight. Though he was sweating beneath his combat gear, Dex barely even noticed that the cabin temperature—not unusually—had reached 35 degrees Celsius.

There was a new force acting upon the dropshuttle now, and the

jostling quickly became more intense. The retros had fired, and the vessel was slowing itself rapidly before it impacted the hard desert floor several thousand meters below.

An orange light over the exit hatch lit up, and Commander Rutcliffe braced himself for the impending impact. The dropshuttle slammed into the ground, stirring up a plume of red dirt that could be seen through the cabin's two wide, slitted viewports. Almost instantly, the light over the door flashed green, and the restraining harnesses broke away. The hatch slammed open, and it only took a few moments for the dozen Commandos to file out of the ship.

Dropping into a combat stance beside his men, Dex reached behind him and pulled his MX-18 repeater rifle from its holster, training it on the mountains to his left. He quickly surveyed their drop zone, a barren, red expanse of dirt almost completely ringed by a short mountain range. Several outcroppings of rock dotted the plain, but, all in all, it was one of the most disadvantaged fighting positions he had ever had the pleasure of landing in.

"Team two," he called, his gruff voice audible over the slowly fading resonance of the dropship's spent thrusters, "get to that outcropping and watch the mountains to the east. Team three, use the dropship for cover and watch their flanks. Team one, you're with me."

Without waiting for a response, Dex sprang to his feet and raced to a series of rock outcroppings to his left. The heavy footfalls of three of his men followed him, and, predictably, just before they reached the safety of the rocks, the mountains opened up in a deluge of laser fire.

Dex dove to the ground, sliding along the loose upper layer of dirt and rolling into a crouch at the base of one of the rock formations. He hid his body behind the boulder, sliding his rifle into a crevice in the barrier, and opened fire on the mountain range.

The rest of his team was also returning fire, but, with the cover provided by the mountains, he knew their shots were mostly ineffectual. The enemy had entrenched themselves in the mountains, and they were firing upon his men from two separate protected positions. Dex quickly surveyed the terrain between him and the mountains and ducked back behind the rock. "Zip," he yelled, his muscles coiled, "follow me!"

Dex tossed the smoke grenade a half-second before he sprang to his feet, and it quickly exploded into a thick ball of concealing white smoke. He waited just an instant before rushing into the cloud, watch-

ing as the attackers' fire tracked toward the billowing gas. As soon as it had, the remaining two members of his team sprang up from behind their concealed positions, laying down a heavy pattern of covering fire. The attackers' fire thinned out, and Dex and Zip raced through the cloud and toward the mountains, still nearly fifty meters away. The smoke cloud was beginning to dissipate, and Dex cocked the bottom barrel of his assault rifle. A concussion grenade locked into the firing chamber, and Dex fired it at the attackers' position in the mountains before him. He and Zip ran out of the cloud just in time to see the explosion rock the mountainside.

Dex did not slow as he reached the base of the mountain, instead leaping into it and grabbing hold of a thin ledge above him. He quickly slung his rifle over his shoulder and reached up with his free hand, pulling himself even higher along the rock wall. In a few seconds, he had reached a more substantial ledge, and he hauled himself over.

Zip quickly followed him up, and from his new vantage point Dex could finally see his attackers. They were Turians, all right, and their russet hides provided near-perfect camouflage against the rock face. Dex's keen eyes, however, scanned the area in front of him, making out several of the attackers' hiding spots.

Switching his rifle to sniper mode, Dex lifted the weapon to his chin and fired several quick but well-aimed bursts. Each shot was accompanied by an anguished grunt as its target was hit, and several of the dead Turians tumbled all the way to the ravine floor below.

As if he could sense the imminent counterattack, Dex ducked behind the curving mountain face just as a smattering of laser fire descended on his position. Commander Rutcliffe peered back toward his men on the ground, and could see that they had taken advantage of the distraction, making a concerted attack on the remaining enemy position. Team three had used the distraction to move to an outcropping only a hundred meters from the enemies, and Dex could hear the muffled thumps of several concussion grenades.

By the time the smoke from the grenades had cleared, the enemy fire had completely abated. Dex scanned the mountainside one last time and thumbed his nanocomputer's comlink. "Rutcliffe to Control," he reported. "Position secure."



It took six rings of the door chime before the door slid open, and

immediately Alexis knew that when she entered, she would find Ryan hunched over his workbench, no doubt tinkering with the project that had consumed him for the better part of the last year.

Alexis walked into the room, and, predictably, Ryan was sitting in the corner, his rapt attention focused on a tiny device in his hands. While technically in his mid-forties, Ryan Taylor's curiosity and penchant for gadgets and pranks more befit a man half his age.

"You busy?" she asked cheerfully.

"Never too busy for you, dear," he replied, looking up at her for the first time. He flashed a smile, and then, turning back to his work, he added, "It's almost done, you know."

"It's about time," she joked, taking a few short steps toward him and craning her neck in an attempt to see just what it was Ryan had been working on so secretly for so long. As if he could sense her curiosity, the corner of Ryan's lip curled upward as he worked.

"You'll find out what it is soon enough, 'Lexi," he said, snapping a component into place and picking up a small instrument from a random pile before him. "Soon enough."

"Like when?" she asked impatiently, fingering a strand of her flame-red hair.

Ryan passed the instrument over the device and set them both down on the table. "I'd say in about 15 seconds," he said, clapping his hands together.

"It's done?" asked Alexis, rushing over to him. "Can I see?"

"Sure," he said, picking up the device and rising from his seat. "Sit over there and enjoy the show."

Alexis obliged, sitting in a chair across from him and quickly folding her hands in her lap. Ryan took the device, which seemed to be a standard personal nanocomputer, and strapped it to his wrist. There was an almost inaudible hum, and Alexis thought she saw Ryan momentarily wince in pain just before a broad smile covered his face.

"Check this out," he said.

Ryan extended his arm outward, and suddenly the nanocomputer's holo-vid projector flared to life, projecting a three-dimensional image of their ship, the *Brigadier*, into the air between them.

"How in the—"

"You see, I've modified this encee to accept direct neural inputs," Ryan explained. "I can now control it by simply—"

As he spoke, the projection wavered, flashing on and off before disappearing entirely. As it did, a bright spark shot out from the

nanocomputer on Ryan's wrist, searing a patch of his dark skin.

"Ow!"

"Are you okay?" Alexis asked, rising from her seat.

"Yeah, I'm fine," he grumbled. "I guess it still needs a bit of work."

"Hey," Alexis said, walking over to him and placing her hand on his shoulder, "that was pretty cool, Ryan. Really amazing, actually. And I'm sure you'll have it perfected in no time."

Ryan sighed disconsolately. "Yeah, I guess."

"I have faith in you," Alexis said, looking into his eyes. She suppressed a chuckle. "Just so long as you don't want to test your next prototype on me."

Ryan looked at her sternly, but he could not help but laugh.



The alert board was lit up with about two dozen different red lights, and, frankly, Zach was getting more than a little annoyed at the computer's incessant, droning warnings.

"Starboard shields down," it chirped. "Inertial dampeners failing. Engines exceeding recommended limits."

With a flick of his wrist, Zach hit the mute switch and silenced the computer's nagging.

Turning his attention back to the battle raging around him, Commander Wallace looped his fighter into a tight upward circle, and, when the stars had finished their gyrations, his targeting sights were locked on the ship that had been pursuing him. A few bursts of his wing-mounted Gatling lasers, and the fighter flashed into a ball of debris.

A laser impact rocked the side of his ship and Zach peripherally noticed that a few more warning lights had flashed to life on his console. He was glad he had muted the computer.

"Damn," he called into the intercom, turning to look at the ship that had fired at him. It was an older model Zach had encountered several times before, and Zach remembered with a smile the vulnerable points of the aging ship. "This is getting old. Who wants to make a run at that Corvette?"

"I'm with you, Wolfpack Commander," chimed a voice from over the intercom. "Let's take that bastard out."

"Alright, Raven," Zach replied. "Form on my wing."

Raven obliged his order, and both fighters headed toward the larger Corvette, which seemed to erupt in an even thicker hailstorm of

laser fire as they approached. Jerking his ship under the Corvette's nose, Zach flew by the larger vessel at high speed, concentrating several shots in the area of the ship's armoured shield generators. Following close behind him, Raven poured several bright lances of her own into the area, finishing off the barrage with a well-aimed missile shot.

Another laser impact rocked Zach's vessel, and, though the computer voice was supposedly muted, it reported nonetheless: "Warning—shields down. Hull integrity at 72%."

Zach cursed under his breath, but checked his scanner readouts to find that the Corvette's shields were down as well. Not a bad trade, he thought.

"You ready to do this?" asked Zach, curving his ship around for another pass. "Lay down covering fire. I'm going for the bridge."

"Aye, Wolfpack Commander. Watch the dorsal turrets."

Zach drove the thruster handle as far forward as it would go, and the engines responded, filling the cabin with their resonating hum and surging the ZF-575 to great speed. The inventory display showed three missiles left—plus the single Hellfire missile—and Zach keyed the weapons control for group targeting.

"Targeting control inoperative," warned the voice of the computer.

"I thought I shut you up?" asked Zach rhetorically, keying the switch for manual fire control. Clustering all four missiles on the bridge at this speed was probably impossible.

Of course, to Zach, that only meant that it had never been done.

The two fighters approached the Corvette, and Raven's lasers began to rake the underbelly of the vessel just before Zach opened fire on the bridge. Using his lasers to target, he fired all four missiles as soon as his shots began to impact the critical bridge area. By the time they had exploded, he and Raven had completed their run, and sped away from the dangerous vessel.

A great explosion shot forth from the bottom of the Corvette, cracking the ship's hull in two. The broken pieces slowly began to drift apart, inert and lifeless. Zach checked his tactical display to see that the remaining pirate fighters were evacuating the area.

"Wolfpack squadron, report."

As the voices of each of his pilots reported over the intercom, Zach looked down to the status board, almost completely covered with red and amber warning lights. "Damn, I'm good," he said, smiling. "Score one more for the Wolfpack."



“Can we start her up now, Captain?”

Anastasia looked to her pilot, and it took her mind a moment to fully realize that it was no longer the cocky Lieutenant Zach Wallace at the controls. Lieutenant Cody Matthews, like Zach was then, was an ex-fighter pilot, and, similarly, appeared to Anastasia far too young to be aboard a Confederation starcraft. His record, however, which included stints on both fighters and Corvettes, was unblemished, and included several commendations, not only for piloting skill, but for bravery in combat as well.

“Yes, Lieutenant Matthews,” she replied, smiling at the slender helmsman. “Go ahead.”

The bridge, which had been almost silent a moment ago, was suddenly filled with the pervasive hum of energy as the ship’s systems powered up from standby mode. Lights on status boards all around the perimeter of the bridge flickered to life, and a projection appeared in the front of the bridge, displayed by the viewscreen’s hidden holo-vid projectors.

“Welcome,” began the voice of the computer. “This is the MP-724 semi-sentient control system computer. You are on board the ZX-999 *Inferno*. Please prepare to complete the preflight checklist prior to—”

Anastasia flipped a switch and cut short the computer’s introduction. She did not need a computer to tell her how to captain a ship. Especially not this one.

“Okay, Lieutenant Matthews,” she said, “take her out of port. Ariyana,” she added, turning to her navigation officer, “inform flight control of our departure and chart a course for the Pacifica System.”

“Captain,” interjected Byron, her tactical officer, “shouldn’t we complete the preflight checklist before we head out?”

Byron’s reputation seemed to be well deserved, Anastasia thought. She had been told that the older man was a stickler for details, and she hoped his by-the-book approach served to keep her in line rather than to get on her nerves. She also hoped Lieutenant Commander Johnson’s reputation as a top-notch tactical officer was equally well deserved.

“It’s fine, Commander,” she explained. “They ran those same status checks half a dozen times before we even got on board, believe me.”

Ariyana turned from her navigation console to look at them, wisps of light brown hair snaking down her back. “Don’t worry, Com-

mander—Captain Mason knows this ship like the back of her hand. After all, she was on the *Apocalypse* for almost ten years.”

Byron silently nodded his head, surely aware that Ariyana knew Anastasia’s history well, as she had served as her navigator and astrometric technician for the last six years. In fact, Anastasia noted with a hint of chagrin, Lieutenant Romano, now in her late thirties, was the only member of her new crew that she had served with before.

“Of course,” Byron apologized, casting his gaze downward. “I was just reminding the Captain of standard procedure.”

“You go ahead and keep quoting standard procedure,” Anastasia offered. “I could use the reminders sometimes.” She looked up and smiled. “Just don’t expect me to follow them too often.”

Byron smiled back at her, obviously relieved.

“So what was it like?” interrupted Lieutenant Matthews, spinning around in his pilot’s chair to face them. “What was it like being on board the *Apocalypse* and stopping the Lucani Ibron?”

Anastasia’s head tilted to one side as she thought back to that ship and that crew, so similar to this one, yet so completely different. “The best way I could describe it, Cody, is to say that it was the most exhilarating, terrifying, rewarding time in my entire life. I was proud, exhausted, relieved. Most of all, I felt fortunate. Fortunate that fate and planning and pure dumb luck had come together to put the right man in the right place at the right time.” She paused for a long moment. “I don’t know how else to describe it than that.”

“Not just the right man,” Commander Zeeman interjected. “The right crew.”

“Maybe,” Anastasia said, shaking her head, seemingly unconvinced. “But I don’t think Earth would still be here if not for Daniel Atgard. Whatever the rest of us did, we were able to do because of him.”

The bridge was silent for several seconds.

“Do you know what I think, Anastasia?” asked Ariyana softly. “I think you don’t give yourself enough credit. I think, that in a thousand years, historians will look back and point to that moment and say: ‘That was our finest hour.’”

That thought brought a deep smile to Anastasia’s lips. *Our finest hour*, she thought, contentedly. *Our finest hour, indeed.*

CHAPTER 2

Though Anastasia's service to the Confederation spanned half a dozen ships and almost 40 years, the surge that slipped the *Inferno* from her moorings had an effect on her like few other things could. Though Captain Mason had called the inside of a starship home for over half her life, the moment when the *Inferno* embarked on her maiden voyage brought back memories of her first assignment as an Ensign under a man who—even then—was widely regarded as one of the most esteemed people in the Sector. A shiver ran through Anastasia's body, and the smile that always accompanied her reveries involving Daniel Atgard spread across her lips.

For a long moment, the *Inferno* simply hovered just outside the massive gates of the shipyard. The viewscreen showed empty space, punctuated now and again by bright plumes of engine exhaust as small ships darted about seemingly at random. Though some were military vessels, most sported the characteristic yellow drive trails that represented civilian ships, probably transports ferrying passengers between Earth's moon and the planet itself. Anastasia flicked a switch on her console and the viewscreen changed to show the shipyard they had just departed, visible in silhouette against the bright face of the moon below. The shipyard had taken just over a year to produce the *Inferno*, a feat that would have been remarkable had the ship not been based on the now-retired *Apocalypse*, the vessel that had, single-handedly, saved humanity from outright annihilation at the hands of the Lucani Ibron ten years ago.

Though it lacked the awful Omega Cannon of its predecessor, the *Inferno* was designed not to merely equal the unmatched formidability of the *Apocalypse*, but to exceed it. Of course, Anastasia noted, the *Inferno*, having just been completed, had nearly 20 years of new technology under its exquisite hull. Though it was just a tiny fraction the size of many larger warships, it was quite probably the single most dangerous vessel in the known galaxy.

The thought sent a fresh shiver down the Captain's spine.

"Should I head for the jump point, Captain?" asked Lieutenant Matthews, jolting Anastasia back to the present. "I can't wait to see

what she can do.”

“Certainly, Cody,” she replied. “Just try to keep her at sublight speed for a while, okay?”

Cody nodded and eagerly grasped the control stick in his right hand. With his left, he gently inched the thruster handle forward, and the ship, with an effortless power that seemed to propel them from within, began to move.

The viewscreen reverted to a frontal view as the ship turned, and as the slowly-pinwheeling stars glided across the screen, the *Categorical Imperative* came into view.

“My God,” gasped Lieutenant Romano. “What a monster.”

And a monster was precisely what it looked like. More accurately, the skeleton of a monster—impossibly long bands of braided composite alloy, joined every so often where they converged at a nexus, hovered naked in space. Several disembodied segments floated about the beast’s massive form, tethered to the main mass by slim, unseen cables, waiting to be welded to the main body. At one end, the beginnings of a hull had begun to form, a bulbous skin that wrapped around the girders and gave the ship some semblance of a shape. That shape, when completed, would form the largest starship in existence.

Anastasia found that she had been unconsciously shaking her head, in disbelief not so much at the ship, but at the insane mind-set that had caused it to come into being.

She had disapproved of the ship from the start, back when it was conceived in 3041. *Do you not remember the Indomitable?* she wondered. *How could you be willing to risk that again?*

Anastasia, for one, would never forget the *Indomitable*. She could never forget what transpired in the early hours of March 15, 3040. The ghastly image from that morning was burned eternally in her mind. After all, she had been there when it happened. She was, in fact, one of the few eyewitnesses to survive.

“It’s amazing, isn’t it?” Commander Zeeman asked, breaking into her thoughts. “It seems as if they keep making it bigger ... maybe that’s why it’s taking them so long to build the damned thing.”

“Maybe,” Anastasia replied, but she suspected the real reason was that everyone *did* remember the *Indomitable*, and that the delay was caused by the desire to create a truly invincible ship.

Anastasia had served long enough to know that such a ship would never exist.

“We certainly need it,” Byron put in. “With the way things have

gone for the Confederation lately, it—and its Omega Cannon—can't be finished too soon."

"But Commander," Ariyana interjected, "that ship is precisely what caused most of those problems. The pirate activity, terrorist attacks, open rebellion, talk of secession in the Council—they've all tripled since they began building that thing."

"That stuff had been going on before they started the ship," Byron replied. "But I doubt much of it will continue once she's finished."

Anastasia slowly shook her head. "The *Categorical Imperative* won't solve our problems, Byron. Look at the *Indomitable*. It wasn't the end of our problems; it was just the beginning."

Byron was silent.

"We've always been good at creating weapons of war," Anastasia continued, speaking as much to herself as to her crew. "And those weapons helped humanity ascend to its place as the most powerful species in the sector. But with that ascension came a price. First the Lucani Ibron, and now the revolt, the rebellion, the war. Humanity is very good at creating weapons, but has been very poor at using them. Einstein once said that our technology had exceeded our humanity, and that was in the twentieth century. Since then, our technology has only grown. Our humanity—our morality—however, has not. And, as we see now, with every ascension, there comes a declination."

The crew was silent for several moments as they each absorbed Anastasia's words. They each knew that they were words that came not from an abstract philosopher or a misinformed idealist. They were words that came from a seasoned veteran, a true hero of the Confederation whose loyalty and bravery were beyond question.

Captain Mason looked to her crew, and, though she did not know most of them personally, she had studied them. Each had emerged from a rigorous selection process and had been chosen to serve on the *Inferno*. But, more than that, Anastasia had studied their histories, trying to glean what she could, not of their aptitudes and abilities, but of their character, of their emotion, of their humanity. The crew they had assembled was a good one, she thought. But it would take more—on a ship like this one, at a time like this one, it would take more—much more than a "good" crew. If the rising tide of resentment that accompanied the truth about the Korgian Annihilation were to be stemmed, it would take something truly extraordinary. And it would take truly extraordinary people to do it.

Anastasia silently hoped she was up to the challenge. She hoped all

of them were.



Dex pried the weapon from the dead Turian's hand, turning it over and searching it for any distinguishing marks. The ID chip had, predictably, been removed, but Dex did not necessarily need an ID chip to determine a weapon's origin.

"Well, it's definitely not Confederation-issue," he said to Zip, "though someone went to considerable trouble to make it look as if it were. It's hard to tell where it's from, but it may be Salarian."

"Figures," said Zip.

"Or," Dex continued, staring closely at the trigger mechanism, "it could have been produced somewhere else—somewhere with access to Salarian parts."

"Haven't the Salarians been supplying the SPACERs for a while now?" Zip asked rhetorically.

"Yeah," Dex replied.

"But what do the Turians have to do with all this? They haven't taken any sides in the conflicts."

"Probably just mercs," Dex answered. "Just like a Turian to profit from both sides."

"I don't think these particular mercenaries profited too much," said Zip, tapping the Turian's body with the tip of his boot. "But who would pay a bunch of Turians to start a ruckus out here in the middle of nowhere?"

Dex had to admit that he was stumped on that one. Though space was, by its very nature, desolate and for the most part empty, and habitable planets were often separated by dozens of parsecs, Gertrom III was especially remote. Some people called the Gertrom System "the edge of the Universe," and the description wasn't all that far off. Located at the very fringes of the Alpha Sector, two hundred parsecs from the nearest inhabited system, Gertrom III was found at the tip of one of the Milky Way's spiral arms, and there was nothing inherent in the planet to induce almost anyone to make the trip. Those few humans who did live out here were normally outcasts, criminals, and the mentally unstable. And of course there were the Cartheen. Those bastards would live almost anywhere.

"I don't know, Zip. Maybe it was just a distraction."

"Well, if that were the case—"

Zip was cut off by an urgent alarm from Dex's nanocomputer. Dex

keyed for the transmission, and a small projection flashed into the air.

"Dex, get your team topside right away," barked the Captain. "There's been some trouble."

Dex and Zip were already racing back to the retrieval point. "Where, sir?"

The Captain's face, though Dex's running caused it to bob comically in the air, took on an undeniably solemn aspect.

"Earth," he said. "They've hit Earth again."



Zach raced down the hallway, taking one last sip from his drink and succeeding only in spilling it on the front of his uniform. He tossed the empty cup aside and keyed his nanocomputer to begin the *Lone Wolf's* quick startup sequence. The door ahead of him slid open and he raced through the flight room, not even slowing as he grabbed his helmet from atop his locker. The door on the opposite side of the room opened at his approach, and he rushed down another hallway, passing several closed doors on each side. The seventh door on the left *whooshed* open, and he was in the narrow fighter bay, cradling his helmet under his arm as he headed for his fighter.

Zach hit another key on his wrist-worn encee and the canopy popped open. In one quick, fluid motion, he was in the fighter, with the canopy quickly sealing around him. He donned his helmet and strapped himself in as the ship completed its startup sequence. He wasn't wearing his flight suit, but his dress uniform, which was more than a bit uncomfortable, would have to do. A splash of green lights lit his alert board, and the fighter bay door began to open. Before it had even finished its motion, Zach punched the throttle and the fighter leapt from the deck and into open space, and Zach quickly checked the heads-up radar display as the ship surged to speed.

Good, he thought. I'm the first one out.

The fleeing vessel had almost twenty thousand kilometers on him, and its red speck was barely visible on the radar display. Zach pushed the thruster handles as far as they would go, and was rewarded by being flattened against his seat as the engines roared in affirmation. He noticed that already some of the lights on his alert board had changed to amber, which was fairly early, even by his standards.

"Warning," began the computer's voice, "exceeding 75% thrust after quick startup is not recommended. Engine temperatures are above standard parameters."

Screw the standard parameters. I'll fly the damned ship apart if I have to.

As if to rebel against the cantankerous computer, Zach tried to force the thruster handles farther forward, with little success. He was closing on the fleeing vessel, and he had the computer plot his intercept point, which was just before the ship would be far enough from the sun's gravity field to enter hyperspace.

You're mine, you bastard. You're mine.

"Wolfman, this is Raven," came a voice from the intercom. "What is your status?"

"Intercept in 45 seconds," Zach replied. "I've got him."

"I'll be there in 90," Raven replied.

"He'll be disabled in 60."

Zach could see the target now, a small cargo ship that appeared to be heavily modified. It was fleeing from Earth at a respectable speed, and Commander Wallace could see several crude weapons that appeared to be sloppily soldiered to the hull. On the back of the ship was an ominous-looking pod.

As if triggered by Zach noticing it, the pod burst forth and released a salvo of missiles, which left white-hot trails in space as they snaked toward Zach's approaching fighter. The anti-missile defense system began to fire, shooting flechette pellets into the path of the incoming missiles. There was a series of quick explosions as the pellets detonated three missiles, but a pair of rockets continued through the defensive screen.

Not willing to slow down, the Commander pulled the ship to the left, watching as the missiles tracked toward him. He jinked the fighter quickly to the right, and the missiles overcompensated, shooting behind him as Zach continued the ship in its original direction.

He was almost in range of the cargo ship now, and Zach reluctantly thumbed the comlink. "Unidentified vessel, this is a Confederation fightercraft. Power down or you will be destroyed."

The ship did not respond. *Thank you*, Zach thought.

The missile lock light came on and Zach fired a pair of missiles toward the fleeing vessel. The ship began to return fire, scoring a smattering of laser hits across the fighter's nose, but both missiles found their marks, exploding against the cargo ship's hull and leaving it spinning and out of control.

"Unidentified vessel, power down and prepare to be boarded," Zach said over the communications channel. "If you fire, you will be—"

Before Zach could finish, the vessel exploded into a ball of fire and was destroyed.

Zach stared at the explosion, incredibly intense for a ship of such size. *But I only hit it with a couple of missiles, he thought. I didn't even target the power core.*

"Wolfpack Commander, this is Flight Command. What in the hell was that?"

The Commander stared through the cockpit plasticite at the now-empty space before him. "I don't know, sir," he replied. "I just disabled him—"

"Disabled him, my ass. We wanted him alive, damn it," the voice responded. "Return to the carrier immediately."

"Yes, sir," Zach replied, still staring into space. *But I didn't fire, he thought. I only disabled him. I only disabled him.*

Zach slowly turned his fighter to head back to the carrier. The last thing he thought as he turned away was how remarkably little debris remained from the explosion.

CHAPTER 3

The activity on the viewscreen began to thin out as Lieutenant Matthews piloted the *Inferno* away from the skeletal warship frame, taking one last look as they passed the colossus and proceeded to their jump point, away from the gravity well of the Sol System. Once they had traveled a fair distance from the moon and its associated space traffic, Cody pushed the thruster handle farther forward and the ship surged ahead, pressing Anastasia into the memory-gel backing of her captain's chair as if with an unseen hand.

"Sorry, Captain," he said, sounding more enthused than apologetic. "This thing is touchier than a fighter. And we're only at one-half cruising speed."

Anastasia had been aboard swift ships before, but it already seemed as if the techs were right—this ship probably *was* the fastest ship in the Fleet. Quite an accomplishment, considering its size and ability. After all, the ship's Quantum Refractor—a cloaking device so expensive and experimental that the *Apocalypse* was still the only other ship on which it was equipped—was, by itself, as massive as some smaller fighters, and for a ship that housed eight crewmembers to be as fast as this was truly remarkable. The advanced turboplasma thrust system seemed—so far—to be all that they had promised.

Sooner than seemed possible, an alert light popped up on Anastasia's console, indicating that they had traveled far enough from the system's center to safely enter hyperspace. A ship that entered or exited hyperspace too near a gravity well—or even passed through one while in hyperspace—was usually destroyed, ripped apart by the gravitational forces. Of course, the experimental hyperspace core aboard the *Inferno*, hailed as a great breakthrough, theoretically removed at least most of that limitation.

Anastasia, however, did not feel like testing the system just yet.

"We are clear for hyperspace," Ariyana reported. "Course is plotted and laid in for the Pacifica System."

"Very good," said the Captain as she thumbed a switch on her console, activating the intercom and carrying her voice to the engineering section. "Vance," she began, addressing her Chief Engineer,

“how’s the hyperdrive look?”

“We’re green across the board down here, Captain,” he replied, his voice audible over the bridge speakers. “The hyperdrive looks ready.”

“Very well. Engage active restraint system. Prepare for hyperspace on my mark.” Though simply a precaution, Anastasia pressed a button on her armrest and the restraint harness, a snaking mass of elastic fibers, sprang into place, securing her arms, legs, head, and torso to the seat. Though tremendously effective, the restraints were neither uncomfortable nor cumbersome. In fact, they hardly interfered with her movement at all, except, of course, that she could not get up. Or be thrown through the viewscreen.

“Engage hyperdrive, one half speed.”

Anastasia braced herself for the surge that always accompanied ships entering hyperspace, especially since she had no idea how this hyperdrive, experimental and supposedly faster than any before it, would behave. To her surprise, as Cody pushed the hyperdrive handle forward, there was hardly any jolt at all. In fact, she had to check her instruments to be sure that they were in fact moving.

And they were moving, all right. According to the instruments, at one-half speed, Anastasia was traveling as fast as she had ever traveled aboard the *Apocalypse*, a speedy ship in its own right. By her calculations, it would only take just under four hours to reach the Pacifica system.

Unfortunately, Anastasia was not in any particular hurry to get there.

The Pacifica System, which was founded in the late 27th Century as a colony for pacifists, farmers, and others favoring a more simple, unattached life, had been the first to loudly voice their protest of the Korgian Annihilation, both when it happened in 3006 and when the horrible truth about it was learned ten years ago. Now, fanned by growing conflicts and unrest throughout the United Confederation of Planets, it had ironically become a hotbed for opposition—peaceful and otherwise—to Confederation Command. Dissidents from throughout the Sector had flocked to New Berkeley and were clamoring for reform, disarmament, and even the right to secede. Recently, however, the acts of protest emanating from the Pacifica System had grown severe, punctuated by the terrorist bombing of the Confederation Headquarters Building itself last week. After the attack was traced to New Berkeley, it was also learned that the SPACERs—someone’s idea of a clever acronym for “the Society for Pacifism And

Continuing Ethical Reform”—had amassed a small fleet, and planned to blockade the System until their demands to be allowed to secede were met.

All in all, Anastasia thought, it was one of the most delicate, explosive, and difficult diplomatic missions in recent history. And it was hers.

If only the *Inferno* weren't so darned fast.

• • •

The Captain was not happy.

“What in the hell were you thinking?” he screamed. “Don’t answer that. I know what you were thinking, and that terrorist bastard deserved to die as much as anyone. But I told you not to kill him, didn’t I? Didn’t I?”

“But, sir—”

“Damn it, Zach, have I said you could talk yet?”

“No.”

“Then why are you still talking?”

“Because—”

“Don’t answer that, damn it! You are not to speak for the rest of the day. Is that understood?”

Zach nodded.

“Good. Now, what the hell were you thinking??”

Zach said nothing.

“Answer me, damn it!”

Zach clenched his teeth. “But, sir,” he began softly, “I didn’t destroy him. I just disabled him. After the missile shot, I didn’t fire again.”

“Then who the hell did?” the Captain asked, still incensed but beginning to calm himself a bit. “The records show an energy spike just before the explosion.”

“No one fired, sir. It—it must have been a self-destruct. But I didn’t destroy that ship.”

“Look at the records, Commander. There is an energy spike consistent with a type VI plasma burst cannon.”

“But—”

“And the resonance from the debris matches your fighter exactly.”

Zach’s jaw dropped. Plasma burst cannon left unique resonances on whatever they were fired upon. It was possible, if the wreckage of a ship was recovered, to match the resonance with the ship that had

fired upon it. But he hadn't fired his cannon on that ship.

But he had been the only one out there.

"They're downloading the flight logs now, Zach. If you're right—and I hope you are—the logs will show that your fighter didn't fire. But if you're wrong, you're going to be in a lot of trouble for this one. And neither I nor your hero status will save you this time."

Zach turned his head as a short tone rang out and the debriefing room's holo-vid projector came to life, creating the image of a tech who wore a decidedly sour expression on her face. Before she even spoke, Zach knew what she had found. He didn't know how it was possible, but he knew that she had found that his fighter's logs claimed that he had fired on the disabled vessel.

"Captain Griffin, I have analyzed the logs from Commander Wallace's fighter." She paused as if what she had to say would go away if she stalled long enough. "They indicate that an energy weapon was fired."

The Captain closed his eyes hard. "Thank you, Ensign," he mumbled, hitting a switch and ending the transmission. He buried his head in his hands.

"Sir," Zach said firmly, standing up and staring at him intently. Zach waited for the Captain to meet his gaze before he continued. "*I did not fire that weapon.*"

The Captain looked into Zach's solemn blue eyes for a long time. "I believe you, son," he said, drained. "I believe you. But I don't know who else will."

There was silence for several seconds before the door chime rang. It slid open, and two tall men in MP uniforms waited at the door.

Zach looked back to the Captain, who was powerless to help him against such incontrovertible evidence. Wordlessly, he walked over and allowed himself to be led away by the guards, continuing down the hallway toward the brig.

But I didn't fire, he thought helplessly. *I didn't fire, but now, I almost wish I did.*



Alexis ran into the mess hall, quickly scanning the room with her eyes. Ryan Taylor's dark, bald head protruded from the crowd at one corner of the large room. Alexis rushed over to him, sitting down and whispering furtively before he could even manage a greeting.

"Did you hear?" she asked. "Did you hear about Zach?"

Ryan swallowed the food he had been chewing since Alexis arrived. "No. What happened?"

"He's being court-martialed."

"What in the Seventeen Systems for?" he asked incredulously. Catching himself, he looked around the room and lowered his voice before continuing. "I mean, Zach is a bit of a maverick, but a court-martial?"

"They say he blew up the ship those SPACER terrorists responsible for this morning's attack were trying to escape in. He was supposed to disable it, but they say he intentionally destroyed it instead."

"Zach wouldn't do that," Ryan affirmed. "I've never seen him disobey a direct order."

"I haven't been able to get in touch with him," Alexis continued, "but I know a guy in communications who let me listen in on the radio chatter from the firefight."

"What happened out there?"

"It's hard to say," Alexis sighed, absently taking a bite from a biscuit on Ryan's plate. "It was Zach who caught him first—"

"Figures."

"—And asked him to surrender. But, instead, the ship opened fire on him, and Zach fired two missiles, disabling him."

"And?" Ryan prompted.

"Well, that's the problem," Alexis answered. "After that, they say they registered a shot from a plasma burst cannon, but Zach says he didn't fire it."

"If he says he didn't, then he didn't. What's the problem?"

"Aside from the fact that he was the only one out there?" Alexis replied. "The problem is that his ship's log shows that he fired the weapon."

Ryan didn't miss a beat. "I could modify one of those things to say that you blew up the *Indomitable*," he retorted. "That doesn't mean anything."

"It means enough to get him court-martialed," she replied. "But the question on my mind isn't so much *how* they did it ..."

"As *why*," Ryan finished for her. "Who would benefit from discrediting Zach?"

"Probably the same people who would benefit from random terrorist attacks in the first place. The same people who are using the truth about the Korgian Annihilation as an excuse to rape, pillage, and plunder. The same people who hope to weaken the Confederation to

the point where systems will be allowed to secede, and the same people who hope to profit from it, or take over those systems."

Ryan took a last bite of his meal and stood from the table. "I've got to get over to the *Divine Hammer* and get myself involved in the investigation," he said. "I've got to clear his name."

"You think Captain Woolslair will authorize that?"

"He'll authorize it," Ryan said, half joking, "or I'll set the ship's computers to play Brechman's Infinite Symphony—in its entirety—until he relents."

"My God," Alexis laughed. "I hope I never get on your bad side."

Ryan flashed her a friendly wink. "Don't worry," he said. "I don't think you could."



Dex picked through the rubble, carefully sifting the brittle material in his gloved hands. The wreckage was charred, thoroughly radiation-burned to the point where the plasticite windows had actually flash-boiled, leaving behind nothing but a few drops of murky clear goo. The walls of the building had collapsed inward, undoubtedly as a result of an implosive thermonuclear core. The blast marks near the room's center showed the location of the core, but the beauty of such a device was that it completely incinerated itself upon detonation. There was no good evidence to trace back to a source.

Surmising the party responsible for the attack, however, was hardly guesswork. After the explosion, which had injured three civilians and a pair of military recruiters, ConFedIntel had tracked a pair of men fleeing the scene and leaving the planet in an illegal, unregistered spacecraft. When fighter pilot Zach Wallace had intercepted that ship, they had fired upon him, and the ship was eventually destroyed under very suspicious circumstances.

Commander Rutcliffe figured that he was lucky in that he had more to work with than most. While the incident involving the destruction of the fleeing vessel was officially under investigation, Dex knew what had happened. Dex had served with Zach on board the *Apocalypse* for over five years, and in that time he had found reason to call Zach cocky, impetuous, rash—but never dishonest. If Zach said he did not fire on the ship once it was disabled, then he didn't, and that left only one plausible alternative.

The ship had destroyed itself.

Maybe the terrorist pilots had figured that suicide was better than

surrender. But that would hardly explain the energy spike and the tampered logs aboard Zach's *Lone Wolf*. No, this had been planned ahead of time, and perhaps even the bombing responsible for the wreckage Dex was studying now was merely the smoke screen designed to deliver this bigger payoff.

After all, what better way to sow discord and weaken one's enemy than to discredit one of their most well-known heroes? What better place to divert their attention than to an investigation of one of their own?

Dex closed his eyes and dropped the rubble he had been holding, which fell a few centimeters to the ground and shattered silently into a thousand unrecognizable fragments. Dex stood from his kneeling position and looked to the sky above, shielding his eyes against the sun that streamed through the now-vacant area of the roof. *So what that I know the truth?* he thought. *What I need to clear my friend's name is proof. And I need it soon. Otherwise, the investigation, whatever its final outcome, will have served its purpose.*

Dex looked to the sky where the *Brigadier* would be orbiting. He knew that if there was anyone who could prove that Zach's flight logs had been forged, anyone who could pick a computer apart, it was Ryan Taylor. Dex instinctively thumbed his nanocomputer's comlink, somehow knowing that he had better get in touch with Ryan very soon. An eerie feeling had engulfed him, a feeling that this was merely the precursor to something far more vile.

Something that may finally rip the crippled Confederation apart.

CHAPTER 4

Only half an hour remained before their arrival in the Pacifica System, and Captain Mason pored over the technical readout of her ship in her quarters, still in awe at what the Confederation had produced. Though terrorism, pirate activity, and political and civil unrest were reaching epidemic proportions within the Alpha Sector, ConFedCom had still found a way to produce a ship as extraordinary as the *Inferno*, at a price that—if she knew it—would probably move Anastasia to tears.

But that money had already been spent, and, no matter how many more worthy uses it could have gone to, it was now Anastasia's obligation to use it as best she could to diffuse the explosive situation into which she had been thrust. After all, this incident in the Pacifica System—Anastasia winced as she thought how history might remember it as "The Pacifica Incident"—would surely serve as a catalyst, one that would begin the process of bringing the peoples of the Confederation together to rebuild, or one that would herald the beginning of its demise.

Why had they sent *her*, she wondered? Though they had explained that the just-in-time *Inferno* was by far the fastest ship in the Fleet and that Anastasia was one of their best, most respected negotiators, it still seemed to Anastasia that a traditional diplomatic envoy and negotiation team would have been the preferred approach, even if they would have arrived a few hours later. After all, Anastasia had to wonder, why send the most deadly ship in the Fleet on a mission of peace?

And the *Inferno* was deadly. Though it—thankfully, Anastasia thought—lacked an Omega Cannon, the very doomsday weapon that was inherently responsible for the current crisis, the *Inferno's* complement of conventional weapons formed as devastating an arsenal as any ship in the Fleet. The ship would be potent enough were that all it had, she thought. The Captain unconsciously flipped the technical readout she had been reading ahead a few pages, and her eyes came to rest on the heading at the top of the page.

Experimental Weapon System XSA-1712: Subspace Destabilization Unit.

It was commonly known among its designers as the *Wind of Death*.

A wave of cold ran through the Captain's body, chilling that part of her that possessed an inherent love of life and everything living. She shut her eyes against the cold, but she could not suppress it, and she could not dispel the notion that the military life was not one for which she was suited.

Not in a military that could envision weapons such as these.

Not in a military that could use the Omega Cannon to wipe out an entire race of Korgians.

Not in a military on the verge of civil war.

Anastasia buried her head in her hands, and her nanocomputer beeped helpfully. They were about to arrive in the Pacifica System.



Dex looked out the window as a small civilian sport craft flew by, executing a sloppy loop-de-loop as if to impress the inhabitants of the space-faring cantina. Dex, however, had been sufficiently jaded by years of experience—five of them with the unparalleled Zach Wallace as his pilot—to be singularly unimpressed by the unskilled exhibitions that often accompanied his visits to the orbital restaurant. He looked around the room in idle curiosity, wondering if the teenage showboating had actually impressed any of the establishment's patrons.

As he glanced about the room, his attention focused on a well-built, bald, black man at the far end of the bar. Dex began to stand, but Ryan had already noticed him and was walking in his direction.

Dex rose as Ryan approached, and the two muscular men embraced in a brief but vigorous hug. "It's good to see you, old friend," Dex said as he retook his seat. "It's been a long time."

"Yes, too long," Ryan agreed, sitting across from him. "I see you took the liberty of ordering me a glass of Vamalian Ale."

Dex smiled. "You wouldn't drink anything else, would you?" he asked rhetorically, lifting his glass and clinking it against Ryan's before both men took a hearty swig. "You still think this stuff 'cleanses your system,' right?"

"It's a scientific fact," Ryan replied. He patted his chest loudly. "And I haven't been sick in years."

Dex's lighthearted laughter soon gave way to grim sobriety. "It is good to see you, Ryan, but I'm afraid we have more important things to do than catch up and get drunk together."

Ryan's demeanor quickly turned serious as well. "Zach," he said simply.

Dex nodded. "I think something big is happening here," he said. "I have a bad feeling about this whole incident."

"Alexis and I were trying to figure out why they would do this, too," he replied. "Everything we came up with pointed to the SPAC-ERs being up to no good. I mean, more no good than usual."

"I agree," Dex replied. "I've tried to contact Anastasia, but she's already left for the Pacifica System."

"You think something might be up with that blockade?" Ryan said, quickly growing concerned. "You think Anastasia might be walking into a trap?"

Dex spread his arms. "I don't know. It's mostly just a feeling. I mean, Anastasia can take care of herself, but something is going on."

"And it will probably go down in the Pacifica System," Ryan finished for him. "What can we do?"

"Well, I can't do much down here on my end of the investigation, and this new assignment as a security force is a waste of time. My squad can't watch everywhere." He took another long draught from his glass. "Besides, we have more important things we could be doing. Put someone else on appease-the-public garbage duty."

"I hear you," Ryan said. "It may make for a nice headline, but why waste an elite Commando team patrolling shopping malls? What do you want to do instead?"

"I've put in for my unit to be transferred to Pacifica. As Anastasia's personal security force." Dex's lip curled upward. "If they're up to anything, my team can handle it."

"I like that idea. What do you want me to do?"

"I think the best thing you can do right now is help in this investigation. Clear Zach's name and get him back on active duty. We don't have time for these distractions, and we don't have the luxury of being without the Fleet's best pilot."

"I'll do what I can," Ryan promised. "So far I've met some resistance with becoming an active part of the investigation, but my Captain did grant my transfer orders to the *Divine Hammer*."

"Good," Dex replied, finishing his drink. "If they give you any more problems, luckily we know someone who may be able to pull a few strings for us."

The words brought a wide smile to Ryan's face. "How is Daniel?" Ryan asked. "I haven't talked with him in a while. I assume he's still

chairing the Ethics Committee, right?"

"Of course," Dex replied. "That was his dream even when he was leading us on the *Apocalypse*. And all this crap has been keeping him pretty busy lately."

"Do you think this investigation will get that high?" Ryan asked. "You don't think they'll discharge him, do you?"

"I doubt it. But if Zach is discharged or if charges are filed, the Committee has the right to review the case. Daniel will make sure everything is on the up-and-up, at least."

Ryan nodded as an almost inaudible alarm rang from his nano-computer. "I had better get back to the transport. I'm scheduled to be transferred to the *Divine Hammer* in a few minutes."

The two men rose and Dex shook his friend's hand. "You take care of Zach, and I'll take care of Anastasia," he said. "Just be ready for whatever is about to go down."

"I will, my friend," he said. "Good luck in the Pacifica System."

Dex nodded his head and Ryan turned to leave. As he passed, he put his hand on Dex's shoulder. "You just might need it."



The starlines on the viewscreen receded back into the points of light they actually were as the *Inferno* came out of hyperspace several million kilometers from the large planet of New Berkeley. Behind the planet hung the nearby Horsehead Nebula, its diffuse glow illuminating the skies behind the planet and creating quite a spectacle from the ground. Of course, from this distance, the apparent pattern that gave the nebula its name was not visible, as the dark gasses that obscured the light emitted by the nebula—from the vantage point of Earth, anyway—were several light-years away.

The system's yellow sun lit half of the lush globe, which from this angle was almost equal parts green, blue, and pitch black. The planet had intentionally been left underdeveloped, and it was one of the few habitable planets that retained most of its natural beauty. It was a shame, Anastasia thought, that the violently rebellious SPACERS had decided to claim this planet as their base of operations.

As the planet grew larger in the display, Anastasia could make out the blockade that had formed like a ring system about the sphere. Small and widely spaced, the ships of the blockade patrolled the area in proud formation, probably blissfully unaware that the meager assemblage of ships would have little deterrent effect if the Confed-

eration ever chose to break it up by force. Of course, the last thing the Confederation needed was a violent conflict with a rebellious faction to crystallize the anti-government sentimentality that had flowed through the Alpha Sector like the blood of a martyred hero. That martyr, in this case, was the entire Korgian System, a system completely obliterated by the then-invincible *Indomitable* and her horrific Omega Cannon, a system destroyed, as it turned out, not out of defense or necessity, but out of sheer dishonesty. It was, in Anastasia's opinion, undoubtedly the single lowest point in the history of mankind.

Anastasia remembered when she had first seen the tape of the Korgian Annihilation. Everyone—even high-ranking officers like Admiral Atgard and then-Commander Mason—had been told that the Korgians, who had been massing for an assault, had fired upon the *Indomitable* when she arrived at their home system. But the tape—*The Tape*, as it came to be known—showed the truth to be otherwise. The Tape showed the Korgians' attempts to surrender and it showed Fleet Admiral Cole's dismissal of that surrender and his decision to fire the Cannon, a decision that destroyed not only the entire Korgian Armada, but also the entire star system and its nine billion inhabitants.

And, Anastasia thought bitterly, humanity's claim to moral righteousness and virtue.

"Captain," interrupted Byron, jarring her from her thoughts, "there appear to be 14 vessels that comprise the blockade. Only one is Cruiser-class; the rest are Corvettes and a few larger fighters." He studied his tactical display. "They all appear to be in fairly poor condition."

Anastasia wrinkled her face. Surely whoever had organized this blockade knew the motley assemblage of ships was no match for any force the Confederation might send. Did they really believe they could accomplish anything if push came to shove? Were they merely making a symbolic stand? Or, Anastasia wondered skeptically, were they trying to bait the Confederation into demolishing the ragtag fleet?

"Captain," reported Ariyana, "I have an incoming transmission from the planet."

"On screen."

The image of the planet on the viewscreen was quickly replaced by the scowling face of an imposing woman. She was young, perhaps in her late thirties, but her face was hard and battle-worn, taking on the

appearance of wrinkled leather. Her dark black hair was dusty and was tied behind her head in a simple ponytail. The woman wore no make-up of any kind and her clothes were plain and nondescript. Old bruises lined her arms and neck and her expression was one of distrust fostered by years of betrayal.

"Who are *you*?" she asked impatiently. "Where's the Confederation negotiating party we demanded?"

"We are it," the Captain replied, not showing any umbrage at the woman's dismissal of her and her ship. "Allow me to introduce myself. I am Captain Anastasia Mason, and I am here to negotiate on the Confederation's behalf."

The woman laughed a humorless laugh. "Stop wasting my time," she scoffed. "You think we're supposed to be impressed because they sent the renowned Anastasia Mason? You underestimate us, dear. We are here to negotiate, not play your little public relations game."

Anastasia's voice remained deliberately steady and unruffled. "We are not here for public relations, and I am not here to impress anyone." She leveled her gaze at the woman. "I am here to negotiate with you, but if you think whomever they send in my place will be more understanding than I, you are welcome to try your luck with them. If I were you, however, I would see this as a good opportunity to have my grievances heard, one that may or may not present itself again if you turn me away."

The woman measured Anastasia wordlessly for several moments. "Very well," she said at last. "I guess you will do. We can begin negotiations tomorrow. I'll transmit the landing coordinates to you then."

"Thank you," Anastasia replied. "I look forward to meeting you."

The woman said nothing, but simply reached over and flicked off the transmission, returning the viewscreen to its previous external view of the planet.

"She was lovely," Victor said, still looking to the viewscreen. "This should be fun."

Anastasia rubbed her forehead wearily. She had just won her first small victory already, in persuading the woman to even speak with them. Or had she? After all, Anastasia sensed that it had not taken much persuasion to convince the woman to accept her as the negotiator. Maybe she really believed Anastasia would be as understanding and empathetic a negotiator she would get. But she had not really seemed as surprised as she should have been that the *Inferno* was sent

instead of a full diplomatic envoy. She had not really questioned why Anastasia was there, and the Captain could not help but wonder why.

A long sigh escaped the Captain's lips. She wondered how much "fun" she'd be able to handle.



The lights were off in Zach's quarters, and he could do little but stare at the darkness of the ceiling. Both of the room's large plasticite windows had been tinted to block out the reflected light from the Earth below, a necessary measure when the ship was orbiting above the bright daylight half of the planet. But still Zach could not sleep, and, though he had not technically been confined to his quarters—or thrown in the brig—he had been given the distinct impression that it was in his best interests to sit placidly in his room while his guilt or innocence was determined by "experts." And he was trying to do just that—sit placidly—even while pirate activity continued to run rampant throughout the Sector and while his very future was being determined.

He was having little success.

In Zach's 36 years, little had matured him like recent events had. He shook his head as he thought back to his days as the pilot of the *Apocalypse*, how everything had seemed like a game to him then. *I was young and cocky then*, he thought, *and I'm old and cocky now*.

But something in him had changed over the past year. When the pirate activity—nearly unheard-of in the Confederation's heyday—began six or seven years ago, Zach had seen it as a great opportunity to display his skills and rack up his kill count. But now, he realized that for every pirate ship he disabled, there were ten more wreaking havoc on cargo ships, cruise liners, and private yachts, ten more ships each doing their little part to tear the once-proud Confederation apart. Zach had, in the past couple of years, grown to think of it as his duty to single-handedly end the pirate activity of the entire Sector, a task that would be labeled "Herculean" if only it were possible at all. Now, every pirate ship Zach destroyed did not merely symbolize a kill on some ledger, but instead meant that Zach had applied one more bandage to staunch the wounds that heralded the imminent demise of the great United Confederation of Planets. And he was able to sleep at night because he felt that he had been doing his part.

An unintentional laugh escaped from Zach's throat as he suddenly realized how ironic it was that he, Zach Wallace, the prototypical

swashbuckling fighter pilot, was lying in his bed, unable to sleep because he was worrying about his role in the great scheme of things. Five, ten years ago, this same inactivity would bother him only because other pilots were out racking up kills while he was quarantined in his cell. Now, it bothered him because those other pilots would not rack up enough kills without him out there to help.

The door chime rang and Zach thought for several moments about simply pretending to be asleep. After all, he doubted that whoever would come through the door would bring good news. But when the chime sounded again, Zach said, "Come in."

Commander Wallace heard the door slide open but kept his gaze locked on the blackness of the ceiling, now a dark shade of gray as artificial light streamed in through the open doorway. Since it appeared his visitor was not going to announce himself until Zach looked at him, he reluctantly sat up, rubbed his eyes, and looked to the figure in the doorway.

Instantly a smile found its way to Zach's lips. "Ryan, is that you? Computer—lights. What are you doing here?"

The room lights faded in to show Ryan's robust form in the doorway. "What am *I* doing here? What the hell are *you* doing in here?" he asked. "Don't you know your squadron leaves for Utopia in an hour?"

"I'm not going anywhere," Zach lamented, slumping back in his bed. "I've been—"

Ryan waved his hand to silence him. "Yes, yes, I know. That thing with the terrorist ship. I took care of that."

Zach squinted his eyes, cocking his head to one side in confusion. "What the hell are you talking about, Ryan?"

"Well," he said, unable to hide his smile any longer, "I wasn't really doing anything, so I thought I would come over here and check out those doctored flight logs. And you know what?"

"What?" asked Zach expectantly, trying in vain to prevent his optimism from overcoming him. "What did you find?"

"The darnedest thing. It turned out those doctored flight logs really *were* doctored. Go figure."

"They were? I mean, I know they were. But you proved it?"

"This is me you're talking to. I could find a stray data bit in a planetary grid; I can find where your flight logs were altered."

"Who did it?" Zach asked. "And why?"

"I don't know *who* yet, but it was definitely someone on the inside.

Someone with access." Ryan sat in a chair opposite Zach. "Someone went to a lot of trouble to discredit you, Zach. Someone wanted you out of the way for a while."

"Maybe the SPACER bastards behind all this terrorist activity?" Zach asked rhetorically. "Maybe one of the big pirating conglomerates sick of me kicking their tails?"

Ryan shook his head. "I don't think a pirate group could have pulled this one off. The forgery was very precise. And it had to be coordinated with the self-destructing terrorist ship. I don't know who forged the logs, but the SPACERs had to be behind it."

"Is that what's going on at Utopia?" Zach asked. "More pirate activity?"

"No," Ryan replied, taken aback. "I guess you haven't heard. You had better get ready and get to the briefing room."

"Heard?" Zach asked, walking to the closet where his flight suit hung. "Heard what?"

Ryan flashed him a surprised look, clearly in disbelief that he didn't know. "It's the damned Vr'amil'een, Zach," he replied solemnly. "They've invaded."

CHAPTER 5

The transport slowed to sublight speed and Dex scanned the tactical display, quickly finding what he was looking for: a ship beginning its descent to the planet's surface.

"Inferno, this is the Cerberus. Hold position, please."

The viewscreen flashed to life, filled with Anastasia's face. "Dex?" she asked, her excitement tinged with a touch of concern. "What are you doing here?"

"I figured you might need an escort during the negotiations," Dex replied, "and I am here to offer my services."

Anastasia smiled. "I'm always glad to have you around, Dex. But is there something going on that I should know about?"

"No," Dex said uneasily. "Nothing solid, anyway. I just figured better safe than sorry."

Captain Mason smiled again. "Very well then. Ariyana, please transfer the landing coordinates to the *Cerberus*. Dex, I'll see you on the ground."

"Yes, Captain," he replied. "*Cerberus* out."

Dex nodded to Retro, his pilot, and the younger man began moving the ship toward the planet, preparing to follow the *Inferno* down on her approach vector. Dex looked to the ragtag fleet encircling the planet, and a look of consternation crossed his face. *This is the best the SPACERs can do? he wondered incredulously. These are the same people with access to imploding thermonuclear cores, advanced pirate ships spanning the Sector, and enough people on the inside to forge flight logs and get security clearance for terrorist attacks? And this motley group is the best they can muster for their big blockade?*

Dex, for one, did not buy it. He knew his instincts had been correct: the SPACERs, as usual, were up to something. And, as his ship descended through the thick atmosphere of New Berkeley, he knew he was right in the middle of it.



Anastasia walked down the entry / exit ramp to find a squad of Confederation Commandos flanking her path. The soldiers, each dressed

in full combat armour, stood at attention, brandishing heavy phaser rifles across their chests. Though the six men along the pathway represented only half a squadron, even half of an elite Commando squad was a force to be reckoned with. Besides, Anastasia knew, the other six members of the team were undoubtedly stationed nearby, watching for trouble. Actually, she corrected herself, only five soldiers were unaccounted for—just at the bottom of the hatchway was Dex.

“You’re pretty serious about your escort duties, I see,” she said as she walked down the exit ramp, embracing Dex when she arrived. “It’s good to see you again.”

Dex released the Captain from his muscular grip. “Commander Dex Rutcliffe reporting for duty, ma’am,” he barked. More softly, he added, “It’s good to see you too, Ana.”

The Captain smiled and looked down the pathway, which led from her ship to a large domed structure that loomed in the distance. Brilliant green and vermilion banners hung from the sides of the golden building, and its metallic walls reflected the light of the mid-day sun into Anastasia’s eyes. Facing back to the blue velvet path before her, she could see that a bit beyond where the line of Commandos ended, a group of people stood awaiting her arrival. The woman from the viewscreen did not appear to be among them.

“I guess we might as well go get this over with,” she sighed.

Anastasia led Dex between the assembled Commandos and toward their greeting party. The Captain smiled subtly as she realized that the three people awaiting her were keeping their distance, noticeably cowed by Anastasia’s guard detail. She could see that the man in the center was a Faruvian, a lean, cat-like being whose prehensile tail whisked silently to and fro at her approach. Faruvians were well known for their grace and dexterity, and Anastasia tried not to let herself be prejudiced by the fact that they were equally well known as the best pickpockets and thieves in the Sector.

“Captain Mason,” began the Faruvian as she approached, his deep, sonorous voice eerily soothing. “What is the meaning of bringing an assault force to these friendly proceedings?”

Anastasia tried to hide her smile. “You know as well as I do that this small group is here purely as my personal escort.” She flashed him a stern look. “It will, of course, be completely unnecessary, I’m sure.”

The Faruvian cleared his throat, rubbing his hands together skittishly. “Of course, of course,” he replied, traces of a smirk evident

behind his thick whiskers. "Allow me to introduce myself, Captain. I am Felor Kittamen, and I have been instructed to provide for your every need while you await the negotiations tomorrow morning. If you would follow me ..."

"Tomorrow morning?" asked the Captain. "I am ready to negotiate now."

Felor released a soft mewling sound, apparently taken aback by the request. "But, Captain," he said softly, his tail's agitations accelerating, "I am afraid that will not be possible today. But I assure you that early tomorrow—"

"Then I will return tomorrow when you are ready to negotiate."

The Faruvian's face took on a pleading aspect. "Please, Captain," he began, "we have prepared lavish accommodations for you and your crew. We respectfully implore you to stay as our guests."

Anastasia studied the lithe cat-man, wary of his motives. But, she reasoned, she would be at least as safe on the ground—guarded by Dex and his squadron—as she would be in her ship. And the SPAC-ERs had spent the last five years rallying public support behind them, support that would vanish instantly if they were to attempt to harm Anastasia or her negotiating party. It was a frustrating feeling—knowing they were up to something, but not being able to put her finger on it—but Anastasia saw little to be gained by refusing to play along with the Faruvian's feigned hospitality. "Very well," she agreed. "I accept your offer."

The Faruvian's slitted pupils narrowed almost imperceptibly. "Good," he said, his voice again calm and soothing. "Now, if you would follow me, I will lead you to your suite." He extended a hand toward the building. "I am sure you will enjoy your stay with us, Captain. Welcome to New Berkeley."

Anastasia exchanged a quick glance with Dex, who tacitly returned her look of concern. *Welcome to New Berkeley*, she repeated in her mind. *Welcome to New Berkeley, indeed.*



The airlock door slid open and Alexis watched impatiently as the river of humans and aliens hurriedly filed past. The crowd of people parted for a moment, and she saw Ryan, scanning the deck for her briefly before she caught his eye. In a moment, Alexis was there, embracing Ryan and pecking him affectionately on his cheek, warm and strangely tender for a man as well built as he. An odd look

crossed Alexis' face as she hugged him, borne from her sudden revelation that she had missed Ryan far more than she had admitted to herself. She fought to push from her mind the fact that his arms, always solid as ropes of titanoferrite, felt comforting and comfortable around her slender waist. Catching herself, she reluctantly released him and turned away as she caught herself gazing into his dark eyes.

"What is it?" he asked, grinning. "Do I have something on my chin?" He lifted his right hand to his face to search for the offending particle. "What?"

Alexis smiled. "It's nothing," she said. "I'm just glad to see you."

"I'm glad to see you, too, Lexi," he agreed. "But why—"

"So—are you ready to go kick some lizard butt?" she asked awkwardly, quickly changing the subject. "Can you believe those damned Vr'amil'een? What the hell are they thinking?"

"You'd think they would have learned not to mess with us last time," Ryan said, seemingly forgetting about Alexis' odd behavior. "Or the time before that."

"I think we'll teach 'em this time. ConFedCom can't be too happy that they chose to attack Utopia."

"We're sending everyone we have at them," Ryan added. "Hey, that reminds me—they're sending Zach's squadron, too."

"Really?" she asked. "That's great ... I bet he could use the action after his little layoff. And it'll be great to fight with him again."

"Well, who knows how much contact we'll have with him," Ryan cautioned. "He could be strafing drop zones on the other side of the planet while we deal with their Armada spaceside."

"Yeah, I know," she agreed. "But it will be good to know he's out there with us, anyway. Have you seen the latest intel reports of what we're up against?"

Ryan beamed her a cocky smirk. "Checked 'em on the way over," he replied, hoisting his wrist-worn nanocomputer in the air. "I think I've finally perfected this baby." As if to prove his point, the nanocomputer, untouched by his free hand, projected a sparkling silver flower into the air.

Alexis reached for the hologram and pretended to smell its petals. "You always knew Arcadian praesanthemums were my favorites." She smiled, awkwardly realizing that they were now alone in the spacious room.

There was a brief but noticeable silence. "I guess we had better report to stations before we get under way," said Ryan.

"Yeah," Alexis muttered. "I guess we should."

The edge of Ryan's lip snaked upwards. "Are you sure there's not something on my chin?"

Alexis tried not to smile. "Yeah," she said. "I'm sure."

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Zach donned his helmet, its comforting form fitting perfectly over his head. He closed his eyes, smiling as the ship's canopy sealed around him and the fighter powered up, automatically running its preflight checks and startup sequence. It seemed to take longer than usual before the alert board flashed green, but once it had, Zach could do little but wait anyway. After all, the *Divine Hammer* was still traveling through hyperspace, and he could hardly pop the bay door and take his fighter for a spin to ease his restless boredom.

He checked the ship's chronometer, which showed another four and a half minutes until realspace emergence, four and a half minutes before Zach could begin his redemption.

Four and a half minutes before he could take his accumulated frustrations out on some unfortunate Vr'amil'een pilot's hide.

Zach triple-checked his weapons display and ran his fingers over the control stick as he thought about his last encounter with the Vr'amil'een. The vicious lizard-men had first tried to destroy the *Apocalypse*, and, soon after, Zach had found himself helping to defend Earth itself against a Vr'amil'een assault force that was not supposed to exist.

But they've really crossed the line this time, he thought. Though their strategy was almost identical—using the Confederation's distractions to launch an assault—their target this time was the resort planet of Utopia, a multiracial planet intentionally devoid of so much as a single military structure. Many Vr'amil'een had even been known to frequent the planet, the most popular destination in the Sector for vacationers, gamblers, con men, and people of all species looking for a place to hide from both the law and civilized society. The amalgamation of peoples the planet attracted was remarkable, and one was as likely to find a well-respected bureaucrat or businessman as a convict or pirate lord. And the mix of alien species on Utopia was second to none, which begged the question: Why would the Vr'amil'een attack here?

But I'll make the bastards pay.

The helpful chime of his alert board found Zach biting his lip and

squeezing the control stick to the point of sharp pain in his fingers. He felt the momentary disorientation as the ship slammed back into realspace, and the pounding alarm klaxons did little to ameliorate his discomfort. In a moment, however, the transit sickness had passed, and his comm board flashed a green light indicating that he was free to launch from the fighter bay.

In an instant, the bay door was open and the fighter had leaped from the deck like an enraged pterodyne, speeding through the opening as Zach powered up his weapons and scanned the sensor grid.

Damn, he thought. There's no one out here.

But he was wrong. It only took a moment before a squad of Vr'amil'een fighters—fifteen, according to the display—became visible against the background radiation emitted by the system's twin orange suns. As the fighters swarmed toward Zach's squadron, he had little time to contemplate the immense size of the Vr'amil'een occupation force, and even less time to wonder why the better part of the Vr'amil'een Armada was clustered around a resort planet half a galaxy from the middle of nowhere.

CHAPTER 6

Anastasia awoke to the scent of blueberries, carried in through the slitted curtain that served as the door to her spacious bedroom. The room was dimly lit, though the Captain could see from the sunlight filtering in through the curtained windows that it was well into daytime already. She rose, donned a robe, and walked through the curtain into the suite's main room.

Dex rose from the table at her arrival, standing over a decadent assortment of fruits and pastries that had evidently been very recently delivered to the suite. She smiled as she noticed that a small section had been painstakingly removed from each piece of food on the table, undoubtedly to be tested for poisons or other drugs by her ever-vigilant personal guard.

"Good morning, Captain," he said, bowing slightly as she seated herself at the table. "I trust you slept well."

"Very well, thank you, Dex," she replied, reaching for a pear-shaped fruit and taking a delicate bite. "Did you get any sleep?"

"I have taken the liberty of checking the food for toxins," Dex replied, changing the subject. "It all checked out," he added, as if he wouldn't have mentioned anything if it hadn't.

"Thanks," she replied. "These pear-shaped things really are quite good, by the way, whatever they are. Have some." She gestured to the trays of food, clearly more than she could eat in a week.

"No, thank you," Dex demurred. "I had some SRPs earlier."

"You can't live on ration packs," she scolded him, momentarily feeling like the Commander's mother. "Now, eat something."

"Actually, you *can* live on them. They are designed to contain all the essential—"

"That's an order."

Dex sat, scowling as he picked a pastry from the tray nearest him. "But real food tastes funny," he protested, sounding a bit like a petulant child. "I—"

Just then, the door chime rang, and Dex rose from the table to answer it. Of course, the gesture was unnecessary, both because the door could be opened by voice command and because Dex's squad

would have surely screened any visitors before they came anywhere near the door to the suite, but Dex had his hand on his holster nonetheless when Anastasia bid their visitor to enter.

The door swished aside and in stepped Felor Kittamen, replete with the obnoxious smile that Anastasia had quickly grown to loathe.

"Good morning, Captain," he mewed. "I trust you have enjoyed our accommodations thus far?"

"Everything has been wonderful, Felor, thank you," Anastasia replied. "When can we begin the negotiations?"

Felor's tail agitations increased in speed. "As soon as you are ready, we may begin."

"Very well." Looking toward Dex, she added, "We will be ready shortly."

The cat-man smiled his obsequious smile, bowed, and wordlessly backed out of the room, closing the door behind him.

"I don't think he was too happy that you insinuated that I would be coming along," Dex observed as Anastasia returned to her room. "I think he's offended that you don't trust him."

"Let him be offended, then," Anastasia replied, quickly dressing and readying herself from behind the bedroom's curtained doorway. "As long as he realizes that you'll be by my side for the duration of my stay here."

Anastasia heard Dex check the power cells on his phaser. "Let them try something," he dared. "Oh, how I'd love to pay back the SPAC-ERs ..."

"I know," said Anastasia, emerging from her room already fully dressed. "I know, Dex. We all would. But we're not here for payback. We're here to try to stop the terrorism and hostilities from escalating." She paused a moment as she watched Dex sight along his phaser barrel. "We're here on a mission of *peace*, remember."

Dex belatedly looked up at Anastasia, replacing his phaser in its holster. "Oh, I know," he said quickly, hooking a pair of concussion grenades to his utility belt. "Peace is my middle name. Not to worry."

Anastasia said nothing as she walked past him and opened the door to the hallway. She was greeted by two Commandos, standing at attention at their posts just outside the door. Each end of the hallway was also guarded by a pair of soldiers.

Dex followed her out, returning the salutes of his men as he followed Anastasia down the short hallway. At their approach, one of the Commandos guarding the east hallway doors opened them and

stood at attention.

On the other side, sitting on a plush bench in the middle of a rounded chamber, was the Faruvian. He rose at the pair's approach, taking a sidelong glance at the guards at the door before he spoke.

"If your army approves," he began, more than a hint of disdain in his voice, "perhaps we can begin the negotiations?"

Anastasia's lips formed into a thin smile. "At your leisure."

Felor bowed slightly and led them toward an open transport tube in the far wall. He gestured for them to enter, following them in and pressing the appropriate key on the tube's control panel.

The doors swished closed and the transport tube began its descent. It struck Anastasia as a bit odd that the negotiations were being held underground, but Dex did not seem concerned, so she convinced herself not to worry about it. Mentally chastising herself for being unduly paranoid, she reminded herself that one must begin negotiations with an open mind, not one clouded by distrust and enmity.

The transport tube came to a halt and the doors slid open to reveal a medium-sized room, devoid of the lavish accouterments of the upper levels of the palace. In the center was a plain wooden table, and before it a single chair. At the opposite side of the table was the hard-looking woman from the viewscreen.

Without waiting for instructions, Anastasia walked to the chair and seated herself, peripherally noticing that Dex chose to stand instead of sitting on one of the chairs at the perimeter of the room. Felor walked around the table and sat in a chair to the woman's side.

"So," began the woman without ceremony, "this is Anastasia Mason. I thought you would be taller." She snickered softly. "Very well. I am Natasha Tauziat, and for your purposes, you can consider me in charge here. Now," she said, leaning across the table, "what in the hell are you prepared to offer me?"

Anastasia tried to control the sigh that escaped her. It was going to be a long day.

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Another alarm rang out as Alexis finished patching the starboard shield grid, and she checked her display to find that the aft capacitors had been reduced to 49%. A jet of steam issued forth from the cooling tubes above her head, and she heard Ryan's voice above the chaos.

"I need that crossover cable *now!*"

Alexis looked over just long enough to catch Ryan's eye as the tech

scurried to him with the required cable. He flashed her a quick wink as he grabbed the cable and began inserting it into an access panel on the side of the harmonics computer bank.

A voice from the intercom tore Alexis away. "Miss St. Claire, what is the status of those shield grids? I've got ambers all up and down my alert board."

That's because they're kicking the crap out of us, she thought, barely refraining from airing her thoughts audibly. "The shields are taking quite a beating, sir," she replied instead. "I'm holding them together as best I can." Then, against her better judgement, she added, "Perhaps you could advise the Captain to perform some evasive maneuvers, when he has a chance."

She could see the tactical officer's face as he sized up her remark, not sure if it was meant to be scathing or humorous. Apparently deciding on the latter, he replied, "That will be all, Lieutenant. Carry on."

Alexis looked over her shoulder to find one of the techs at the engine control board staring quizzically at her. "It's true," Alexis offered. "Some evasive maneuvers *would* be nice."

The tech gave her an *I know* look, quickly returning to her duties. But Alexis never could understand what Captain Woolslair thought was to be gained by obstinately charging straight into the thickest of the fighting. Judging from the lack of use of the maneuvering thrusters and the repeated damage to shield grids on all areas of the ship, Alexis was sure that the Captain had not deviated from his standard combat "strategy."

Of course, Alexis reminded herself, she was not a tactician. Combat strategy was not her job. Her job was to keep the shields up so that Woolslair could look like a hero. Which was fine, she thought. She would be happy enough if she just kept the *Brigadier* in one piece.

Another jarring explosion rocked the ship and Alexis returned to her work. As she patched another hole in the shield grid, she thought of how much she enjoyed the responsibility of keeping the entire crew safe from attack. And, in the middle of the chaos, with Vr'amil'een weapons raining down on them like hailstones, Alexis could not help but smile.



Anastasia slumped down on the bed, her mind and body thoroughly drained even though the most physical exercise she had all day was

walking to and from the transport tube. The worst part was that, despite all her best efforts, her most generous offers, and her extensive diplomatic training, she had been unable to cajole so much as a single reasonable concession from Natasha.

"You look tired," Dex offered. "That was one tough lady."

"I know," Anastasia replied, her words muffled through her pillow. "I have a bad feeling that we're just wasting our time."

"You've had tough negotiations before, haven't you?"

"Sure I have. But—I don't know. At least you usually make *some* progress. You can just tell when someone is never going to budge a centimeter."

Dex laughed. "I especially liked the way she wanted autonomous control of half the Sector, *and* a presence in the Confederation Senate. All with Confederation military protection, no less."

"Exactly my point, Dex. She must know her demands are ludicrous. Yet she won't compromise at all, and she wants to reopen negotiations tomorrow." She sighed heavily. "It's nothing more than a tremendous waste of time," she repeated.

"You want to just pack up and leave, then?" Dex asked. "If you think they're just trying to stall us or—"

Dex's nanocomputer suddenly sounded an ominous tone. In an instant, Dex's phaser was out of his holster and he had run to the bedroom's large curtained window.

"Get down!" he yelled. "Behind the dresser!"

A fresh surge of adrenaline propelled Anastasia off the bed and behind the dresser in one fairly fluid roll. She peeked out from behind the dresser to see Dex firing out the window at some unseen assailant.

"Get your head back," he ordered, apparently sensing her movements without so much as a glance in her direction. As if to illustrate his point, a bright green beam of energy crashed through the window and burned a hole through Anastasia's bed.

The bed she had been lying on ten seconds earlier.

As abruptly as the attack had begun, it was over, the angry cacophony of laser fire quickly thinning out to nonexistence. Still under orders to keep her head back, Anastasia hesitantly muttered, "Dex?"

He appeared around the corner of the dresser, offering his hand and helping her to her feet. He had reholstered his phaser.

"I think it's time for us to get going," he suggested. "It seems your instincts were right. They didn't want us here to negotiate."

Anastasia brushed herself off, looking out the broken window at

Dex's Commandos, who had already secured the area outside. She strained her eyes and could see that three of them clustered over a dead Turian, evidently the instigator of the attack. She could see, even from this distance, that his head had been vaporized by a well-aimed phaser bolt.

"That was it?" Anastasia asked. "A lone Turian?"

Dex gave her a confused look. "One is all it takes."

Anastasia nodded. But if someone had really wanted her dead, she doubted that they would have sent just one attacker. Surely they could not have underestimated Dex's squad that much?

Anastasia walked back to the ruined bed and sat. *Something about this isn't right*, she thought. Her senses had told her as much since before she even descended to the planet, and they were warning her even more vehemently now.

"Yes, Dex," she said abruptly, rising from the bed. "It is time for us to leave."



The Vr'amil'een snub fighters were nothing more than specks, hardly visible through the glare cast on the canopy by the system's twin suns. Zach only glanced at his tactical display, which was about to become far too chaotic to be even remotely useful.

The enemy ships suddenly began to grow larger, and Zach locked onto the lead fighter, releasing a missile as soon as he was in range. A moment later, the oncoming ships released a massive salvo of missiles, which sped toward Zach's squadron like a wall of spikes.

"Evasives!" Zach barked into the headset, and he corkscrewed his fighter between a pair of the unguided missiles. A third caught him with a glancing blow, set off by its proximity warhead, but the shields held. He looked up to find that the snubs were upon him.

It only took a moment for all semblance of textbook dogfighting skills to be lost. Dozens of Confederation fighters and scores of enemy ships commingled in a deadly dance of unrehearsed desperation. Zach targeted the first fighter he saw and hoped his squadron-mates would keep most of the rest off his tail.

Streaks of energy shot from the nose of the ZF-575, catching a snub fighter in the engines and spinning it out of control. The proximity alarm trilled, but Zach was unable to evade a missile that streaked into his ship's flank. The starboard shield grid sputtered out and a wisp of smoke snaked from the control board.

"You alright, Wolfman?" called Raven's voice over the intercom. "Sorry about that—I couldn't take him out in time."

"Fine," Zach replied, already targeting his next victim. "I'll hold the ship together."

The ship Zach was tailing executed a standard S-curve, and Zach anticipated the maneuver, finishing the enemy off with a burst from his wing-mounted lasers. He shook his head derisively. *Live by the book, die by the book*, he thought, instinctively spinning his ship around in a dizzying turn and watching as the snub tailing him utterly over-shot his position.

Ahead of him now was a trio of snubs, tailing Halcyon's agile SF-367 fighter. Halcyon twisted out of his pursuers' line of fire, but was unable to lose them amongst the maelstrom of enemies. Zach forced the thruster handles forward and shot after the receding ships, recklessly accelerating through the mass of fighters at a dizzying velocity. He thumbed the firing studs and his lasers found their target, ripping into the nearest of the three snubs and causing the remaining pair to give up their pursuit.

"Thanks, Wolfman," Halcyon stammered. "I couldn't shake those guys."

"Don't mention it," Zach replied, realizing that he had picked up a tail of his own. Another ship approached from the front, closing on him with remarkable speed. Zach threw the thruster handles forward once again, streaking toward the enemy with abandon. A series of shots impacted his rear shields, but the ship ahead wavered in its approach, and Zach swerved around it, spinning 180 degrees. The pursuing fighter tried to match his movement, but was not agile enough, crashing into the other snub and sending both spinning out of control.

Zach spared himself a quick glance at his readouts and assured himself that his ship was still in fighting condition. A short alarm tone rang out and Zach found another pair of snub fighters speeding toward him. He gritted his teeth and shot back into the fray.

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She could still hear Felor's ingratiating voice over the intercom. "But Captain," it continued, "I assure you steps are being taken to find out who is responsible for this evening's attack. Security will be tripled—"

With a wave of her hand, Anastasia silenced the transmission.

"We are clear for launch," Ariyana reported. "All systems reading

optimal; energy banks fully charged.”

“Good,” Anastasia muttered, settling comfortably into her Captain’s chair. “Get us the hell out of here.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

The ship’s antigrav repulsors raised the *Inferno* from her perch, angling her nose upward just as the main engine bank took over. With a dampened rush, the ship surged into the sky, taking only a few moments to clear the planet’s thick atmosphere.

Anastasia half expected the orbital armada—if one could call it that—to open fire on her ship, but the *Inferno*, followed by Dex in his *Cerberus*, sped through the blockade without incident. She breathed a sign of relief as they gained distance from the planet of New Berkeley.

Without warning, however, the ship’s movement suddenly stalled, unceremoniously coming to a complete stop only a few thousand kilometers from the planet and its blockade. A shrill alarm went off inside Anastasia’s head, and she could almost hear the voice of her unconscious mocking her. *I told you so ...*

“Captain,” Cody exclaimed, his eyes darting across his status board. “I’m reporting all engine banks off-line.” He punched valiantly at his console. “Controls are not responding.”

“Go to maneuvering thrusters,” she ordered, calling up the engine displays on her own console. “Turn us to face the blockade.”

Cody obliged and the ship spun to face the planet. But the SPACER ships were not moving. They just sat there, seemingly oblivious to the *Inferno*’s condition.

Could it be just a simple engine failure?

Dex’s image appeared on the viewscreen. “Captain?” he asked. “Is something the matter?”

Anastasia studied the engine schematics on her console. “We seem to be having problems with the engines, Dex. I’m about to find out the cause of the problem now.”

Just before she thumbed the intercom, Vance’s voice carried over the speakers. “Bridge, this is engineering. Captain, I am searching for the cause of the malfunction. All diagnostics report—” His voice abruptly cut off. An ominous rumble had engulfed the ship, the sound of an equally ominous weapon powering up.

“My God,” Anastasia whispered.

It was the Wind of Death.

“Byron,” she shrieked, her composure instantly giving way to a torrent of unabashed terror. “Shut it down! Shut everything down

now!" She looked to Dex on the viewscreen. "Dex, get your ship the hell out of here *right now*."

Dex opened his mouth as if to respond, but, seeing Anastasia's frantic expression, he quickly thought the better of it and reluctantly began moving the *Cerberus* away at high speed.

Anastasia jammed a sweaty palm at the intercom button. "Vance, cut main power! Sever the—"

But it was too late.

The rumbling reached a crescendo as tremendous waves of energy collected within the ship's Subspace Destabilization Unit. The noise quickly became unbearable, a scything wave of sound never meant to be heard by human ears.

And then it fired.

The effect of the Unit, an effect Anastasia had prayed she would never live to see, was actually quite beautiful, in some horrific, appalling way. Waves of cosmic distortion cascaded from the ship in all directions, traveling outward like a hazy, rippling wind.

A Wind of Death.

The sweeping distortions rushed toward the helpless blockade like an unstoppable tidal wave. A quick count showed Anastasia that eight ships comprised the blockade on this side of the planet, and Anastasia hoped in vain that at least some of them were beyond the effects of the weapon. Within a few moments, the disturbance had reached the ships, washing over them in oblivious malevolence and causing the vessels to deform comically in the distortion's wake. Just as soon as it had begun, it dissipated, mercifully just before impacting the planet itself.

The ships of the blockade, seemingly unscathed by the attack, hung in space just as they had before the wave passed over them. From a purely visual inspection, an observer would not in fact be able to tell that anything was amiss. It was almost as if it had never happened.

Except, of course, that every living thing aboard the ships was now dead.

An anguished cry escaped Anastasia's lips, an involuntary reaction to the carnage that had just taken place before her eyes. She slowly tore her gaze from the viewscreen to look at the status display, which confirmed what she already knew to be true. *Eight enemy vessels*, it read. *Zero life signs*.

There had been one hundred and seventy-five people aboard those eight ships.

A voice from the intercom tore her from her pained reverie.

"Captain? What in the hell is going on? I have no control over primary—" His voice cut off in mid-sentence.

"Vance?"

"Captain!" he screamed, frantic. "Send security to access corridor three right away!"

Byron had already bolted from his post, phaser in hand, as he rushed through the bridge doors and down the short hallway to engineering. Victor followed close behind him, and Anastasia rushed to keep up. Her mind was foggy and she struggled to clear her head.

A saboteur? On the Inferno? How in the—?

Anastasia raced around a bend in the corridor to find that Byron had already cornered the intruder, a red-faced Turian who stood with a photon destabilizer pointed to his chest.

"Don't move," Byron ordered. "Drop your weapon or—"

With a flash of blue plasma and a brief anguished grunt, the Turian was gone, disintegrated by his own hand.

An alarm echoed through the hallway. Reflexively, Anastasia stumbled back to the bridge, leaving Byron and Victor behind to investigate the former saboteur.

Upon her arrival, the Captain found Ariyana and Cody half turned to face her, half watching the viewscreen with unhinged jaws. Between them, the viewscreen was lit by flash after flash as a dozen Vr'amil'een warships jumped into the system.

CHAPTER 7

The ship shuddered violently as another concussion missile rocked the starboard bow. The shield grid wavered momentarily, but the matrix held and Alexis breathed a shallow sigh of relief.

Sounds of explosions and high-energy laser turret discharges continued to fill the engineering deck, and a faint trace of ozone could be smelled in the air. Techs shouted and ran past, ferrying cables, power cells, and diagnostic equipment across the large, crowded room. At Alexis' console, wildly-fluctuating energy readings and capacitor levels made for a prismatic show on her display. She looked across to Ryan, punching madly at his computer terminal, and found herself smiling.

A trill alarm at her console redirected her attention as she stared at a breach in the port shield grid. Her fingers flew frantically over the controls as she redirected power to compensate, remodulating the grid and optimizing it for projectile weapon defense just as another missile impact rocked the ship.

Her comm light came on and a voice from the bridge carried to her ears. "Lieutenant, I'm reading gaps in our shield harmonics. I need you to ..." His voice trailed off as he apparently realized that Alexis had already addressed the problem. "Er, good work. Bridge out."

Alexis shrugged and kept up her work. As if she needed someone on the bridge to tell her to patch a gap in the shields.

The sounds of laser fire died away and most of the alarms wailing from various stations on the deck silenced themselves. The shield grid remained steady, not rocked by particle impacts or savage missile explosions. The frenetic activity of the engineering crew gradually faded to a reserved but purposeful pace.

The battle was over.

A voice reverberated throughout the room. "Attention all hands, this is your Captain. Stand down from combat status. The invaders have been driven away."

A boisterous cheer rang forth from the assembled engineers and technicians and Alexis yelled the loudest of all. She turned to see Ryan, sitting with his muscular arms folded across his thick torso,

smiling at her from across the room.

And she smiled just a bit wider in return.

• • •

Anastasia scrambled back to her command chair, belatedly realizing that it would do little good. Still numbed by recent events, she had nearly forgotten that her ship had just fired its Subspace Destabilization Unit and, as such, was nearly helpless for the next 90 seconds.

An eternity in space combat.

The Captain studied her tactical console and confirmed that eleven Vr'amil'een ships had arrived in system and now, without even their meager defense fleet to protect them, the planet of New Berkeley was helpless before them.

A few small ships rose from the planet to meet the attackers, but they offered little resistance and were eliminated quickly by the robust Vr'amil'een Cruisers. Several of the swifter enemy ships veered off from their approach to the planet, and began accelerating toward the powerless *Inferno*.

And Anastasia couldn't even raise the shields.

A ship suddenly appeared at the top of the viewscreen, speeding past the *Inferno* and toward the incoming vessels.

"I'll hold them off as long as I can," came Dex's voice over the intercom. "But I don't know how long that will be."

"Just give me 30 more seconds," she replied, jarring herself back to action. "Byron, Victor, get back here right away." Captain Mason looked back to the viewscreen and at the darting *Cerberus*, which was trying valiantly to distract the attackers long enough for her ship's power to come back on-line. But Dex's ship, an armoured transport, was not much of a combat vessel, a fact borne out by its meager combat designation, ST-709. Dex was managing, however, to harry the attackers without suffering serious damage, and was doing an admirable job of keeping them away from the *Inferno*.

The welcome hum of power returned to the bridge and a chorus of lights greeted the Captain on her display console. Byron and Victor raced to their seats, buckling themselves in just as Anastasia gave the order to move.

"Get us over there, Cody," she ordered. "Byron, keep those ships away from the *Cerberus*."

"Gladly, Captain," he replied, targeting the ship nearest to Dex. A salvo of laser fire erupted from the *Inferno's* nose and collided with the

Vr'amil'een heavy fighter, disabling it and knocking it into a dead spin. The remaining three Vr'amil'een vessels concentrated their attack on the new threat, spinning toward the *Inferno* and releasing a volley of gunfire that was absorbed by the ship's heavy shields. A missile streaked forth from one of the forward missile tubes and disabled another fighter, and Byron concentrated the ship's formidable plasma burst cannon on an advancing Corvette, which endured the barrage with its hardy neutronium armour.

"Evasive maneuvers, Cody," barked the Captain. "Victor, divert auxiliary power to the forward shields."

The wounded Corvette steadied itself and launched a blast from its massive nose cannon, which caught the *Inferno* before Cody was able to turn her away. The impact shook the ship, but a glance at her display showed the Captain that the shields had withstood the attack. Lieutenant Commander Johnson returned fire, overwhelming the crippled ship with a blast from the particle emitters. A quick burst from the wing-mounted Gatling lasers and the remaining heavy fighter exploded into debris.

"You alright, Dex?" Anastasia asked into the intercom, scanning her display for more enemy ships. "How's your ship holding up?"

"We're fine, Ana," he replied, his ship coming into view on the main screen. "But the people of New Berkeley don't seem to be faring as well."

Anastasia re-centered the display on the planet and could see that the remaining ships of the assault force had concentrated on the planet itself and were preparing to release devastating orbital barrages at the helpless cities below.

Before Anastasia could give the order to attack, Ariyana spun in her chair to face her. "Captain," she said, "we have an incoming transmission, on-screen."

It was a familiar face that appeared on the viewscreen, a face that belonged to Fleet Admiral Joseph Wright, a gaunt, hard-worn man in his nineties. Though Anastasia had little direct experience with the man, he was known for being tough but fair. Anastasia found him abrasive, and was not surprised to learn that, though he was well respected, few people liked him.

"Captain Mason," he began, "you are to fall back to the Denegar System to shore up the defenses there. You are not to engage the Vr'amil'een at New Berkeley." The Admiral adjusted his uniform and leveled his icy gaze at Anastasia. "Do you understand?"

"But, sir," she stammered, unsure if he was aware of the whole situation. "They're killing them. We have to—"

"That is an order, Captain," he replied, his somber voice calm and forcefully rigid. "New Berkeley has requested to secede from the Confederation, and, as such, will no longer receive Confederation protection. You are instead to proceed to the Denegar System as instructed."

"You don't understand, Admiral—"

"You have your orders, Captain. You have done enough harm there already." The Admiral adjusted his collar once again. "Admiral Wright out."

His image disappeared from the viewscreen, and was replaced with the view of the planet. The slaughter of New Berkeley had begun.



Zach guided his ship through the wreckage, scores of twisted fighter-craft frames tumbling slowly in the vacuum of space. Every so often a shower of sparks or a bright plume of fire would erupt from one of the lifeless hulls, fed by on-board oxygen tanks or unburned fuel cells. Commander Wallace's sensors scanned the orbiting graveyard as he surveyed it with his eyes. It was the aspect of being a fighter pilot Zach liked least: the somber scouring of the remnants of battle, such an antithesis to the furious action of a dogfight. What Zach and his sensors were searching for were life signs—Confederation pilots who had survived and could be rescued, and enemy pilots who could still be lurking amidst the rubble. More than once, a ship thought to be disabled had launched a surprise attack after the battle was seemingly over.

"Section Nine-Alpha, clear," came Halcyon's voice over the intercom. Wolfpack Squadron, still relatively intact, had been assigned to space-sweeping duty, as pilots were apt to call the unsavory assignment. The incidence of space-sweeping ships being surprised and destroyed by skulking enemies was higher than any pilot would have liked. As such, Zach was patrolling with Raven reassuringly covering his wing.

"All Beta sections clear," reported Zach, studying his sensor display one last time. "Nothing but rubble here."

As his fighter banked back toward the carrier, a sudden movement caught Zach's eye. At first, he thought it was just a reflection off a

derelict fighter's canopy, but as he looked closer, he could see there was indeed something moving inside.

"Raven," he called, "check out the fighter at 213 mark seven." Even as he said it, Zach keyed his sensors for a tight-beam scan.

What the sensors read was mostly radiation interference, common on damaged vessels and part of what made space-sweeping such an arduous process. But as Zach focused and calibrated the sensors, he could make out an erratic but definite life-form signature coming from the Confederation fighter.

"We've got a live one," Zach called. "I'm going in."

Zach thrust his fighter toward the slowly-spinning fighter hulk, expertly matching its speed and rotation. He moved his fighter to within a couple of meters of the doomed spacecraft. From here, he could plainly see the pilot through the cracked cockpit plasticite, twitching but clearly alive.

"Wait just a second, Wolfman," Raven cautioned. "The radiation levels from the exposed Duopasqualonium rods are well above lethal. And the engine core is about to go critical. Get the hell out of there—that poor bastard is already dead anyway."

"Negative, Raven. Retreat to a safe distance and call for an ambulance shuttle."

"But, sir—"

"That's an order."

Zach unfastened his restraint harness and double-checked his flight suit's vacuum seals and oxygen levels. He grabbed the plasma cutter from under the seat and popped the ZF-575's canopy.

There was a violent hiss as the air rushed out of the cockpit, and Zach pushed off from his chair and sent himself drifting toward the derelict spacecraft. He used a few short bursts from the suit's thrust system to get him to the disabled ship's cockpit. He flicked on his plasma cutter and began to burn through the cracked plasticite.

From this distance, Zach could see the spasmodic figure quite clearly, and could see that his face, sealed within his flight helmet, had already been thoroughly radiation-burned. Zach winced as he realized that he could no longer make out the dying pilot's identity.

Zach moved aside as the plasma cutter finished its work and a section of the plasticite exploded away from the pressurized cockpit. A cloud of steam shot forth through the opening, and Zach could feel the intense heat coming from the ship's deteriorating engine core. The ship shook as a jet of flame arced out from the rear of the vessel and

the Commander realized that the core had already gone critical.

And that didn't leave him much time.

Zach braced one arm on the ship's hull, reaching in with the other and pulling the twitching body out through the cockpit dome's opening. Unconscious and weightless in zero-g, the body complied, and Zach kicked himself away from the doomed fighter as soon as the pilot was clear.

Using the maneuvering jets was tricky with the extra mass, but Zach grabbed onto his ship's open canopy and stuffed himself in, pulling the pilot down on top of him. The body was uncomfortably warm, and, as the cockpit sealed, Commander Wallace realized that his tiny cockpit was not meant for two.

The cockpit re-pressurized with a hiss and Zach poked at the control lever, mostly blocked by the rescued pilot. He was jerked back as the ship accelerated, but, though he could not fasten his restraint harness, there was nowhere for him to go in the cramped space.

"Computer—autopilot," Zach called, unable to steer the vessel, now moving rather swiftly through the debris field. "Return to launch point." A bright flash reflected off the canopy and a muffled explosion shock wave let him know that the pilot's ship had finally exploded. The now-rigid stillness of the pilot himself let Zach know that he was already dead.



Admiral Wright's image disappeared from the *Cerberus'* viewscreen, and was replaced by a view of Vr'amil'een ships bombarding the planet of New Berkeley from orbit. Four blocky landing craft had disembarked from twin fighter carriers and had begun their slow descent into the clouded New Berkeley atmosphere. Dex knew that the four landing craft held enough Vr'amil'een soldiers to easily overrun whatever meager defenses were still available on the planet, which, ironically, was now all but helpless without protection from the very Confederation the SPACERs had demanded removed from the system.

The viewscreen changed once again, and this time it was Captain Mason's face that filled the screen. Her eyes had narrowed and she wore a look of grim determination that seemed out of place, shrouding as it was her beauty and delicate features. Dex knew the decision she had just made.

"I need your help on this one, Dex," she said, almost pleading. "I

can't stop the fleet and those landers by myself."

Dex hesitated—just for a moment—as the thought of disobeying Confederation Command played uncomfortably in his mind. But his instinctual sense of duty left him little choice.

"I'm on the landers," he found himself saying, even before he thought he had really made up his mind. "They won't get far."

Anastasia could not hide the sense of relief that washed over her face. "You do realize, Dex, that—"

"Understood, Captain," he replied. "Rutcliffe out."

Zip and Retro looked to the Commander in silence. "Plot an intercept course," he ordered, settling into his chair. "All available speed."

Retro looked to Zip for a moment, as if waiting for him to possibly countermand the order. But Zip stared back at him unblinkingly, and, out of the corner of his eye, Dex saw him give an almost imperceptible nod. "Aye, Commander," the pilot finally replied. "Atmospheric entry in fifteen seconds."

Dex turned to Zip, who had busied himself with his tactical console. Though he was trying to look comfortable, his knuckles were white against his armrests.

The viewscreen now showed the *Inferno* as the ship loosed salvo after salvo of lasers and missiles at the Vr'amil'een fleet, horribly outnumbered and possibly even outgunned. Dex's vantage point was still from some distance away, as the infinitely slower *Cerberus* had been laughably unable to keep up with the *Inferno* as Anastasia had rushed into battle.

It was a helpless feeling for Dex, not yet in range, and, even if he were, unable to do much against the well-armoured Vr'amil'een warships. He doubted his transport would be the match of a single Vr'amil'een Corvette.

How the *Cerberus* would fare against the landing craft that had disembarked from the fighter carriers, however, was a different matter altogether.

Dex braced himself as the clouded New Berkeley skies rushed nearer on the viewscreen. His transport was not designed for high-speed atmospheric entry. In fact, ideally, the *Cerberus* would never enter the unstable atmosphere at all, instead releasing its dropshuttle from orbit. The *Cerberus* performed pitifully in an atmosphere, where its angular construction made it handle like a brick.

The transport slammed into the wall of air, and flames immediately began their frenzied dance along the hull. Even with inertial dampen-

ers at maximum, the ship rocked fiercely as it was buffeted by atmospheric forces. Nothing but fire could be seen through the front viewscreen, and the tactical scans showed little more, unable to target within the aerial inferno.

The flames began to dissipate, and Retro slowed the ship as they entered the lower atmosphere. Immediately, four blocky Vr'amil'een landing craft could be seen, each descending toward the capital city of Pax. Dex targeted the nearest ship and launched his meager complement of missiles, which tracked the falling vessel and impacted against its armoured hull. The landing craft wavered, and thick clouds of black smoke trailed behind the wounded vessel, but it continued its descent to the surface.

"Bring us in closer," Dex commanded. "We'll take him out with the guns."

Retro brought the *Cerberus* in behind the crippled lander, which began to return fire with its dorsal turret. A series of shots raked across the *Cerberus*' bow, but the shields absorbed the minor barrage. Dark smoke obscured most of the Commander's view, yet Dex targeted the smoking vessel with precision, firing a long burst with his forward laser turret. The lasers found their marks, and the rear half of the shuttle exploded into a fiery ball, leaving the lander to plummet to the ground below.

Dex could feel the ship slowing and he looked to the viewscreen to find the ground rushing up at a precipitous pace. Retro yanked back on the controls and the *Cerberus* fired its landing rockets, making a rough but successful landing in a large, grassy savanna that stretched to the horizon. A distant explosion resounded throughout the shuttle, and a thin wisp of smoke snaked into the air to mark where the crippled lander had crashed. Through the viewscreen, however, Dex could see that the remaining three ships had landed safely, and a horde of Vr'amil'een soldiers and ground assault vehicles had already begun swarming out and dispersing as they headed for Pax.

"Alright, team," Dex ordered, unstrapping himself and heading for the exit hangar. "Let's move out."

His team's reply came quickly over the intercom, and Zip rushed from his seat to equip himself for battle. Dex followed him down the smooth corridor to the hangar, while Retro remained aboard to watch the *Cerberus*.

Zip and Dex burst forth into the holding area, and Dex wasted no time in getting to the L-PAS huddled in the corner, its hunched,

sagging shape giving no outward impression of its awesome potency. He climbed the short ladder and lowered himself into the suit, powering up from standby mode and sealing the unit around him. He fastened himself into the combat suit's cockpit, and looked through the dark plasticite of the machine's head. In front of him were the remaining 11 members of his team, and even those who had seen the suit in action before stared unblinkingly at Dex as he thudded the L-PAS forward. Dex thumbed the suit's comm system, and his voice boomed across the enclosed space. "Pop the hatch and let's go."

"My God," gasped a young soldier, looking to the Commander in awe. What he saw was an ominous, pitch-black, full-body combat suit that sported four massive, forward-facing turrets, one over each shoulder and one under each arm. The exhaust vents from the jet thruster pack on its back were visible around its armoured legs, and the suit's helmet was fronted with a dark plate of directionally transparent plasticite. The suit, which was so heavy it required hydraulic servos for movement, made the Commander appear at least triple his actual size. In fact, had the young soldier not just heard Dex's voice coming from the metallic beast, he probably would have thought he was staring at some sort of automated battlefield robot and not the most powerful combat suit known to man.

"In case you are wondering, Corporal," Dex hastily explained, "what I am wearing is a Legionnaire-class Personal Assault System. It is fitted with four over-under Gatling Cannon capable of firing 42-mm explosive rounds at a rate of 100 shots per second each. Additional armaments include two arm-mounted guided missile launchers, dual silicon-refractor optical-discharge laser turrets, and two over-the-shoulder mortar tubes with a range of slightly over five kilometers. The turboplasma thrust system is capable of propelling me at altitudes of up to three kilometers at over 500 kilometers per hour. Full atmospheric control is provided by the internal oxygen recyclers and an onboard O₂ supply. The hydraulic assist system, which generates 17,000 Newton-meters of torque, allows me to run over any terrain at speeds approaching 150 kilometers per hour. The two-centimeter atomic armour plating can withstand over 3,000 kilotons of direct force, and is the protective equivalent of a barrier of pure steel over five meters thick. Sensor arrays, motion detectors, and thermographic vision systems are all state of the art, and the energy supply, a two-ton nucleomagnetic drive coil, can provide enough energy to run the suit well into the next century."

The exit hatch folded outward and slammed to the ground with a reverberating thud.

“W–what does that mean?” stammered the soldier, mouth agape.

“It means,” Dex replied, “that I’m about to go kick somebody’s ass.”

CHAPTER 8

Alexis ran the remodulation sequence one last time, checking power levels and grid harmonics on the *Brigadier's* newly-repaired shields. All status checks showed the shields as reading 100 percent, and finally Alexis was satisfied. She yawned heavily and suddenly realized just how exhausted she was.

"Are you still here?" came a voice from behind her. Alexis spun around to find Ryan walking toward her. Her yawn must have covered up the muted swish of the doors at his entry.

"Yeah, well," she stammered, rubbing her eyes, "I just had to be sure the shields were back up to snuff."

Ryan half-smiled, half-frowned at her. "Do you know what time it is? You look exhausted. Go to sleep."

Alexis cast her gaze downward. "It's just that there's no guarantee the Vr'amil'een won't be back. And they hardly left anyone here to defend Utopia ..."

"And you're a perfectionist."

"Right," she granted, "but also there's—hey, wait a second ... what are *you* doing down here?"

Ryan opened his mouth in shocked reply, but it quickly turned to a wide grin. "You got me," he admitted. "I'm a workaholic too."

Alexis smiled and stepped closer to him, resting her head on his shoulder. "You're right, though. I think I will get some sleep."

A warm tingle coursed through Alexis' body as Ryan placed his hands on her slender waist. She moved her hands up his back, gripping him more tightly, and looked up to his face. He gazed back at her with warm, soft eyes and a tender smile creased across his lips. "Alexis," he whispered, bringing his face a centimeter closer to her own.

"Oh, wow," she breathed, and then she was kissing him.

• • •

There were eight of them—eight ships that rained fire down upon the defenseless world of New Berkeley. Eight ships dropping orbital bombs and firing surface bombardment cannon at civilians.

There was no way Anastasia could turn away.

"All ahead full," ordered the Captain, her fingers tightly gripping the armrests of her chair. "Byron, target the ground bombardment Cruisers first."

There was no hesitation as Cody rocketed the ship toward the Vr'amil'een attackers at incredible speed. Byron looked to Anastasia for a moment, but said nothing. He merely nodded slightly to the Captain.

Anastasia looked to her tactical display, which showed the *Cerberus* plummeting into the atmosphere in pursuit of the four Vr'amil'een landers. All she could do was hope that Dex's lone squad was enough to stop them.

A flash of red on her console refocused the Captain's attentions on the battle at hand, and, just as her display indicated that they were in range, Byron launched a heavy salvo of missiles at the lead bomber. Cody tore straight at the ship, and the forward gun turrets exploded in a hailstorm of effulgent death. The lasers ripped into the hull of the Vr'amil'een vessel just as the missiles did, rupturing it and sending the ship spinning on a slow death spiral down into the planet's atmosphere.

The remaining ships of the enemy convoy forgot their bombardment of the planet and concentrated their firepower on their new attacker. The speedy ship was a difficult target, however, and most of the heavier projectile cannon missed their marks. A smattering of light gunfire assailed the *Inferno* from all directions as it sped through the midst of the enemy formation, and Lieutenant Matthews spun the ship back around in a painfully sharp turn to make another run.

"Target at 117, mark 12," Anastasia ordered, highlighting an enemy on her tactical display. In acknowledgement, Cody veered toward the Corvette, positioned at the starboard edge of the Vr'amil'een battle group. A fresh burst of acceleration flattened the Captain against her seat.

Several snub fighters had begun to launch from twin Vr'amil'een fighter carriers and swarmed at the *Inferno* in an angry mass, scoring hits across the bow of the ship as they raced toward them. Commander Zeeman took control of the laser turrets and returned fire at the attackers, while Byron concentrated the heavier weapons on the Corvette, unleashing a savage volley in its direction. As his performance reports had claimed, his aim was true, and his barrage scored a lethal hit on the lightly-armoured enemy vessel.

Several simultaneous impacts rattled the *Inferno* as the heavier Vr'amil'een ships began to target her more successfully. The shield grid wavered, but held, and a voice from the engineering deck came over the intercom.

"Power reserves are down to critical, Captain," reported Vance. "The SDU sapped our energy banks pretty good, and there's just not enough left to power our heavy energy weapons and withstand this barrage."

"Very well," the Captain replied. "Just keep the shields up for me. We'll cut back on offensive usage."

Cody rocketed the ship away from the enemy mass, taking a slower turn as he faced the battle group again.

"Go easy on the plasma burst cannon," Captain Mason intoned. "Stick to missiles and the mass driver guns. Victor, use the flechette turrets on the snubs."

Lieutenant Commander Johnson wavered for a moment, then nodded, focusing his attentions on the weapons inventory. He seemed indecisive as he reinitialized the firing patterns, but appeared to recover as Cody once again accelerated the ship at their targets.

"Take out the fighter carriers, Lieutenant," said Anastasia. "Try to get us around below them so that Byron can disable the launch decks."

Lieutenant Matthews did as he was told, swooping the nimble ship under the lead fighter carrier and avoiding a vicious barrage of cannon fire. Byron poured heavy shells into the carrier's belly, tearing gashes across the poorly-shielded fighter bays and stopping the flow of snubs emerging from the ship. The carrier returned fire with her rear guns, however, and shook the *Inferno* with a direct hit that crumpled the ship's rear shield grid.

"Damn it, Captain," Victor spat. "We're just too low on energy, and there's just too many of them."

Anastasia grimaced. She knew he was right. They hadn't even dented the Battlecruiser yet.

"Captain," Ariyana reported, staring at her radar. "We have incoming ships from the planet."

"On-screen."

A fleet of ships could be seen rising through the clouded skies of New Berkeley, a diverse group of unmarked vessels, sizable in number and apparently heavily armed. They streamed toward the Vr'amil'een attackers and began to engage them as soon as they were

within range.

"Those bastards," Victor grumbled. "What are they doing with all those ships?"

"I don't know, Commander, but all that matters right now is that we're on the same side." Anastasia shifted in her seat. "Cody, take us at the flagship. We've got to knock out that Battlecruiser."

"Aye, Captain," he replied, rubbing his hands together vigorously and quickly retaking the control stick. The ship surged ahead, and the angular Battlecruiser lumbered into view. "Full weapons, Byron. Vance, all power to the front grid." More softly, she added, "Here we go."

The *Inferno* screamed toward the giant vessel, preceded by a searing swarm of heavy missiles. The weapons clustered on the mighty ship's bridge, engulfing it in a cloud of debris as the concussion warheads tore through thick layers of robust neutronium armour. Byron poured salvos of energy weapons into the clouded breach, vaporizing armour and hull and rocking the massive Battlecruiser violently. Still, the ship returned fire, a ruthless shelling that overcame the *Inferno's* failing shields and impacted upon the well-armoured hull. The viewscreen sputtered out momentarily as a fiber optic camera was destroyed by the barrage, automatically replaced by a redundant backup an instant later. Cody wrestled with the controls and gained distance from the wounded flagship. Alarms rang out and warning lights blared silent crimson pleas for attention. Anastasia punched at her controls, but the shields would not respond, and her readouts showed the shield capacitors as totally drained.

"We need to make another pass," she affirmed. "We're the only ones who can take out that 'Cruiser."

"Captain," said Byron, "may I remind you that our shields are offline."

"Yes, Byron, you may. Lieutenant Matthews, bring us back around."

"Gladly, Captain."

The ship surged to speed, and the daunting flagship grew steadily larger in the display. It began spouting deadly shells from its side turrets, but Cody adroitly jinked the ship into a corkscrewing dive, jerking back up and heading straight for the Battlecruiser's crippled bridge.

"Now, Byron," yelled the Captain. "Give it everything we have!"

Byron obliged, slamming his palm into the firing controls and

releasing a full complement of the *Inferno's* weapons. The bulky 'Cruiser was unable to avoid the barrage, and the munitions found their marks, sending great peals of fire and debris shooting from the Vr'amil'een flagship. Heavy artillery battered the streaking *Inferno*, impacting directly upon the ship's Quantum Armour, and jarring the crew violently, but abruptly, the larger vessel's return fire ceased, and it began to drift lifelessly down toward the planet.

Anastasia scanned the tactical screen as Cody retreated to a safer distance. The firefight was coming to an end, and the forces of New Berkeley were destroying and disabling the last of the Vr'amil'een ships. The hidden force was a heterogeneous but fairly sizeable assortment of ships, and left Anastasia wondering just what else the devious SPACERS had been hiding all along.



Dex marched the suit down the hangar's short exit ramp, his team huddled close behind him. The onboard sensors showed a squad of Vr'amil'een soldiers advancing toward his position, while the remaining two headed for the city.

Fools, Dex thought with a bitter smile. They think one squad can handle us?

Dex scanned the terrain as the hatch closed behind them. The savanna offered little place to hide, and, though Dex normally would have his men retreat to the tree line behind them for cover, he had to move quickly. Even if the lone Vr'amil'een squad only slowed them down, they would have accomplished their objective. Once the remaining squads had taken Pax and were entrenched and fortified behind its walls, it would take a lot more than even Dex's squad to remove them.

"Fan out in twos and look for cover," Dex ordered, re-acclimating himself to the suit that he had not used in months. "Find a defensible position and support me with long range fire. Do not advance until ordered."

His unit did as they were told, expertly dispersing and disappearing into recesses in the rolling landscape, behind tree stumps, and into shallow bogs. Dex fired up the suit's jets and hovered into the air, scanning the field ahead through the telescopic sight. The Vr'amil'een unit consisted of mostly heavy infantry, armoured soldiers with mass driver guns capable of doing damage even to a suit as well-armoured as his. The weapons were, needless to say, impressively effective

against infantry units.

In the center of the Vr'amil'een formation was a standard hover-tank, its stout turret as wide across as a man's arm. The vehicle lumbered over the uneven terrain effortlessly, and the remainder of the unit struggled to keep up.

Dex activated the targeting sights and let loose a pair of mortars, which *thunked* out their firing tubes and arced gracefully toward the enemy formation. The hovertank altered its path and sped away from the falling missiles, but the massive explosions that marked their impact swallowed several of the slower Vr'amil'een troops.

Dex swooped toward the advancing hovertank, alighting some distance in front of it and aiming his arm-mounted missile launcher at the machine. The hovertank was faster, however, and its turret swiveled toward Dex and loosed a shell at him at his approach. Dex fired the jets again, and the suit leaped into the air, the ground below erupting into a ball of flame as the suit took off. Dex this time aimed the missile from the air, firing as he rose straight into the sky. The missile snaked toward the tank, which tried to evade it with a surprisingly nimble turn. The guided missile compensated for the movement, however, and struck the hovertank on its right flank, tearing a hole into the thick armour of the machine. There was an almost deafening noise as a heavy shell impacted upon the suit's thick armour, and Dex momentarily lost control of the suit as it pinwheeled to the ground.

Dex diverted his attention from the spinning horizon visible on the viewscreen and focused on the suit's gyro, desperately trying to steady himself before it crashed. He used the maneuvering jets to steady the suit, and hovered uncertainly just meters from the ground.

All at once, a trio of shells slammed into the Commander's back, now turned to face the Vr'amil'een squad. Alert sirens filled the cockpit as the heavy shells tore into the lightly-shielded thrusters. The impact knocked the suit to its knees, and Dex reached out with the machine's massive arm to steady himself. He stood and turned to face his enemies, and stared directly down the barrel of the still-functional hovertank.

Even as he looked, the tank was already firing, and there was no way for Dex to avoid the shell that slammed into the suit's armoured torso. The impact deafened the Commander, and tossed the suit back like it was no more than a toy. Dex hurtled through the air, slamming into the ground with another painful jolt and sliding across the damp

savanna for several hundred meters before finally sagging to a stop.

Dex shook his head as waves of pain coursed through his body. He struggled to focus his blurred vision and checked the suit's damage readouts. The shell had impacted directly in the center of his torso, which was actually to his advantage, as that was where the suit's impressive armour plating was thickest. The Commander looked out the viewscreen, which was black with mud and wet grass. He tried to stand the machine on its feet, wincing with the pain even as the machine groaned in protest. Surprisingly, he was able to steady himself before he was hit again, and he looked to see tube-launched grenades raining down upon the enemy position. The advancing Vr'amil'een horde had finally come within range of his squadron, and their bombardment was buying him much-needed time to regroup.

Dex willed away his disorientation and searched the savanna for the wounded hovertank. A dark plume of smoke rose from the gaping hole in its side, and Dex leveled the suit's left arm at the vehicle, launching another missile with a satisfying *whoosh*. The missile streaked toward the hovertank and caught it directly in the turret, exploding in a ferocious globe of flame that left nothing but charred wreckage.

Several shells exploded near him as Dex focused on the advancing Vr'amil'een infantry. He turned the suit slightly to his left and activated his quad Gatling cannon, peppering the savanna with explosive shells. He turned slowly, sweeping his field of fire across the Vr'amil'een infantry. Wherever he faced, destruction poured into the countryside, leveling the helpless Vr'amil'een troops in an unyielding barrage. When he had completed his sweep, nothing moved, and a black swath had been drawn across the lush countryside as if by a giant torch. Crumpled bodies littered the field and smoke rose from their mangled corpses.

"Advance to Pax," Dex ordered over his intercom, and he checked his readouts to find that his jets were no longer functional. He lumbered the L-PAS across the rolling terrain, unable to wait for his squad as he raced to beat the remaining Vr'amil'een troops to the city walls. The land rushed by quickly as the suit gobbled up ground with considerable speed. Dex checked the sensors to find that the other two Vr'amil'een squads were nearly in range, but that they had almost reached the city walls. Each squad had a hovertank as its centerpiece, but they seemed ignorantly oblivious of his presence, focused as they were on the city ahead. In fact, through the telescopic sight, Dex could

see that the tanks had already begun bombarding the city walls, and the speed with which Dex has dispatched the squad sent to stop him had clearly surprised the overconfident Vr'amil'een. With a sinister scowl, Dex targeted his remaining two mortar shells and launched them simultaneously at the Vr'amil'een hovertanks. The missiles sailed silently through the air, crashing down upon their targets with furious force and engulfing both tanks in fierce explosions. One tank had its entire turret incinerated by the impact, and the other detonated from within as the mortar's explosion reached the ammunition stored inside. The ensuing fireball consumed several Vr'amil'een infantry clustered around the vehicle, and the surviving Vr'amil'een scurried haphazardly to face the new threat. Dex's lasers flashed out again and again, striking down the Vr'amil'een from long range as they scurried for cover in the barren sands at the base of the city walls. With no cover, they were unable to escape Dex's attack, and within mere seconds he had decimated both squads. A small group of soldiers to his left organized themselves enough to return fire, and a smattering of lighter long-range shells impacted against his suit's armoured breastplate. Dex concentrated his guns on the pocket of resistance, quickly silencing their fire and convincing the remaining Vr'amil'een soldiers to drop their weapons in surrender.

The L-PAS slowed as it neared the city and Dex trained his weapons on the capitulated enemy soldiers. None seemed willing to reach for their weapons or even try to escape across the barren sands. Dex looked to his display and could see that his squad was advancing steadily toward the city, where they would take the surviving Vr'amil'een soldiers into custody. Sparing a glance skyward, Dex wondered if Anastasia had fared as well in the skies above New Berkeley.

Dex stifled a sigh. If she hadn't, it would be he that would soon be surrendering to an approaching Vr'amil'een fleet.

CHAPTER 9

Zach approached the smooth silver door to the briefing room and waited as the sensors announced his arrival. The doors soon swished open to reveal Captain Griffin seated behind his desk. The older man was silent, his expression unreadable as Zach entered and wordlessly took his seat opposite him.

"Commander Wallace," the Captain began, "that was some stunt you pulled out there. You recklessly endangered yourself by getting that near a ship that had gone critical."

Zach opened his mouth to reply, but was silenced by a wave of the Captain's hand.

"But that's not why I called you up here. Actually," he added softly, "I admire your courage, son. And I admire your devotion to your fellow pilots. But I am obligated to inform you that regulations call for more caution in such situations. We don't want to lose our best pilot."

"I had to try, sir."

"I know you did, Zach. I would have done the same thing if I were you. Regulations be damned."

"Thank you, sir."

The Captain cleared his throat and shifted in his seat. "Why I did call you up here was to brief you on your next mission." A short sigh escaped the Captain's lips. "You know how thin the Confederation has spread itself, and these damned Vr'amil'een are attacking systems all over. To make matters worse, the SPACERs have threatened to use their fleet to enforce secession demands by two neighboring planets. They're using the destruction of their blockade as political ammunition." The Captain shook his head. "Apparently the bastards forgot Captain Mason saved their asses up there."

"What's going to happen to her?" Zach asked.

"Hell, I don't know," Griffin replied. "They don't tell me stuff like that. Word is, she's going back to Earth for a hearing."

"The Ethics Committee?"

"Yeah, probably. Look, Zach, I know she's a friend of yours. I wish I knew more, honestly. But right now I need you to go to Denegar."

Zach nodded, pushing Anastasia's plight from his mind. Denegar, a barely habitable moon on the fringes of Confederation space, had just been captured by the Vr'amil'een. As the only known source of Duopasqualonium in the Sector, the Confederation had to retake it at all costs.

"Sir?" Zach asked. "Just me?"

"No, son, not just you. Your squad."

"They're not sending the carrier? Don't they realize—"

"Of course they do. But you know how volatile Duopasqualonium is. We can't risk a full-scale invasion."

Zach nodded. Duopasqualonium was, in fact, the most unstable and explosive isotope known to man, but that was precisely what made it so valuable—it was the Confederation's chief source of fuel for military vessels.

"They're just sending your squad for air support and a ground unit to infiltrate the moon base," the Captain continued. "Another friend of yours, I think."

"Dex?"

"Commander Rutcliffe, yes. Although I hear Wright is none too happy with him either about the debacle over New Berkeley. But his unit should be on its way soon. You're to rendezvous with them there."

"But, Captain, surely the Vr'amil'een have had time to reinforce their position by now. My squad and one ground unit? That's all?"

"Like I said, our forces are spread pretty thin. And, remember, you're just supposed to cover the men on the ground. Just distract the lizards long enough for Commander Rutcliffe's team to slip in."

Zach sighed audibly.

Captain Griffin leaned forward conspiratorially. "I know it sucks, son, but if anyone can do it, it's you. Just don't try to be a hero out there. Do your job, cover those men, and then get the hell out."

"Understood, sir."

"Good," the Captain replied, leaning back in his seat again. "Dismissed."

Zach stood and saluted, turned smartly on his heels, and left. As the doors closed behind him, he could not help but think that the only person in the Sector he wouldn't trade places with was Dex.



The *Cerberus* arrived at Earth with little fanfare, descending into

Confederation Command's private hangar bay without incident. Dex looked across the landing platform for some sign of the *Inferno*, but the impressive vessel was nowhere to be seen. Dex sighed. He did not blame Anastasia for taking her time in returning to Earth.

Dex disembarked the ship and boarded a waiting transport, which took him to the ConFedCom Headquarters building, a short distance away. He was escorted to the elevator, which deposited him deep within the bowels of the structure.

When he arrived at the sub-basement's main briefing room, he was greeted with an assortment of military officers that included Fleet Admiral Joseph Wright and Senior Tactical Admiral Octavius Green. Though Dex had met Green once before, he had never before met the Fleet Admiral face-to-face. He was surprised by how old he looked in person.

"Sit down, Commander," offered the Fleet Admiral, his leathered face unreadable. He shuffled a stack of papers on the table, looking up and rubbing his eyes in an expression of profound weariness. "You look to be in good health," he began. "I understand you have had an exciting few days. I'm glad to see you and your men were uninjured."

"Yes, sir," Dex replied, sitting uncomfortably in the chair before him. "Thank you."

The Admiral's tone abruptly changed. "Of course, you had no business getting involved in the skirmish in the first place."

Dex ground his teeth together apprehensively. He knew an ambush when he saw one.

"But why don't we start at the beginning?" Wright offered, placing his monocle in his eye and looking down to the papers on the table. "It seems that your squad barely averted the attempt on Captain Mason's life," he remarked, "but you were not as lucky with the saboteur who found his way on board the *Inferno*."

The Commander opened his mouth to speak, but was silenced.

"Have I asked you a question yet, Commander Rutcliffe?"

Dex kept his expression steady. "No, sir."

The Admiral pursed his lips, nodded. "What happened as you left the planet?"

Dex inhaled deeply. "As stated in my report, sir—"

"I did not ask what you stated in your report," Wright interrupted. "I asked you what you saw as you left New Berkeley."

"As I escorted the *Inferno* through the blockade," Dex replied, "I received a transmission from Ana—from Captain Mason informing

me that she had lost control of primary systems. Before control was regained, I was ordered by the Captain to leave the area immediately." Dex paused. "I did so."

The Admiral removed his infernal monocle. "So, Commander, what you mean to tell me is that you did not actually *see* what transpired above New Berkeley, and obviously you never actually saw—nor do you have any direct evidence of—a saboteur. Is that correct?"

Dex grated his teeth. "What are you implying?" Just a hint of a scowl showed at the corner of the Commander's mouth. "Sir?"

"You will answer the question, Commander," interjected Admiral Green.

"If you somehow plan to turn Anastasia into the scapegoat in all this," Dex replied, rising from the table, "you won't have my help to do it."

"Sit down, Commander," ordered the Fleet Admiral. "Control your outbursts or I will have security escort you out."

Dex leaned toward the older man, laying his palms on the table's lacquered surface. A sly smile played across his lips. His voice was low, almost sepulchral. "They'd never get through the door in time."

Wright opened his wrinkled mouth, but no sound emerged. Dex held his gaze for several long heartbeats, then turned and left the room without another word to the assembled officers. Wright did not say anything as he left, and, indeed, it was some time after his departure before any of them spoke again.



The three hours Anastasia spent in her quarters as the *Inferno* sped back to Earth stretched out interminably, each second oozing by with all the urgency of slowly-coalescing dewdrops dripping lethargically from the leaves that spawned them. The room lights were subdued, and the only sound was the intermittent but incessant warbling of the comlink's emergency channel, a sound that Anastasia actively disregarded, staring instead at the starlines streaming toward the window. Ahead of her, though invisible, was Earth, the planet she had plainly failed and that she felt utterly unable to face.

Every member of her crew had tried to comfort the Captain, telling her that there was nothing she could have done to prevent what had happened in the skies above New Berkeley. But Anastasia knew differently. Though she had not fired her ship's terrible weapon, she had failed to prevent it from firing. The distracting attack on her life

notwithstanding, the fact remained that she had failed to secure her ship, and her failure had led to the deaths of those one hundred and seventy-five people. As captain, in the end, the blame was hers to shoulder.

She stared back out the window.

The starlines abruptly constricted, resolving into a web of familiar light-points that bracketed the Earth in ignorant solemnity. The planet grew ever larger as she gazed out the window and the *Inferno* made its descent to the surface. Dropping silently through the cloudless sky, the magnificent ship slowed as it approached the dove-gray dome of Confederation Command's private landing hangar. A pair of perpendicular fissures appeared in the dome as the ship drew near, expanding to reveal a quartet of neatly unfolding panels. The *Inferno*, resplendent even in the wan predawn light of the rising sun, was quickly swallowed into the hangar to alight on the titanoferrite platform below.

The transport ride to the Confederation Headquarters building was remarkably short, and Anastasia hardly remembered the trip or the journey down to the Command Sub-Basement. She thought with chagrin that Dex had just taken a similar trip only a few hours before.

"The panel has been expecting you, Captain," announced the aide at the door, and Anastasia was ushered in to sit at the foot of a long, faux-wood table already bristling with Confederation officers. She sat wordlessly and waited for the debriefing to begin.

Fleet Admiral Wright looked at her for several moments before he spoke, his rasping voice grating like sandpaper on Anastasia's ears. "Why don't you tell me what happened out there, Captain?" he began.

"What do you want to know?" she snapped uncharacteristically, surprising herself with the vehemence of her own feelings. More softly, she added, "Where do I begin?"

"We can talk about the failed negotiations later, I suppose," he replied. "Start with your departure from the planet."

Anastasia sighed audibly, relaying the morning's events with unnaturally stoic—almost glacial—calm. The Fleet Admiral listened with fingers steepled before narrow, pursed lips, tacitly reproachful though not overtly irate. When Anastasia finished, he simply nodded to no one in particular and dropped his speckled hands to the table.

"And this saboteur," Wright asked, "he disintegrated himself?"

"That's what I said," she replied.

"Interesting. And, aside from your own crew, do you have any witnesses? Will Commander Rutcliffe be able to confirm your story?"

"Of course he will," Anastasia affirmed, indignant.

"So his sensor readings will show the extra life form?"

"Well, the Turian had evidently concealed his life form signature from our sensors, so I don't think the *Cerberus* would be able to—"

"Then presumably, Captain," Wright interrupted, "the *Cerberus*' logs will show the energy spike from the photon destabilizer the intruder used to disintegrate himself?"

Anastasia was taken aback. "I don't know, sir. The *Cerberus* was probably out of range by the time he fired."

The Fleet Admiral leaned back, steepled his fingers again. "Interesting."

"I fail to see what the hell is so interesting about it," she snapped.

"Watch your tone, Captain," Wright replied, suddenly animated.

"May I remind you that you are here on charges of insubordination?"

"Oh, right," Anastasia muttered inaudibly.

"My orders to you were quite clear, were they not, Captain?"

Anastasia gritted her teeth. "Crystal clear, sir. You asked me to stand by and watch an entire planet be butchered. You asked me to abandon those people."

"Those decisions are *not* yours to make, Captain!" Wright yelled, slamming his fist on the table. "Do you realize that Denegar was captured because of your disregard for authority? Denegar—a planet absolutely vital to the Confederation military effort. Vital to our efforts to repulse the Vr'amil'een. And instead, you chose to risk your ship defending a world that had demanded autonomy from the Confederation, a world that demanded the removal of all military presence from the system, a world that is the center of operations for scores of recent terrorist attacks! These are the people you chose to defend?"

"But they were being butchered!" Anastasia cried, rising from the table. "How could I simply leave?"

"Sit down, Captain," Wright intoned. "I am asking the questions."

Anastasia gradually slowed her breathing and retook her seat.

The Admiral continued. "Due to their secession demands, New Berkeley was not under Confederation protection. You had no duty to them. You should have remained neutral in the conflict."

Captain Mason made no effort to hide her distaste. "The hottest circles of hell are reserved for those who, in times of great moral crisis,

maintain their neutrality.”

Wright ignored the quote. “Captain Mason, you have been charged with disobeying a direct order from a superior officer. There will be a full hearing on the matter, commencing immediately. A special session of the Ethics Committee has already been called.”

Anastasia did not blink.

“You are lucky, Captain,” Wright continued, “that such charges, brought against high officers, are heard before the Ethics Committee.” He leaned forward again, but did not speak, instead leaving unsaid the implication that Atgard would not rule against his friend.

“I will let my actions speak for themselves, Admiral,” she replied icily. “And I would do it again.”

The Fleet Admiral stared hard at Anastasia for several long moments. “You are dismissed, Captain,” he declared.

Anastasia rose wordlessly and walked from the table. Her receding footfalls echoed long after she had left the room.



Alexis awoke gradually, a smile coming to her face as she realized that it was not her alarm that had woken her, which meant that it was her day off. She kept her eyes closed as she rolled back into the pillow, strangely firm.

Her eyes bolted open as she remembered that, for the first night in as long as she could remember, she had not slept alone.

“Good morning, beautiful.”

Alexis stared into the dark brown of Ryan’s eyes and returned his warm smile. She nestled a bit closer to him and let the warmth of his skin surround her.

“Good morning,” she replied.

“Actually,” Ryan corrected her, glancing at his nanocomputer, “it’s technically afternoon.”

She smiled at him for several long heartbeats, not wanting to spoil the moment with words.

Sensing that he was now awake, Ryan’s nanocomputer let out a plaintive beep. Without removing his other arm from under Alexis’ neck, he silenced the tiny machine, which displayed a stream of data in the air with its embedded holo-vid projector. Ryan turned away from the luminous intrusion, but his neck quickly snapped back and he concentrated on the reports scrolling through the air.

“What is it?” Alexis asked, sitting up in the bed. “Is something

wrong?"

"I'd say," he replied, reading the data, a concerned expression furrowing his brow. "The Vr'amil'een have captured Denegar. But even worse—it seems Anastasia has been court-martialed."

"Anastasia? What in the Seventeen Systems for?"

"Failure to heed a direct order ... dereliction of negotiating duties ... and gross negligence leading to the deaths of 175 people."

"My God ... Anastasia—are you sure?"

"Positive," Ryan replied. "She's going before the Ethics Committee today."

Alexis released a long breath. "Daniel's on there. He won't let her be charged."

"Not so fast, Lexi. Obviously having Daniel there will help, but if the charges are legitimate, I'm sure he'll do what he has to do."

"You really think he'd rule against Anastasia?"

"If the evidence is there, I don't think he'd have any choice. Besides—there are two other Justices on the Committee. He could be overruled."

Alexis gripped the pillow in frustration. "What can we do?"

Ryan shrugged his muscular shoulders. "Nothing, I'm afraid. The trial is set to begin in a few hours. Plus, we're needed out here. And the Confederation is so overextended right now, they probably couldn't spare a transport to get us there. What could we do anyway?"

"I don't know ... testify for her? I know we don't know what happened, but we could be character witnesses at least. We served with her for five years."

"I'm sure the one thing Ana has going for her is that Daniel probably knows her character better than any person alive. Character witnesses are the one thing she won't need."

The room was silent, and even Alexis' ever-present aura of optimism seemed to fade tangibly from the room. She rested her head on Ryan's shoulder and gripped him tightly with both arms. "I just feel like everything's falling apart, Ryan," she muttered. "I've never felt so helpless before."

Ryan kissed her pallid forehead and squeezed her tightly in return. "We do seem destined to live in interesting times. But we've been through them before, and we'll get through these as well."

"I know," she whispered, trying in vain to make herself believe the words. "I know."



Dex stared hard at the viewscreen, the starlines streaming toward him. He knew Wright had wanted to court-martial him, if not for his actions at New Berkeley, then definitely for those at the briefing. Yet, while Anastasia was facing the Ethics Committee, he was many light-years from Earth, on his way to the fringes of Confederation space. Though Wright had explained that he was not being charged for his role at New Berkeley because he was following Captain Mason's orders, Dex knew that the real reason he was back aboard his ship and not in custody was because Wright needed him for this mission. In fact, the timing made it evident that it had been planned well before his debriefing on Earth.

"Commander," advised Retro, snapping Dex back into the present. "We're here."

Only a small circle of wan white light illuminated the viewscreen as the *Cerberus* slowed from hyperspace and began the cautious approach toward its target. The ship had jumped in at the fringes of Denegar's parent system, and had only a few minutes to stealthily get into position before the Confederation fighter squadron showed up to engage and distract the Vr'amil'een naval presence in the system.

And that presence was formidable. Low energy scans showed no less than a dozen ships, and, though detailed readings were not possible with the surreptitious sensor sweeps, several of them appeared to be quite massive.

But those ships were not Dex's immediate concern. His concern at the moment was slipping to within striking distance of the moon undetected, so as to be able to make his landing once the reclamation force arrived.

"Zip," Dex ordered, "activate the electronic countermeasures suite and place the ship into hibernation mode. Retro, don't do anything until the dropshuttle has cleared the dock. Once the fleet arrives, feel free to join in the fun."

"I've got it, sir," Retro replied, his face taking on a sanguine aspect from the ship's red auxiliary lights. "And I'll be there to pick you up once it's all over."

"Good. Alright, Zip, let's get to the shuttle."

Dex and Zip raced the short distance to the hangar, where the remainder of his team was making last-minute preparations for the liberation of the vital moon base. Upon their arrival, Dex's team filed

into the shuttle and took their seats, with Dex and Zip close behind.

The hatch slammed closed and Dex fastened the restraint harness across his chest, double-checking the power levels on his phaser rifle. His combat armour felt restrictive but reassuring, and Dex smiled as the transport lifted from the deck and coasted into space. The narrow slits along the shuttle's sides showed nothing but black space, but even with no external reference, Dex could tell that the ship was moving slowly, sensor-sheathed as much as possible and gliding toward the moon with the meager protection of the ECM suite.

Dex checked his chronometer. Only 90 seconds remained before the fleet arrived, and his ship was nearly in position.

An angular shape flitted across the starboard viewslit and the ship's proximity alarms rang out. A spattering of gunfire raked across the vessel's hull, and the shuttle dipped precariously into a sharp turn.

"Commander," called the shuttle pilot's voice over the intercom, "we are under attack!"

"Damn!" shouted Dex aloud. From where he was, he was helpless and nearly blind. And the shuttle was not designed for combat.

Dex peered out the viewslit, scanning in vain for his attackers. A snub fighter slipped into view, and raced directly toward the ship, forward gun batteries blazing. Warning klaxons rang out as the shuttle's meager shields were overwhelmed.

Abruptly, the attacking fighter exploded into a ball of debris, and the dauntingly large form of the *Cerberus* swung into view. And, though Dex could not see it, he was sure the activity had gotten the attention of every Vr'amil'een ship in the system.



The utter void of space is a perception that must be experienced to be understood. Even darkened rooms or midnight under a new moon are but poor surrogates for the overwhelming sense of solitude that can only be conveyed with the knowledge that the emptiness extends for millions of kilometers in all directions. Though he had spent countless hours in a fighter, it was at this moment that Zach felt most alone in his entire life. Even the knowledge that the other eleven members of his squadron were drifting nearby did little to ameliorate the isolation.

Zach checked his nanocomputer and confirmed that his sequestration would continue unabated for another 90 seconds. Ironic though it

was, the prospect of plowing into battle against horrific odds excited Zach, and the ensuing 90 seconds dredged by as if an eternity.

To lessen his discomfort, Zach tried to think of the other members of his squadron, each watching their own chronometers in order to synchronize their attack. He thought of Dex, probably already on his way to the surface of the moon in his puny dropshuttle, a risky maneuver that would probably be the best odds Dex saw all day.

An uncharacteristic but intense fear crept into Zach, not a fear for his own safety, or even that of his squad, but a paralyzing, irrational fear that he would never see Dex alive again. Though Zach could only properly be described as “cocky” once behind the controls of a fighter, his prototypical ebullience flatly failed him now.

An almost inaudible tone alerted Zach that the time was almost at hand, and he fought to clear his mind of distractions. He knew unmistakably that Dex’s safety was in his hands now.

At the predetermined time, the ZF-575 fighter powered up from standby mode, and his tactical console initiated its combat routines. Before his radar display even flashed to life, Zach rocketed the fighter from the moon that had concealed it, streaking toward the tiny moon of Denegar, barely visible through the cockpit plasticite.

Enemy ships flared to life, reddish drive trails exploding from their engines as they spun to face the oncoming phalanx of fighters. Zach’s display now showed his entire squadron, a bit behind him but following in perfect formation. His eyes never wavering from his first target, Zach launched a volley of laser fire the moment he was in range. He sped toward the larger vessel—a Vr’amil’een Corvette—and scanned the display for Dex’s dropshuttle, a faint point of green amidst an angry sea of red. Trying to make sense of the visual cacophony, Zach instinctively headed for Dex’s ship, on the far side of Denegar.

“Wolfman,” transmitted Raven hurriedly, “where are you going? Aren’t we supposed to distract them on *this* side of the moon?”

A missile impact jarred his ship, but Zach continued on course. “Affirmative, Raven. Stick to the plan. But I’ve got a bad feeling. I’m going for Dex.”

There was a slight pause. “Acknowledged, Wolfpack Commander. Be careful.”

Zach allowed himself one quick look in the direction of his squadron, which expertly harried the opposing fleet. He knew his pilots were good enough to distract the Vr’amil’een while avoiding serious harm. But he also knew that if just one ship did not fall for the distract-

tion, Dex's dropshuttle would hit the ground as slag.

The moon was small, and it took the swift fighter under a minute to reach the far side. As his sensors came into range, they picked up not one but two Confederation craft—the dropshuttle and the larger *Cerberus*. Immediately it became apparent why the larger ship was shadowing the dropshuttle: a trio of Vr'amil'een snubs had not fallen for the distraction and were firing relentlessly at Dex's ship.

Zach closed the distance rapidly, releasing a pair of missiles just as the *Cerberus* destroyed one of the small fighters. The missiles readjusted and snaked toward the remaining snubs, catching the surprised pilots just as they dove toward the defenseless dropshuttle.

"Thanks, Commander," came Retro's voice over the intercom. "I don't know if I could have kept all three off of them."

"Sure thing," Zach replied. "Now get your ship out of here before we attract too much attention."

"Roger."

Zach spun his fighter around, scanning his tactical display as he prepared to head for the other side of Denegar. Now closer to the moon, the sensors registered several anti-air gun emplacements along its surface. The recon reports had not included such emplacements, which must have been portable and hastily set up. No matter—they were still more than capable of picking Dex's shuttle out of the sky.

The ZF-575 curled into a vicious dive, strafing the moon and sending a swath into its face. Zach pulled the fighter out of the dive just as he began taking fire from the remaining artillery positions, looking once again to his display as he swung around for another pass. The dropshuttle was nearly in range, and a glance showed Zach that he would not be able to strafe all the remaining emplacements in one pass. The rest of his squadron was too far to help, and Zach instinctively targeted his remaining missiles on the gun batteries.

Damn! I can't use missiles on the surface! I could detonate the whole damned moon!

Zach clenched his teeth together, knowing that it was his only option. He targeted a pair of concussion missiles on the emplacements, and roared toward the surface, his forward lasers pouring destruction into the batteries. He released the missiles as he fired, pulling up hard on the stick as he raced from the volatile moon below.

Though completely inaudible in the void of space, what seemed to Zach like thundering explosions resounded from the moon, engulfing the remaining defense stations. Zach looked down to see a great

plume of fire erupt from the moon as a vein of Duopasqualonium was ignited by the conflagration. The moon, however, remained intact, and Zach watched with satisfaction as the dropshuttle roared unhindered to its destination. He spun his ship into another tight curve and headed back to his squadron, just as a horde of Vr'amil'een snub fighters cleared the rim of the moon. He spared only one quick glance back at the shuttle, which landed safely on the cratered surface and was immediately surrounded by a cloud of fine powder.

The Vr'amil'een fighters concentrated relentlessly on his ship, swarming the ZF-575 and scoring a smattering of hits across her tail. Zach kicked up the engines and raced through the crowd, allowing a faint smile to find its way to his lips.

CHAPTER 10

Anastasia walked into the Grand Hall of Justice with trepidation. The exterior of the building was white marble marked by darker veins throughout, with pillars stretching the height of the four-story structure. The wide hallway leading to the main hearing room was lined with portraits of leading ethics scholars, whose likenesses ranged from Plato to Glaucynon to recent Supreme Court Justices. Anastasia glanced at them only peripherally. She approached the large double doors.

A pair of Anastasia's escorts quickened their pace as they reached the end of the great hall, and wordlessly opened the heavy doors to the main room. Anastasia took a small breath and entered the room, gaping as she did at the ten-meter vaulted ceiling, intricately carved in wood, marble, and gold. A wide aisle led between tiers of seats, toward the center of the room. On the left was the Justices' panel, separated by a wide space from a simple table offset to the right. Anastasia did not wait for directions, but continued toward the table and sat down in the center of three wooden chairs.

The great doors closed, and a solid thud reverberated throughout the near-empty room.

Anastasia's small entourage took their seats in the gallery, lining the front row. The Captain glanced down to a pitcher of water and a single glass set before her. She filled it and took a measured sip.

With a magnified click, the doors opened once again, and a stream of people entered and fanned out among the empty seats in the gallery. Anastasia straightened her posture and looked to the imposing bench before her.

The last of the onlookers found their seats and the doors swung closed, their sound this time diluted by the audience and their light chatter. Anastasia looked back to the panel to see that a small door had opened behind it, producing a bailiff, standing at rigid attention.

"All rise!"

Anastasia stood from her seat, clasping her hands firmly behind her back, chin held high as she looked to the raised platform. A pair of black-cloaked Justices, a man and a woman, emerged from the door

and took seats at opposite ends of the bench. Following a moment later was a man in his seventies, a short tuft of silver hair atop his head. He was clothed in a loose-fitting black robe, which nonetheless revealed a set of strong shoulders and a purposeful gait as he walked to his seat. His face showed the first hints of wrinkling, lending a kindly look to his strong features and deep-set eyes. Those eyes passed over Anastasia, and conveyed a sense that the man behind them was one who was no stranger to weighty decisions and great responsibility. They looked like eyes of a man who had seen much more than three-quarters of a century.

Daniel Atgard took a moment to take in the room—almost as if it were his first time seeing it—and sat at the center of the bench. He folded his hands across the table before him and met Anastasia's eyes, holding her gaze as the bailiff spoke.

"On this twenty-third day of November, Three Thousand Fifty, this Honorable Ethics Committee stands in judgement of Captain Anastasia Mason, accused of disobeying a direct order from a superior officer. You may be seated."

Anastasia retook her seat and took another sip from the water glass before her. She looked to the bench and searched her memory to recall the last time she had seen her friend.

"Captain Mason," rang out Atgard's voice, "you are charged with felony military crimes, which can carry a sentence of demotion, suspension, dishonorable discharge, or imprisonment. Do you understand the charges against you and the possible sentences they entail?"

"I do."

"And do you understand that this special session of the Ethics Committee has been called in order to determine the validity of the charges against you, brought by your commanding officer, Fleet Admiral Joseph Wright?"

"I do."

"Very well. Then I call this tribunal to order." Atgard lifted a heavy wooden gavel and brought it down upon the bench.

"Captain Mason," began the female Justice, identified by a placard before her as Justice Parsons. "We have all seen the tape of what occurred on the day in question. Fleet Admiral Wright clearly gave you a direct order not to engage the Vr'amil'een attackers and to instead depart the Pacifica system. You refused, and remained to confront the enemy." Justice Parsons paused briefly before continuing. "Do you deny any of this?"

"I do not."

"Then, Captain," intoned the third Justice, "you do not deny disobeying the order."

"No, I do not."

"Then I presume that you are to present us with an affirmative defense for your actions."

"I will indeed."

The third Justice leaned back in his seat. Atgard leaned forward.

"Surely you do understand the importance of the military chain of command, Captain? Surely you understand why orders must be followed, and why officers are not free to simply disregard those orders?"

Anastasia's mouth hung open. If Daniel Atgard, her closest friend and the man who had refused orders from the President of the Confederation himself, was not sympathetic to her motives, who would be? It was not so long ago, Anastasia remembered, that it had been Atgard explaining his disobedience to a committee. Could a decade out of action have changed his views so drastically?

Captain Mason took another sip from her water glass. "I understand that the judgement of superiors millions of kilometers away is often no substitute for the judgement of officers in the field."

Atgard looked at her skeptically. "So you claim, then, that it should be field officers, and not their superiors at Confederation Command, who make all military decisions?"

"No, of course not. But surely you do not claim that officers in the field must be automatons, never free to disobey what they believe to be a misinformed or unethical order?"

"I have made no such claim, Captain. But neither have I ever claimed that it is acceptable to do so except in the most egregious of circumstances."

Anastasia slammed her palms against the table. "What could be more egregious than ordering me to watch hundreds of thousands of innocent people die?"

Atgard ignored the question. "Is it possible, Captain, that, at the time he gave the order, the Fleet Admiral of Confederation Command, at Confederation Headquarters, was privy to more information than you were?"

"I—I don't understand," Anastasia stammered.

"Is it conceivable that Fleet Admiral Wright knew of information that you, having just fled the surface of New Berkeley, did not pos-

sess?"

"Well, sure. I suppose he had plenty of information. After all, he was sitting safely behind a computer console here on Earth." Anastasia grimaced, mentally chastising herself for her thinly-veiled insult.

"And is it conceivable that any of this information could have affected your decision?"

"What could he possibly have known that would have changed what I had to do? The Vr'amil'een were slaughtering innocent people. I had a chance to stop them. What other 'information' would you need to know? What other data would you have needed to go save those people, Daniel? And don't tell me you wouldn't have."

Justice Atgard paused a moment, his eyes unreadable. "What I would have done is not the issue."

"Isn't it? Could any of you honestly tell me that you would have watched those people die?"

"Are you aware, Captain," Daniel continued, "that as a result of your disobedience, the vital moon of Denegar was captured by Vr'amil'een forces?"

Anastasia replied quietly, noting that the other two Justices made no move to speak. "Yes."

"Are you also aware that over two thousand Confederation personnel were killed in that assault? Are you aware that, without those vital Duopasqualonium ores, innumerable military and civilian lives may be sacrificed? Are you, indeed, aware that, at this very moment, a mission is under way to retake Denegar? Are you aware that not all of those brave soldiers will survive the assault?"

"But they were being butchered!"

"Are you aware, Anastasia, that two of your closest friends are fighting for their lives at Denegar right now?"

Captain Mason gritted her teeth, and the words gave her pause. A tense silence settled over the spacious room. "If they were here, sir, both Dex and Zach would testify that I had no choice but to do what I did. They'd have both done the same thing."

Justice Atgard rubbed his temples meditatively. "If they are fortunate enough to return home, Captain, perhaps we can ask them."

There was a long silence in the room. Anastasia stared unblinkingly at Daniel, trying to read his thoughts. But his gaze was unreadable, detached, professional. She knew—she had always known, really—that Daniel would not give her any special favors, not treat her or her

case any differently. And she would not have had it any other way.

Justice Atgard looked to his two colleagues, apparently to make sure they had no further questions. "Captain Mason," he continued after a brief pause, "do you have any final statements you would like to make?"

Anastasia stared into the table for a moment, drawing a heavy breath. She straightened herself and looked directly at the Justices. "I realize that, due to my actions, there have been serious consequences—consequences I may or may not have been able to prevent had I followed the Fleet Admiral's orders. And I must take responsibility, both for my actions and for the results thereof. I also understand the importance of following orders and the necessity of obedience in military situations."

Anastasia fought to prevent her lips from curling into a snarl. "But I could not in good conscience have followed that order. I could not have left innocent civilians to be butchered at the hands of a Vr'amil'een army. Orders from above must be treated with deference, but must not be treated as beyond scrutiny. Armies of unquestioning zombie followers have been responsible for some of the most shameful episodes in the history of mankind. Could the Korgian Annihilation have been prevented if a few officers had refused to follow an order they knew in their hearts to be immoral?" She leveled her gaze directly at Atgard. "Would the Creelarians still be here today had one brave Admiral not refused an order he knew to be unjust?"

"Answer those questions before you answer the question of what is to be done with me."

Daniel stared at her for several long moments. "This tribunal is in recess. We will reconvene tomorrow with our decision."

With that, the three Justices rose, leaving Anastasia alone with three hundred spectators and her own unsettling thoughts.



The dropshuttle hit the moon's surface hard, and Dex's team sprang from the vehicle as soon as the hatch had slammed open. Dex emerged into a concealing cloud of thick gray dust, which made visibility through his plasticite faceplate nearly impossible. He ran blindly, heading for a narrow ridge that separated his team from the ground base. The dust cleared, and the Commander slid along the ground into the shallow ravine at the ridge's base.

Dex's team followed behind him, crouching behind the low wall

and scanning the moon's surface for resistance. There were no Vr'amil'een on the surface, and his readings indicated that even the gun emplacements Zach had expertly removed had been automated.

"Let's move," Dex barked into the headset, and sprang to his feet, using the moon's lower gravity to help hurdle him over the ridge. He keyed his suit's gravity boots to keep himself anchored to the small moon, and ran toward a small mountain up ahead. There was no resistance as his team approached the cliff face, and Dex scanned the outcropping to locate the exhaust duct, ten meters above.

"You don't suppose the lizards have found the blueprints to this place yet, do you?" asked Zip over the headset. "It would be mighty inconvenient if there was a squad of foot soldiers waiting for us when we came in."

"I don't think so," Dex replied. "They keep these ducts pretty well hidden precisely because they don't want anyone doing what we're about to do." Dex looked up the mountain to where the invisible opening was. "Follow me up."

Commander Rutcliffe disengaged his grav boots and climbed easily up the cliff. He reached the designated spot and keyed his nanocomputer to deactivate the chameleon tarp that disguised the opening. A small section of the mountainside shimmered and faded to a drab gray, still almost undetectable against the similarly-colored terrain. Dex carefully removed the tarp and peered down the duct, using his nanocomputer to scan for life forms. Satisfied, he hoisted himself over the hole and dropped down, buoyed slightly by a draft rising from within the mountain.

Dex dropped into a combat crouch, gripping his phaser tightly as he spun around. He had descended into a darkened crevice, illuminated only by a faint shaft of light permeating the darkness from above. One by one, his men entered the duct, the last pair remaining by the opening to await their return.

His helmet's night vision system was unable to pick out much in the pitch-black tunnels beneath the base. The walls of the mine emitted neither heat nor radiation, and only the faint lines of glowing Duopasqualonium ore hidden within them gave Dex any guidance as he picked his way toward the base.

Dex cleared a corner and checked his nanocomputer to confirm that he was nearing the underground entrance to the mining base. The Duopasqualonium had thinned out this close to the entrance, making navigation more difficult. He halted his team and scanned the area for

life forms.

His nanocomputer showed a pair of faint readings several meters up the tunnels, but he could not tell if they were miners or guards. He switched off his night vision system and could see a dim red glow emanating from around the corner. He motioned for his team to remain where they were and he quietly inched his way up the tunnel.

Dex set his phaser to silent as he neared the bend in the tunnel, sacrificing power for stealth. He leaned around the corner and fired off several quick shots, catching the Vr'amil'een miners by surprise and eliciting little more than a muffled thump as they collapsed to the ground.

He used his nanocomputer to signal for his men to rejoin him, and crept farther along the tunnel, now moderately lit by fixtures attached to the walls at regular intervals. A stronger reddish glow was evident up ahead where the tunnels met the mining base itself. Surprisingly, Dex could not detect any life forms, so he rounded the corner into an empty room. He proceeded cautiously forward, the ground giving way to metal floor. The room had two exits, and he directed Zip to lead half his team down one corridor as he led the remainder down the other.

The halls of the base were unusually empty, undoubtedly due to Zach's assault. Dex rechecked the base's blueprints and led his men to the heavily-shielded control room, where he reasoned most of the base's occupants would have holed themselves in during the attack. The life form readings were inconclusive, as the interference from the refined Duopasqualonium isotopes nearby rendered his scans nearly useless. Dex crept along the walls toward the control room, noting the blast marks along the walls that evinced the firefight that allowed the Vr'amil'een to take the base a few days ago.

The doors to the room were, predictably, closed, and Dex motioned for his men to be ready as he keyed the opening sequence through his nanocomputer. His team lined the hallways along both sides of the doors, and as they swished open, Dex streaked into the room, firing his phaser at a pair of surprised guards near the door. His men covered him from the door's opening, and a pair followed him into the room, laying down covering fire as Dex dove behind a console. The room was filled with Vr'amil'een—sixteen, by Dex's quick approximation—most of whom were armed.

It did not take long for the startled Vr'amil'een to return fire, and the room had erupted in gunfire within moments. The initial volley

had taken its toll on the Vr'amil'een, however, and Dex guessed that approximately half a dozen guards were returning fire as he and two of his men crouched behind the console and the other pair hid outside the open doors.

Suddenly intermixed among the sounds of gunfire in the room were the sounds of Confederation phasers. Dex looked back to the door where his men still hid, belatedly realizing that the other half of his team had entered through the other doors.

Dex sprang up from behind the console, firing at the backs of several Vr'amil'een who had turned to face the new threat. Caught in a crossfire, the remaining guards were gunned down, and fell to the ground with anguished grunts. Dex trained his phaser on the remaining unarmed Vr'amil'een, who made no move to resist. He motioned for his team to secure the remainder of the base as he surveyed the room. Two of his men were down, one dead and one wounded critically. Dex winced as he knelt by the wounded man, Sergeant McNeill, holding his hand as he reached for his medpack.

"There must be a surgeon droid in this base somewhere," Dex shouted. "Find it!"

Two of his men raced out the doorway to search for the base's medical facilities. Dex kept hold of McNeill's hand as he trained his phaser on the captives with the other. "Just give me a reason," he mouthed from behind clenched teeth.

As he did, he felt McNeill's hand go limp in his.



The audience had been led into the chamber and Anastasia awaited the emergence of the Justices from the small door behind the panel. She checked her chronometer again, wondering if the Justices would agree on a ruling today, or if she would be forced to wait another day to learn of her sentence. *This much delay must mean a split vote*, she reasoned. *Could Daniel be arguing to persuade the other Justices in her favor? Or had he cast his vote against her?*

Lost in her thoughts, the Captain did not even notice the silent opening of the door and the emergence of the bailiff. It was the hush of the crowd that caught her attention.

"All rise!"

Anastasia shot up from her seat, banging her knee painfully on the table as she rose. The three Justices streamed out at once this time, quickly taking their seats. The bailiff instructed the audience to be

seated and said nothing more, but merely closed the door behind them and stood at attention.

Justice Atgard looked down and rubbed the bridge of his nose with his fingers. He looked as if he, like Anastasia, had not slept the night before. His eyes were heavy with a profound weariness.

"Will the accused please rise?" he said.

Anastasia did so, this time more slowly and with a fair degree more care. She stiffened her back and looked to the panel.

"There can be no doubt that this decision has been one of the most taxing of my career," Atgard began. "To remain perfectly neutral while I rendered judgement upon one of my closest friends was perhaps the single most difficult thing I have had to do since I have chaired this Committee. To decide a case that evokes so much similarity to my own actions ten years ago was a formidable task. And to rule on so weighty an issue was a grave responsibility."

The other Justices nodded solemnly.

"But this tribunal has come to a decision."

Anastasia felt her knees weaken, but she firmed herself, hoping the grit of her teeth was not evident to the Justices.

Justice Atgard continued. "If we are to have an effective military, and one that must be held accountable for its actions, we can expect—or, rather, demand—that its officers be aware of and be responsible for the possible consequences of their decisions."

Anastasia fought to remain standing. She felt as if all the air had been sucked out of the room.

"However, neither Captain Mason, nor any other Confederation officer, can be expected to have such omniscient knowledge of the results of their actions that every possible consequence be held against them and every decision they make be second-guessed after the fact. Though the orders of commanding officers must be treated with supreme deference, this tribunal is unwilling to mandate that they be followed at all costs. Though we have split on this ruling, there is no doubt in any of our minds that Captain Mason, at the time of her decision, aimed to best serve the Confederation and the people who comprise it. Though, with the benefit of hindsight, we can see that the consequences of this action have indeed been crippling, we shall not multiply them by sanctioning or removing one of the Confederation's finest officers. Captain Anastasia Mason, you have been found innocent of the charges brought against you, and you shall be reinstated to your former position without delay."

Daniel Atgard allowed himself the slightest of smiles in Anastasia's direction. "This tribunal stands in recess."

CHAPTER 11

The engines whined in protest, but the ZF-575 handily outraced her pursuers, speeding away from Denegar. Zach spun the ship around and took a moment to check the tactical displays. The remainder of his squadron was performing admirably, swooping in on the larger ships and retreating before taking any serious damage.

Commander Wallace looked to a Vr'amil'een Corvette at the near edge of the enemy formation. The ship seemed to be taking the brunt of his squad's attack. "Halcyon, form on my wing," he called. "Keep the snubs off me."

"Affirmative, Wolfman."

Zach armed his Hellfire missile and dove toward the wounded Corvette. As he passed, he poured laser fire along its length, curling behind it and targeting the engine bank. The ship's guns scored a barrage of hits on Zach's fighter, but he steadied himself and launched the missile toward the aft of the Corvette. He pulled away before he saw the impact, as a swarm of snub fighters quickly surrounded him, battering his shields mercilessly from all sides. In front of him, a pair of the snubs exploded, and he rocketed through the hole, leaving the rest of the snubs behind.

"Thanks for making me an exit, Halcyon," Zach said over the intercom. He checked his display to see that the Corvette's engines had been disabled, and that his squad had pounced upon it, using missiles to finish it off.

Once he was a safe distance away, Zach turned his fighter back to the battle, just in time to see a pair of missiles streak forth from the surface of Denegar, impacting a Vr'amil'een Cruiser and breaking it in two. There were a series of flashes from behind the enemy fleet, and a squad of Confederation gunboats sped toward the Vr'amil'een forces.

"That's it!" Zach screamed over the intercom. "Dex took the base!" He fired up his engines and headed for the remaining Vr'amil'een Cruiser. "Lay into them before they target the moon!"

Zach launched his remaining complement of missiles and squeezed his firing trigger until his fingers hurt. Though he could do little to the monstrous Cruiser by himself, he had to prevent it from turning its

guns on the volatile moon. His squad had baited it some distance away from the moon—hopefully out of its range—and had to finish it off before it got close enough to destroy the recently-recaptured Confederation base.

As Zach fired upon it, a great explosion tore through the Cruiser, undoubtedly from another set of surface-fired missiles. The Confederation gunboats had come into range as well, and were concentrating massive amounts of firepower on the Vr'amil'een ships. As they came into range, they launched a barrage of missiles against the enemy fleet, decimating their remaining forces. Zach checked his display to find that only two Corvettes had survived the onslaught, and that they were stubbornly returning fire against the new attackers. Several gunboats fell victim to their counterattack, but both Corvettes were quickly silenced, disabled before Zach could even bring himself into range.

Zach took a deep breath as his adrenaline high began to subside. A quick glance to his console showed him that none of his squadron had been destroyed, though a pair of fighters had been disabled and had wisely limped away from the battle. The gunboats were rounding up the surrendering Vr'amil'een snub fighters. Zach popped his flight helmet and brought his heart rate back under control. He looked to the recaptured moon of Denegar.

"Control, this is Commander Wallace," he said into his dangling helmet microphone. "Patch me through to Commander Rutcliffe, please."



Anastasia sat reflectively in her command chair, never before so comforting around her body. She took a deep breath, never before realizing how much she could miss the ship's tinny, recycled air.

The starlines on the viewscreen gave little indication of the speed at which the *Inferno* was traveling to the Landus System, a strategically important region near the Vr'amil'een border. Though ConFedIntel had no information indicating that the Vr'amil'een planned to attack the outlying system, its importance, proximity, and relative lack of defense made it a tempting target. With all available forces spread out fighting the Vr'amil'een, protecting shipping lanes from attack, and defending major population centers, the *Inferno* would be the centerpiece of a badly-underpowered defense force.

Even the monotonous yet dangerous nature of guard duty did little

to deter Anastasia's buoyancy. It was, after all, an important mission, and it seemed that Fleet Admiral Wright, though surely disappointed, had accepted the decision of the Ethics Committee and was not intent on harboring destructive grudges, at least not at such a crucial time. Landus was where the *Inferno* was most needed.

It was Commander Zeeman who interrupted her meditations. "It sure is good to have you back, Captain. I knew those charges would never stick."

Anastasia laughed uneasily. "I'm glad you were so confident, Victor. I was scared out of my mind."

The Commander returned a warm smile. "You really thought Atgard would have ruled against you?"

"Had he thought the charges were warranted, yes. Yes, I'm sure he would have," she replied. "I thought for a while that he would."

Lieutenant Romano spun in her seat to face the Captain. "What else could you have done? They didn't really expect you to watch those people die, did they?"

"It's a bit more complicated than that, I'm afraid," the Captain answered, unsure why she was defending the countervailing position. "Perhaps we could have prevented the capture of Denegar had we been there. People died there too."

"But we got it back," Lieutenant Matthews shot back, now facing the Captain as well. "Would it have been so easy to retake New Berkeley?"

"I don't know," Anastasia replied. "I guess that wasn't the point. I guess the point was that I *knew* the people on New Berkeley would be killed—it was certain, it was imminent. All the rest were just possibilities. I had to prevent what I knew I could at the time."

Commander Zeeman nodded. "It's not a perfect world," he said solemnly. "The best of all possible worlds, maybe. But far from perfect. Tough choices must be made."

Anastasia nodded her assent. Though such choices usually came easily to her in the heat of the moment, she wondered sometimes if her gut reaction was always the right one. The arguments posed to her during her trial rang loudly in her mind. She had considered Atgard's words, not just as an argument to be defeated, but as an idea to be examined. And it had much merit. The Captain sighed. Momentous decisions had always seemed so easy for Daniel, so meticulously thought out and well reasoned. Sometimes Anastasia was afraid that her emotions too strongly dictated her actions. She was worried that

reason often never entered the picture.

"Well, what's important is that you made the right choice," Ariyana added. "Even the Ethics Committee agreed. I hope you'd do it again."

Anastasia gave another uneasy smile. She would do it again. She hoped she wouldn't have to.



Ryan tapped idly at his console, his mind clearly not on the readouts it dutifully displayed. The computer was running a sensor diagnostic—the third this week—and, though Lieutenant Taylor understood that the ship was at a heightened state of alert, even he found it excessive.

"Sensors reading a large grapefruit off the port bow," Ensign Takasugi reported. "And three squadrons of flying toasters."

"Uh-huh," Ryan replied.

"Lieutenant? Are you paying attention?"

Ryan snapped himself out of his half-trance, looking to his assistant. Her brow was furrowed as she returned his stare.

"Oh, yes, yes. I'm sorry. I guess I just had other things on my mind." He focused on his screens. "The diagnostics are running smoothly."

The Ensign allowed herself a coy smile. "It's not like you to be distracted at work. Anything on your mind?"

Ryan felt his cheeks begin to flush. Though they hadn't advertised their involvement, everyone on the ship seemed to know of his relationship with Alexis.

"No, Ensign," he replied, "just these diagnostics."

Ensign Takasugi suppressed a chuckle. "I often become enthralled in diagnostic readouts myself," she quipped. "Fascinating stuff."

"Thank you, Ensign. That will be all." Ryan hoped his dark skin hid the crimson flush creeping into his cheeks.

Suddenly, the diagnostic screen went blank, replaced by a status display as the program terminated unexpectedly. An alarm rang out from the speakers.

"We have a contact!" shouted Ryan. "Battle stations."

There was a flurry of activity as the crew scrambled to their consoles. Ryan caught a glimpse of Alexis as she rushed into the room and found her station. Their eyes met as she glanced at him from across the room.

"It's a Vr'amil'een attack party," Takasugi reported. "Multiple contacts. We are maneuvering to intercept."

Ryan could almost imagine Captain Woolslair on the bridge rushing the ship into battle. The man must think the *Brigadier* was invincible. Ryan supposed it was a testament to his crew's efficiency.

Within seconds, the sensor displays were cluttered with hundreds of ships from both fleets, bright pinpricks of red and green. A green blip appeared on the edge of the screen and promptly spawned a dozen smaller ships, all rushing into battle. Ryan smiled as he realized that Zach's squad had returned from its mission just in time.

• • •

"They have me doing *what?*" fumed the Commander once he had returned to the bridge, causing the *Cerberus'* crewmembers to snap even more rigidly to attention.

"Well, sir," repeated Zip calmly, "they want us to go to Charnus Prime and quell the riots there."

"Charnus Prime?" Dex roared, casting his gaze about the bridge as if looking for someone to be angry at. "There hasn't been a day this year that there haven't been riots on Charnus Prime! The locals love it."

"Not all of them, sir," interjected Retro. "I actually lived there for a while, and the vast silent majority didn't go along with most of the radical ideas espoused by the vocal few who—"

Commander Rutcliffe's gaze showed that he was not in the mood for such socio-political explanations, and Retro wisely left his sentence unfinished.

"I suppose this is punishment, then," Dex sighed.

Zip cleared his throat. "They did say you should consider yourself lucky you haven't been court-martialed." Hastily, he appended, "Sir."

"They weren't going to court-martial me," Dex replied, visibly disgusted. "They needed us to go to Denegar. They had the whole mission planned before they even talked to me. And they can't overtly do anything to me now that it's done. This is how they're punishing me—sending me off on riot duty, knowing that I have to stay in line after ... well, after the debriefing."

Zip looked down at the metallic floor. "I heard what happened at the meeting, sir." He met Dex's gaze again. "They say you threatened to kill Fleet Admiral Wright."

"I did no such thing," Dex replied, allowing himself a small

chuckle. "But those bastards were trying to blame Anastasia for everything that happened over New Berkeley. They wanted me to go along with it." He cleared his throat. "I just let them know that I wouldn't."

A slight smile formed at the edge of Zip's mouth. "I would have loved to have been there to see it, sir."

"Me too," added Retro.

"Anyway," the Commander continued, "what's done is done. And now we're stuck with riot duty."

Zip shook his head. "So what do we do, Commander? Do we go to Charnus Prime?"

"I suppose we had better," he sighed. "There's not much else we can do now, and I can't give them an excuse to discipline me. None of us can do anyone any good if we're all court-martialed." He sat heavily in his command chair. "Set a course and engage."

Zip entered the coordinates, grumbling under his breath. "I hate riot duty."

"I know," replied the Commander as the ship began to move. "I'd rather just charge into a Vr'amil'een camp, guns blazing, than have to sit back and let civilians take pot-shots at us." He shook his head. "That kind of duty can be the most dangerous."

"We'll be able to handle the Charnus riff-raff," promised Zip. "Even the SPACERs."

Commander Rutcliffe nodded, but did not share Zip's enthusiasm. Sure, his squad, an elite military Commando unit, would be able to handle whatever they encountered on Charnus Prime. They'd be able to handle them all too well, because they wouldn't be facing a trained military force, but merely a bunch of angry civilians with rocks and blasters. And though Dex had killed his share of soldiers—human and alien—on the battlefield before, he would not lead his unit on a mission to neutralize civilian rioters.

But if he didn't follow his orders, someone else would be sent in his place, perhaps someone with fewer moral compunctions about the duty they had been assigned. Someone unwilling to quibble over ethics while the Confederation degenerated into anarchy.

Dex leaned forward in his chair and rubbed his temples with callused fingers. He looked to his tactical console, which showed the *Cerberus* en route to Charnus Prime. He let out a heavy sigh.

The chronometer ticked another minute from the ETA.



A smile crept across Zach's face as he maneuvered his fighter into a more advantageous angle of attack, one that placed the incoming ships out of line with either sun.

"Wolfpack squadron, form around me," he barked into the headset. "Standard attack formation. Do not break until 10,000 kilos."

His squadron did as they were told, their ships coalescing into a complex double-hexagon formation. They burned toward the incoming fighters at high speed, each pilot eager to enter the frenzied rush of battle. Though his last combat had been merely hours before, there was nothing that made Zach feel more alive than the fury of battle. It was dangerous, but he loved it. God help him, he did love it so.

It seemed to take forever for the Vr'amil'een ships to come into range, and Zach had plenty of time to study the readouts from the tactical computer. They were snubs, all right, standard Vr'amil'een fighters with tough armour but low maneuverability. One at a time, they were no great threat—not for a ZF-575, anyway—but the sensor screen showed a huge, red, amorphous mass of fighters streaming from Vr'amil'een carriers. Zach's squad, as one of the first into the fray, was outnumbered at least eight to one.

Good odds.

"Wait for it ..." Zach whispered into the headset, watching the enemy fighters approach. He looked out the plasticite viewpanel, visually gauging the distance of the closest of the ships. "Wait for it ...

"Now!"

Viewed from afar, the movements of Wolfpack Squadron must have looked like an elaborate, artistic dance of light and power. Simultaneously breaking from precise formation, each of the twelve fighters looped and rolled amidst each other, emerging from the hexagonal cluster as a writing mass of chaotic beauty, sending iridescent shards of laser death streaking across the blackness toward their adversaries.

And just like that, the red glows of twelve Vr'amil'een fighters disappeared from the sensor screens.

Viewed from the inside of Zach Wallace's cockpit, the spectacle was nothing more than a transient flash of light and pinwheeling stars. And once the preliminary attack had run its course, the firefight quickly degenerated into an embroiled cacophony of lasers and thrusters, a hundred pilots in a hundred ships each trying to kill the

other.

Zach found himself in the thickest of the maelstrom, and it was all he could do to avoid colliding with the Vr'amil'een fighters. Several shots impacted his fighter's shields, and Zach wondered how anyone could target in the confusion.

Once he had passed through the thickest of the fighters, Zach artfully spun his ship around, lasers blazing wildly at the nearest Vr'amil'een fighter. A few moments later, its armour succumbed to the barrage, yielding a brief but spectacular explosion that quickly dissipated into the void.

The chatter on the headsets had become almost indistinguishable, but Zach picked out Raven's voice above the clutter. "Zach, watch your six."

Without so much as a glance at the display, Zach brought his fighter to an abrupt halt, spinning 180 degrees and targeting the ship that had been following him. A quick missile shot and another red blip disappeared from the screens.

"Thanks, Raven," he said, locking his sights on yet another fighter. "These flying garbage cans are getting on my nerves."

"Roger that," she replied, barely audible above the noise of ten other pilots. Zach caught a glimpse of her fighter streak past his viewpanel, firing relentlessly upon an alien snub. "Only about a hundred left to go, though."

Zach smiled as a barrage of gunfire raked across his port bow. The computer blared a halfhearted warning and the port shield indicator light flashed from green to amber. Deftly slipping his ship between a pair of snub fighters, Zach accelerated upwards, leaving his pursuer far behind.

But soon another one was on his tail. Even as Zach outran and outmaneuvered countless Vr'amil'een ships, more always waited to take their places. And, though he had been destroying them at what seemed like a prodigious rate, the sensor screen still showed an angry mass of swarming red death.

Zach wondered how in the Seventeen Systems the tracking computers made sense of it all. More importantly, he wondered how he could.

Another explosion, and another red dot faded from existence. But another red cloud was visible on the edge of the display. Vr'amil'een reinforcements were on their way.



The world of Landus was a somber brown globe, darkened except for a thin crescent of light creeping around its edge. The black shadows of magnificent mountain ranges could be seen across its arid surface, and Anastasia wondered how the settlers below lived on the barren border world.

Captain Mason had arrived to find that the “defense fleet” she had been sent to bolster consisted essentially of the *Inferno*. A small collection of sub-Capital ships ringed the planet, a group that would be little help were the Vr’amil’een to invade the system. Since arriving, however, there had not been so much as a blip on her long-range scanners, and Anastasia chastised herself as she experienced a feeling of boredom.

“Long range scans indicate no contacts,” Lieutenant Johnson reported, breaking the silence as he had precisely every hour. “All sectors are clear.”

“Thank you,” Anastasia replied, not sure whether to admire Byron for his adherence to protocol or to condemn him for his compulsive behavior. She sighed and sank lower into her chair.

“Guard duty is the worst, isn’t it?” Victor offered, beaming her a halfhearted smile. “You wait around, hoping nothing happens. But all this nothing happening is enough to drive you mad.”

The Captain chuckled. Victor had no idea how right he was—especially after Anastasia’s recent involuntary vacation on Earth.

A small movement on the viewscreen caught Anastasia’s eye. She looked lazily toward it, unable to see anything in the darkness. She shrugged and turned back to Victor, peripherally noting a strange silvery sheen where the light glinted off the object. She looked down to her console, calling up the short-range scans, and the screen showed a tiny red blip directly ahead.

It was a ship.

“Look alive,” she commanded, punching up a magnified view of the vessel on the viewscreen. Byron, in all his vigilance, had apparently only been watching the long-range scans, and for some reason this ship had failed to register.

Within a moment, Anastasia knew why.

Now comprising the majority of the viewscreen was an ovoid silver vessel, one whose skin seemed to convolve in rhythmic waves as if made out of a metallic liquid. The ship was small, no larger than some

fighters, and sported no protrusions, windows, or visible weapons of any kind. It did not move, but simply hovered serenely between the *Inferno* and the desert world of Landus.

Anastasia found she lacked the air to scream.

The Lucani Ibron ship inched quietly closer to the brown globe below.

CHAPTER 12

“Don’t worry, Halcyon,” Zach promised. “I’m on your bandit.”

The Vr’amil’een ship tailing Halcyon’s fighter somehow managed to follow him through a complex series of maneuvers, matching his every movement with adept precision. Zach could not help but be impressed by the Vr’amil’een pilot’s skill, shadowing a more maneuverable ship as precisely as he was. It almost seemed a pity, Zach thought as he aligned his targeting crosshairs on the swerving snub fighter, but an instant later the missile lock light flashed to life, and Zach thumbed the firing stud, sending his last missile to eradicate the skillful enemy pilot.

“Your six is clear, Halcyon,” Zach reported over the intercom, but a quick glance at his sensor display still showed too many Vr’amil’een fighters to count, and three ships from his squadron had already been disabled and removed from the fight. Plus Zach was out of missiles, and, though he had gotten the upper hand on at least a dozen enemy fighters so far, his shields were all but depleted, the lights on his status board waning from a now-reassuring amber to a sanguine red before his eyes.

As Zach was about to return his attention to the dogfight, a new light on the sensor display caught his eye and the computer trilled an urgent-sounding alarm.

“Warning,” it began, “new enemy vessel—”

Zach slapped at the mute switch, returning his attention to the chaos around him. He silently cursed the panicky computer and its incessant overreactions. After all, he thought, the new blip on his screen was merely that of a heavy Vr’amil’een fighter. A little tougher than the snubs, sure, but what was one more fighter amongst fifty?

Zach looked around for a new enemy to target, pushing the incoming vessel out of his mind for the moment. He would deal with the new threat when it arrived.

To his bewilderment, however, Zach’s front viewpanel was completely devoid of enemy fighters. It was as if they had suddenly decided to retreat, still enjoying a five to one advantage.

Zach shook his head violently. *But Vr’amil’een don’t retreat, he*

admonished himself. So what in the hell was going on? He looked back down to his sensor screen, watching in consternation as the fifty or so red specks scattered at top speed away from the area. In fact, he noticed, the only enemy vessel still coming in his direction was the new fighter the computer had tried to warn him about.

Perplexed, Zach spun his ship to face the incoming vessel, punching up a detailed scan of the new attacker as he did so. By then, however, Zach did not need the computer's help; the strange vessel was within visual range.

Zach stared hard at the viewpanel, mouth agape. It was a Lucani Ibron ship.

A torrent of emotions billowed into Zach's consciousness, quickly focusing into an intense surge of hate directed squarely at the alien ship. Forgotten were the snub fighters, the SPACERs, even the Vr'amil'een. Forgotten was his crusade against pirate activity and his mission in the present battle. Only one thought smoldered firmly in his mind.

Revenge.

"Wolfpack Squadron," he found himself saying over the intercom, "fall in behind me, attack formation Omega-nine."

"Are you serious?" someone asked, though Zach's attentions were too focused to discern who it was. "You mean you want us to—?"

"Form behind me or run away," Zach replied curtly. "I don't care which. You have fifteen seconds."

The Lucani Ibron vessel was still moving deliberately toward the planet, and Zach maneuvered his ship directly into its path. All eight of his remaining squadron-mates quickly thrust into formation around him.

"Wolfpack Squadron ready," Raven's voice reported. "We're with you, Zach."

The silver alien craft continued its approach, steadfastly ignoring the waiting fighters. As if on cue, the pilots of Wolfpack Squadron abruptly broke formation, blossoming forth like the petals of some deadly flower, spewing beams of laser energy before them as they sped toward the enemy vessel. Though it was hard to make out in the chaos, Zach's ship, as usual, was in the lead.



It had taken a while, in the engineering bay of the *Brigadier*, for the

situation unfolding outside to become clear. Once it had, however, every status monitor on the deck was keyed to the external viewcam feed of the bizarre Lucani Ibron ship.

"Is this a dream?" someone asked.

Alexis knew it was no dream. Though the last time she had seen one of the deadly alien ships was over ten years ago, then from the *Apocalypse's* engineering bay, the sight of the slowly convolving silver sphere on the monitor brought all her memories of that time rushing back in a torrent of awful clarity.

Last time, Alexis reminded herself, they had actually defeated the seemingly invincible vessel, earning humanity a ten year reprieve from the Draconian sentencing of the race known to some as the "Ancient Arbiters." With the technology of the *Apocalypse* and the genius of Admiral Atgard, a similar Lucani Ibron ship had indeed been destroyed.

But the *Brigadier* was not the *Apocalypse*. And her captain was not Daniel Atgard.

Suddenly, several bright lances of light streaked across her monitor toward the alien ship, and Alexis hurriedly rechecked her displays to confirm that it was not the *Brigadier* that had fired. Within a few moments, a swarm of Confederation fightercraft appeared on the display, and, though she could not make out the prominent wolf's-head design on the fighters' wings, the ferocity of the attack told her it was headed by none other than Zach Wallace.

Alexis watched as the fighters determinedly raked the surface of the Lucani Ibron craft with concentrated laser fire, to no visual effect. The ships arced and rolled around the enemy vessel in a dance of chaotic beauty, their white drive trails and blue-white energy weapons forming an incandescent web surrounding the sliver alien craft. The alien ship, incidentally, appeared to be completely ignoring the attack.

A sudden twinge of alarm forced its way into Alexis' consciousness as she noticed that the mesmerizing gyration of the ship's alien hull had begun to accelerate its hypnotic movements. A moment later, a dozen corkscrewing beams of intense energy shot from various points around the unmarked perimeter of the vessel, inconceivably tracking the darting ships and striking each in a furious flash of yellow light. Instantly, the light-web of the fighters' attacks dissipated, leaving behind nothing but the now-quiescent silver ship and the sputtering corpses of several fighters, fighters formerly of the once-proud Wolf-

pack Squadron.



It took the belated alarm tone to break Anastasia from her shock-induced trance. Her eyes fluttered wildly and she was quickly filled with a potent amalgamation of surprise mixed with abject terror.

"My God," breathed Byron. "Is it—?"

"It is," she replied.

Somehow Anastasia managed to jolt herself into action, scanning her tactical displays and calling up the weapons inventory. "Bring us into range, Cody. Byron, launch everything we have at that ship *right now*."

"Affirmative, Captain."

The ship surged forward and a hailstorm of firepower erupted from its nose. Lasers, plasma bursts, ion streams, and magnetically-propelled projectiles streaked toward the enemy vessel, followed closely by a fusillade of concussion missiles and nuclear warheads. The onslaught pounded into the motionless alien vessel, enveloping it in a cloud of flame that nearly filled the viewscreen. The shock waves from the nuclear explosions buffeted the shielded *Inferno*, overwhelming the inertial dampeners and rocking the bridge. The explosions subsided quickly in the void of space, but the oval alien ship remained, visibly unscathed.

"Charge it," Anastasia ordered, her teeth firmly set. "Charge the Wind of Death."

Byron complied without protest, and an unearthly sound filled the bridge. Anastasia's eyes were locked on the Lucani Ibron vessel, unmoving and seemingly oblivious to the barrage it had just endured. The seconds ticked by, and the noise of the *Inferno's* awful weapon quickly became unbearable.

The word came as no more than a raspy whisper from Anastasia's parched lips. "Fire."

The infernal sound was instantly replaced by one even more diabolical. A tremendous wave of energy coursed toward the enemy ship, deforming all in its wake. Just before impact, the surface of the alien ship solidified, and the horrible wave washed over the vessel, to no effect.

The alien ship's skin resumed its pulsations, but a tiny white dot had appeared on its surface.

"My God," breathed Anastasia, remembering with a desolate groan

that her ship had just fired its terrible Subspace Destabilization Unit.

Which meant, more or less, that she was completely helpless for the next 90 seconds.

She seriously doubted that whatever the Lucani Ibron had come here to do would take that long.

Turning her attention back to the viewscreen, Anastasia watched the deeply enthralling movement of the alien vessel's silver surface in awe. The ship, seemingly in no hurry to complete its mission, simply hovered uncontested in the space above the undefended planet of Landus.

"What are we going to do?" asked Cody.

"What *can* we do?" replied Byron. "All combat systems are offline."

Anastasia desperately searched her memory of the SDU specifications, trying to remember if any of the systems unaffected by the device would help her now. *Yeah*, she thought with uncharacteristic sarcasm, *perhaps the food replicators can cook up something helpful*.

Within a few moments, however, the exercise became academic.

A tenuous halo of light formed around the alien ship, rapidly intensifying to great brightness. There was an abrupt discharge, and the viewscreen automatically changed its view to show a bright lance of light that passed into—or, rather, directly *through*—the planet of Landus.

Every muscle in Anastasia's body abruptly seized in terror.

In a spectacle nearly identical to the destruction of the *Indomitable* a decade before, a ball of light appeared from the ship and traveled down the light beam toward the helpless planet. It sped unmolested through the atmosphere, embedding itself soundlessly deep within the planet's crust.

Gradually, bright white cracks became visible along the planet's surface, cracks that expanded and multiplied at a rapid pace. For a long moment, they halted their frenzied expansion and the doomed planet lay very still. Anastasia found, to her horror, that she was completely unable to avert her eyes from the ghastly sight taking place before her.

Without warning, the planet exploded, an effulgent conflagration rendered by the viewscreen as nothing more than a simple, impenetrable field of white. The alien ship, apparently satisfied, momentarily elongated and then shot briskly away.

The population of Landus, thought Anastasia involuntarily, had been just under two hundred million.



Far above the resort planet of Utopia, an incomprehensibly alien vessel advanced through a dissipating field of Vr'amil'een and Confederation warships. Seemingly undamaged and unperturbed by any efforts thus far to stop it, the silver ship appeared singularly unconcerned with the planet's defenders, one of which was maneuvering directly into its flight path.

The Lucani Ibron craft halted, less than half a kilometer from the Confederation Battlecruiser before it, showing no sign of apprehension, recognition, or even annoyance. Five-meter-tall letters along the larger ship's bow read *U.C.S. Brigadier*, a fact that seemed totally inconsequential to the ship and its ancient inhabitants. The aliens made no move, charged no noticeable weaponry, and made no attempt to communicate with either the *Brigadier* or the meager assemblage of Confederation warships that silently arrayed themselves behind it. They simply hovered, unreadable, in the void, projecting the unmistakable air of their own invincibility.

From the bowels of the massive Battlecruiser, Alexis and Ryan watched the display in fascinated horror. There was little they could do at this point, a fact that drove many of the less-experienced crewmembers on the engineering deck nearly insane. Alexis, however, had realized long ago that her role was not that of a bridge officer, and had, through 15 years of experience, learned to cope with the unsettling sense of helplessness that manifested itself at moments such as these. But the arrival of the Lucani Ibron ship nonetheless instilled in her a nearly incontestable desire to rip out large tufts of her own flame-red hair.

She was helpless.

Upon the command of Captain Woolslair, the *Brigadier's* heavy turrets began spouting deadly beams of laser energy toward the Lucani Ibron ship. Alexis dutifully checked readouts and stabilized power grids from her console, peripherally noting that the attack's prodigious rate of power consumption could not be sustained for long.

It didn't matter.

The searing energy beams battered the tiny alien craft, making no discernible impact upon its bizarre liquid hull. Alexis conscientiously

double-checked the shield harmonics, ensuring that, when the counterattack surely came, her ship would be as prepared as possible to withstand it.

She looked across the deck to Ryan and a chilling sense of finality crept into her soul. She found herself walking over to him and staring forcefully into his strong, dark eyes.

He wordlessly took her hand in his.



Away from her display, Alexis did not see the thin beam of light shoot forth from the alien vessel, and, although the *Brigadier* continued its relentless barrage, the beam passed through the mighty vessel and, indeed, the entire planet below. The ball of light that appeared a few seconds later took only a moment to pass, unhindered, through the fully-shielded ship, continuing its inevitable journey toward Utopia.

By the time it had reached its destination, the skies above the doomed planet showed no trace that the exalted *U.C.S. Brigadier* had ever even existed.

By the time the strange silver ship had departed, the same could be said of the resort planet Utopia.

CHAPTER 13

Confederation News Services, 26 Nov 3050, 02:36 Standard Hours.

The reprieve is over; the Lucani Ibron have returned.

In a span of only a few minutes, three Confederation planets—Utopia, Landus, and New Berkeley—were destroyed today by between one and possibly up to three Lucani Ibron ships—ships that reintroduced themselves after a ten-year hiatus in much the same way they first made contact with the Confederation: a violent and unimaginably devastating attack on Confederation forces.

Video satellites orbiting the planets of Utopia and Landus captured near-identical images of ships strongly believed to be of Lucani Ibron origin firing intense light-beam weapons within moments of their arrivals. Both planets, with a combined population of over six billion, have been confirmed as completely destroyed.

As reported earlier today, Utopia recently became the epicenter of escalated military conflict between the Confederation and attacking Vr'amil'een forces, forces that were still present at the time of the planet's destruction. Footage obtained by this agency depicts a concerted attack on the alien vessel by Confederation warships, an attack that was apparently unable to damage the intruder or prevent the planet's destruction. Losses suffered by each side, and the location of remaining warships—if any—are unknown at this time.

News satellites in the sparsely-populated Landus system were too far from the planet at the time of the attack to positively confirm the identity of the planet's attacker, but they do show an uncontested ship arrive in-system, destroy the planet with a phenomenal light weapon, and depart in an unknown direction moments later. Though Landus was home to only 200 million permanent residents—all believed dead—it was home to a major Confederation shipbuilding facility, destroyed in the attack.

Though the SPACER's satellite ban in the Pacifica system prevented direct observation, unconfirmed reports claim that Captain Anastasia Mason, sent as part of a diplomatic envoy whose mission was to negotiate with SPACER leaders, was orbiting the planet at the time of New Berkeley's destruction. Sources from within the SPACER organization claim that no Lucani Ibron ship arrived at New Berkeley, and that it was Mason's ship—

the Inferno—that returned to New Berkeley after destroying their planetary defense force just a few days ago. In that incident, which Confederation sources have classified as “an unfortunate accident,” Captain Mason’s ship discharged a powerful and terrifying new weapon, which killed all aboard the ships while leaving the vessels themselves undamaged. Though Captain Mason has claimed that the weapon fired as the result of an alleged saboteur, the incident occurred just minutes after Mason prematurely terminated negotiations on the planet. One source, who claims to have been present at the negotiations just before escaping the doomed planet, characterized Mason’s demeanor during the talks as “unyielding and antagonistic,” adding that Mason vowed to “make the SPACERs pay” just before talks were aborted.

Sources at Confederation Command could not be reached for comment, and would neither confirm nor deny Captain Mason’s involvement in the destruction of New Berkeley. ConFedIntel officially classifies the incidents as “under investigation.”

Further information will be reported on this frequency as it becomes available.



A throbbing pain coursed through Anastasia’s temples, and an anguished sigh escaped her lips. Her entire body felt physically sore and exhausted, though she had not been able to lift a finger to stop the Lucani Ibron massacre. She felt cold and emotionally numb—unable to deal with the torrent of horrors that had befallen her in the past few hours.

She unconsciously fingered the datapad in her hands. Highlighted on the display of ships lost in the attack at Utopia was the entry *U. C. S. Brigadier*.

Anastasia felt a single tear fall, burning an icy stripe down her cheek.

The bridge was silent, much as it had been for the past hour. Lieutenant Romano scratched unconsciously at her console, looking through the viewscreen into empty space.

A short tone from the console broke the deathly silence. “Captain,” Ariyana reported, “incoming message from ConFedCom.”

Captain Mason exhaled heavily. She felt wholly unable to face Fleet Admiral Wright, having so plainly failed him once again. She took a deep breath, wiping her face with her palm. “On screen.”

The elderly visage of Joseph Wright quickly filled the viewscreen.

The lines on his face seemed deeper, somehow, and the man looked as weary as the Captain felt.

"We were counting on you, Anastasia," he sighed. "We thought you were our best hope."

The Admiral slowly shook his sallow head.

"I assume you have heard," he continued, not waiting for a response, "Utopia, New Berkeley—also destroyed. Over six billion dead. Riots on every major planet in the Sector. The SPACERs—who have blamed *you* for the destruction of New Berkeley—have convinced several planets to begin proceedings to secede from the Confederation in the hope that they will be spared. Crews have mutinied and entire battle groups have been lost. The Vr'amil'een are still advancing, but every available ship is being used for the evacuations. In short," he concluded, "the entire Sector is in a state of chaos and the Confederation itself is on the verge of anarchy, civil war, and outright collapse."

"Abandon all hope," Anastasia muttered, "ye who enter here."

"Perhaps if things had not gone so badly at Landus and New Berkeley," Wright retorted, his shoulders sagging dispassionately, "there would still be hope."

"I don't think you understand, Admiral—"

"I don't think *you* understand, *Captain*," he countered, his voice finally gaining some measure of strength. "You failed us in your negotiations, you failed to control your own ship, and you failed to prevent the destruction of a Confederation planet. The harbingers of annihilation are upon us and you are our last, best hope for survival." The Admiral frowned. "I suppose we all knew this day would come."

"The Lucani Ibron are not invincible, Admiral. No one is."

"Do you think *you* can stop them, Captain?"

Anastasia's eyes glazed over, and she ignored the question. "All three planets—they were destroyed at the same time?"

The Admiral nodded gravely.

"Then we are dealing with three separate ships?"

"Unless they can be in three places at once."

"I wouldn't put it past them," interjected another officer, from off-screen.

Anastasia ignored the officer's remark. "Can we track them?"

"We have deployed tachyon detector beacons," replied Admiral Green, Wright's highest-ranking tactical officer, as the screen changed to show him. "The beacons, which were developed when the Lucani

Ibron made contact ten years ago, can detect Lucani Ibron hyperspace movements within their immediate vicinities. However," he continued, "the enemy vessels have begun avoiding the beacons. Only when they get within a few hundred parsecs of Earth will the beacons be closely-spaced enough to ensure full coverage." He stared hard at the Captain. "And by then, it will be too late."

"What were their last known positions and headings?" she asked.

"The limited data we have received indicated the three ships heading toward three new Confederation planets," Green answered. "And since they have yet to attack these planets, we are assuming that they are still recharging their primary weapons."

"Then presumably they still have that limitation?"

The Admiral cocked his head. "Presumably."

"What are we going to do?" Anastasia asked. "You mentioned evacuations?"

The viewscreen re-centered on Wright. "We have begun evacuations of the planets," replied the Fleet Admiral. "But they will never be completed in time. We predict that we only have a few hours left before their arrival." The Admiral removed his monocle. "And the *Inferno* is the only ship not already stationed there that can make it to any of the planets in time."

What little color remained in Anastasia's porcelain face instantly drained. "And what about the other two planets?"

The Admiral tapped his monocle softly on the hardwood table. "New Burma is the most densely populated of the three. That is where you will go."

"But, Admiral—"

Wright raised a bony hand. "I pray that you will not fail us again, Captain." He replaced his monocle, steeping his fingers once again. "That is all."

Anastasia stared at the Fleet Admiral unblinkingly, holding his gaze for several tense moments. Then, without a word, the Captain spun out of her chair and stormed off the bridge.

"God help us all," she heard someone say as the doors closed behind her.

• • •

Zach awoke with a start, and instantly regretted it. A scything lance of pain ripped through his skull, and for a moment Zach felt—rather, wished—that he would simply pass out again.

"Commander? Commander Wallace?"

Zach reopened his eyes—more slowly this time—making no attempt to move. A kaleidoscopic burst of light rewarded the effort.

"How do you feel, Commander?"

Zach thought about this for some time. "Am I dead?"

There was a hollow laugh. The sound pained Zach's ringing ears. "No, Commander. You're going to be fine."

Zach sighed—another painful experience.

"Too bad."

When next he woke, the searing pain had been replaced by a mute throbbing, and Zach filled his lungs with recycled air, belatedly surprised that no new pain accompanied the process. He sat up slowly, recognizing the familiar layout of the infirmary, and spent the next several minutes testing each of his limbs.

A nurse droid hovered into the room. "Please lie down, Commander," it droned. "The doctor will be with you soon."

Zach ignored the machine and instead hoisted himself off the bed, gingerly putting weight on his feeble legs. As he steadied himself, a sudden torrent of memories coursed through his mind, bringing back with awful clarity the last few minutes before he had been knocked unconscious. "My squadron," he mumbled. "What happened to my squadron?"

The nurse droid looked at him with hollow, helpless eyes. "If you would just lie down, Commander, the doctor will—"

"What happened to my squad??"

As if in response to his question, the doors swished open and an elderly man entered the chamber. "Calm down, Mr. Wallace," he soothed. "Just try to calm down, please."

Zach's eyes narrowed. "I'll calm down when you've told me what happened out there."

"Very well," the doctor agreed. "But perhaps you had better sit down."

"I'll stand, thank you," Zach replied, but a sudden wave of dizziness forced him to reconsider, and he slumped back on the bed. "The last thing I remember, we broke off to attack ..."

"Your squadron has been destroyed, Commander. Only yourself and Lieutenant Brennan have survived." The doctor stared dolefully at the sterile metal floor. "I am sorry."

But Zach did not hear his apology. He had passed out.



Dex brooded over his assignment in his austere quarters aboard the *Cerberus*. He loathed riot duty—even when the rioters were violent, he could not bring himself to shoot at civilians. And the danger from a teenager with an overcharged hand blaster was as real as that from a Vr'amil'een soldier with a mass driver cannon.

Dex ground his teeth together hard. There was a sudden crack and Dex looked down to find that he had snapped the input stylus he had been holding very neatly in two.

He was angry. He focused on the anger, massaging it in his mind as if it were a tangible thing. He concentrated furiously on his current mission. The more he did so, the more he knew he was avoiding the true cause of his rage.

Commander Rutcliffe rubbed his temples and looked across the Spartan room to a holocube on the small desk. The picture it displayed, suspended above its base, was of Ryan, his massive arms folded across his barrel chest like a superhero, and Alexis, tiny by comparison, mimicking his pose. Though she tried to ape his stern expression, she could not hide her habitual smile. They both looked rather ridiculous.

A thin smile found its way to Dex's lips, but was quickly replaced by a pained grimace. He closed his eyes in a vain attempt to shut out his feelings.

You are a soldier. You are strong. Feelings are for the weak.

He exhaled and heavily hung his head.

The Commander checked his nanocomputer to find that he still had over an hour until their arrival in the Charnus System. He picked up the datapad he had been studying and tossed it to the floor. He had all but memorized the information therein: maps, personnel ledgers, probable terrorist locations, recent events. Perhaps the most troubling aspect of his mission was that several local Confederation government buildings had been attacked in the past week, resulting in some serious damage and the deaths of two government workers and a soldier. The terrorists could not just be ignored.

But what can I do? Dex wondered. I'm a soldier, not a negotiator—not a counter-terrorist expert. How am I supposed to stop the attacks without simply killing every teenager who throws a rock?

Unconsciously, Dex found his gaze had strayed back to the holocube on the desk. His vision blurred, and, for the first time he

could remember, the Commander was crying.



“Commander? Commander Wallace?” The nurse droid hovered down the metallic corridor after Zach. “I do not believe the doctor has cleared you for duty yet.”

“I’ve just cleared myself for duty, tin-head,” Zach fired, slipping into the transport tube and keying it closed. The droid’s voice faded away as Zach was whisked down to the ship’s flight deck.

The door slid open and Zach walked down a short hallway, stopping at his locker only long enough to grab his helmet, and entered the hangar. Though his personal ZF-575 was damaged beyond all hope of repair, sulking piteously in a corner, Zach found a suitable replacement and used his nanocomputer and his security clearance to pop the canopy and activate the ship. As he climbed the short entrance ladder and hopped in, snagging his hospital gown in the process, he was reminded that this was the second time this week he was going into battle without his flight suit.

The hangar boss hurried over to check on the unscheduled departure, but Zach waved him off, starting up the ship’s engines and keying for the hangar bay doors to open. The boss evidently knew better than to try to stop the Commander, and he did not attempt to override the bay doors’ opening. As soon as there was room, Zach shot the ship through the gap and keyed the hyperdrive for Zebulon Beta, a solid three hours away from the Utopia system, even at top speed.

Zach had no idea if he would get there in time, and he had *absolutely* no idea what he would do to stop the Lucani Ibron ship once it arrived to destroy the planet. The only thing Zach was sure of was that the Lucani Ibron would pay—he would make them pay—for the unspeakable destruction they had wrought upon the human race.

Another thought, however, meandered at the edge of Zach’s consciousness. He tried to push it away, but to no avail—and he knew—deep down, he knew—that his actual motivation stemmed not as much out of a desire to protect the innocent people of Zebulon Beta, not as much out of a desire to repay the Lucani Ibron for the destruction of Landus, or Utopia, or even the *Indomitable* a decade before. Zach knew full well his primary motivation, the thought that smoldered most fervently in his mind, was to avenge the slaughter of his friends, the late pilots of Wolfpack Squadron.

Zach found the knowledge of his true motives somewhat comforting. Without even realizing it, within a few moments a thin smile had formed at the Commander's lips.



A familiar pattern of streaming starlines surrounded Anastasia, a spectacular backdrop she steadfastly ignored, her attention instead focused on the display of the chamber's holo-vid projector. Displayed by that projector were news reports and Confederation briefings on recent activity she had missed during her recent catastrophic missions and subsequent self-imposed communications blackout. It was hard to believe everything she saw had happened within the past 72 hours.

The reports chronicled petitions to secede filed by four Confederation planets, one of which had apparently become the new center of SPACER activity. Who in the organization had survived the destruction of Landus, Anastasia did not know, but she morosely concluded that it was probably the violent fringe types too extreme even for the SPACER mainstream. That the new headquarters were located at Charnus Prime was hardly surprising.

Three planets destroyed ... four more seceding. Anastasia wondered if a government had ever lost seven planets in 24 hours before. And she knew the carnage was far from over.

The planets that hadn't seceded weren't faring much better. Riots, looting, and anarchy were all common. Several cities had declared martial law, and many of the more powerful city-states had taken the opportunity to stir up old feuds and declare war upon each other.

Three planets, of course, were vainly trying to evacuate in the face of their imminent demise.

The Vr'amil'een, well known for their propensity to pounce at any sign of weakness within the Confederation, had begun their largest offensive since the assault rebuffed by Daniel Atgard in 3040. Though the Vr'amil'een treaty still theoretically forbade the reptilian race from producing any capital warships—Cruiser class or larger—the past decade's continuing unrest within the Confederation had caused that mandate to go largely unenforced. Consequently, the tenacious Vr'amil'een had rebuilt their armada to pre-assault levels. ConFedIntel reports claimed that most if not all of the Vr'amil'een forces at Utopia escaped before the planet was destroyed, and massive fleet movements toward two new Confederation systems were underway. The skeletal defense forces stationed in these systems—depleted by

attrition and the loss of ships being used in the evacuations—were no match for the sizeable forces headed their way.

Anastasia sighed. She would trade places with those planets' defenders any day. They didn't have a Lucani Ibron ship coming for them, after all, and compared to one of those incomprehensibly invincible monstrosities, the entire Vr'amil'een Armada seemed infinitely less menacing.

The Captain fought to clear her mind, focusing on what lay ahead. After her failed attempt to stop the Lucani Ibron ship at Landus, Anastasia had spent many hours with Vance in engineering, trying to determine if there was any way to make her ship's SDU effective against the seemingly invincible aliens. Though there were few adjustments that could be made to the terrible weapon—such as remodulating it to tweak the frequency—Vance had also explained that the weapon was far more effective at closer range, and, though Anastasia had no desire to get any closer to the alien ship, it at least left her with some hope.

Anastasia re-checked her chronometer, finding that only a few minutes remained until they were set to arrive at New Burma. She flicked off the holo-vid projector, still spouting scenes of terror and rebellion, and walked to the room's metallic door, which opened silently at her arrival. She stepped through and onto the bridge, where her crewmates awaited her.

"I was just about to call for you," Commander Zeeman said. "Only three minutes to realspace emergence."

Anastasia nodded and found her way to the Captain's chair, settling into it with trepidation. Her mood was tense, but not panicked—perhaps simply because the situation seemed so helpless that even panic would do little good.

She surveyed her bridge officers, analyzing their demeanors before this, their biggest test together. Commander Zeeman looked to his status consoles, an expression of calm but serious concentration evident on his face. He bore the look of a battle-hardened veteran, a seasoned officer whose 35 years of combat experience had chiseled away any vestiges of nervousness, indecisiveness, or fear. Only a slight tapping of his index finger on his chair's armrest hinted that any stress whatsoever lurked beneath the Commander's controlled exterior.

Byron Johnson, to the Captain's left, flicked his eyes nervously from one console to another, double-checking readouts but clearly not

absorbing them. Though, at age 68, Johnson was the oldest member of Anastasia's crew, he had spent most of his years in the service drawing up tactical strategies from the safety of the ConFedCom Headquarters Building. His files, in fact, showed only three years of sporadic shipborne experience, and it was unclear as to whether he had ever actually tasted combat. Anastasia hoped his services would not be needed in an emergency, and she tacitly reminded herself not to call on him to make any split-second decisions.

Ariyana, seated at her astrometrics station in front and to Anastasia's right, outwardly looked nervous, though Captain Mason knew from prior experience that she would perform admirably under pressure—even the unparalleled pressure that would soon be at hand.

Lieutenant Matthews, to Ariyana's left, stroked the control stick with an anxious energy borne not of nervousness, but of excitement and anticipation. Anastasia had known another pilot—the inimitable Zach Wallace—who had shown such signs before entering battle, and he had used his intensity and adrenaline to perform feats of piloting skill and finesse that could only be described as superhuman.

"Captain," called Victor, interrupting her analysis, "we have arrived."

Anastasia nodded and Cody pulled back on the hyperdrive lever, returning the *Inferno* to realspace and bringing the beleaguered planet of New Burma into view.

Transport ships, personal shuttles, and cargo carriers dotted the viewscreen, their bluish and yellow-white drive trails visible over the winking lights of the darkened nighttime half of the planet. The frenetic activity, the incomprehensible radio chatter, and the preponderance of lights on the planet's surface all hinted at the pitifully incomplete state of the evacuation.

"My God," whispered Ariyana, "it looks like they've hardly begun."

But Anastasia did not have time to curse the harsh logistical realities of a full-planet evacuation. Preceded only by a trill alarm from the short-range sensors, the now-familiar outline of a Lucani Ibron ship appeared out of the void, constricting into its signature ovoid shape as it emerged into realspace. Anastasia double-checked that her ship's terrible Subspace Destabilization Unit was fully charged, and ordered Lieutenant Matthews to bring the ship within range of the aliens. As she did so, she fought unsuccessfully to push from her mind the knowledge that, when she fired, several of the evacuating ships

would be caught well within her horrific weapon's lethal range.

Strangely calming to her was the thought that she would probably be robbing the people on those ships of nothing more than the last few seconds of their lives.

CHAPTER 14

Zach tried to push the overtaxed hyperdrive engines even harder, but, even with the safety protocols manually disengaged, the engines were simply at their limits. The ZF-575, however, as one of the smallest ships capable of hyperspace travel, moved at a respectable pace, one that would bring Zach to Zebulon Beta within a few minutes, a few minutes that would feel like an hour to the impetuous pilot. When he arrived, he would be without the firepower of his fighter-carrier, the *Divine Hammer*, a far slower ship unable to reach the Zebulon system remotely in time for whatever was about to occur there.

What Zach alone would do to the incoming Lucani Ibron ship, he still had no idea, but he felt as if the sheer power of his unbridled rage would be enough to overcome his enemy. Maybe he thought that, upon the alien vessel's arrival, lasers would simply issue forth from his eyes to smote the murderous Lucani Ibron. His hatred was so palpable he almost thought it would be enough.

His fighter's weaponry *was* formidable, however: wing-mounted class VI plasma burst cannon, silicon-refractor optical-discharge laser turrets, and missile tubes capable of launching the deadly Hellfire missile. The heavy fighter's considerable firepower made it the match of Corvettes and Frigates several times its size, and Zach Wallace was as adept at using that firepower as any person alive.

The bizarre technology of the Lucani Ibron, however, made it all totally useless. So far, no known weapon—not even the categorical Omega Cannon—had made so much as a dent in the alien vessels. The sheer helpless fury Zach had felt when pummeling the ship to no visible effect had been pungently consuming, and that same impotent feeling threatened to consume him now.

Zach pushed the doubts from his mind, refocusing his energies and steeling himself for battle. Having almost overshot the realspace emergence zone, he pulled back on the hyperdrive lever and was rewarded by the familiar retraction of the starlines back into luminous points. Visible first through the cockpit plasticite was the yellow-brown globe of Zebulon Beta, but it only took a moment for Zach's glare to focus on the tiny silver ship quietly orbiting the august amber

sphere.



His ship had emerged from realspace and already begun the descent to Charnus Prime by the time Dex wandered to the bridge. He had told his crew that he was not to be bothered, and they had known better than to disobey the order.

The planet of Charnus Prime was a hazy blue-green, lush forests covering most of the globe's temperate surface. The rest of that surface was covered with wide oceans, and most areas on the planet were deluged with a perpetual rainfall.

The *Cerberus* descended slowly through the clouded atmosphere, dropping below the billowing vapors and into the midst of a heavy gale. Streaks of lightning arced through the clouds near the bulky transport, and the thick sheets of rain made visibility all but impossible.

"I guess I'll be using the instruments to land," Retro muttered to nobody in particular, and his remark was met with only silence. Dex thought bitterly that the ubiquitous rainstorms would do little to lighten the gloomy mood on the ship.

Though the lights on the landing pad were totally concealed by the storm, the ship began to slow and Dex felt it touch down lightly on the weather-beaten platform, on the roof of the Confederation embassy building. The Commander fingered the intercom to the transport's exit hangar, where half of his squad would be waiting.

"Landing team, exit the ship and secure the perimeter."

"Aye," replied Zip over the intercom, and Dex switched the main viewscreen to an external camera covering the exit hatchway in the transport's aft.

The half-dozen Commandos filed out of the ship and took up positions around the rooftop, imposing figures in their full-body hostile environment gear. A group of embassy guards was already waiting outside, and several others were stationed around the roof, but Dex wanted his own men on the alert as soon as possible. The embassy guards were professionals, of course, but they were not Commandos.

Dex watched as his team scanned the streets below with built-in thermographic imaging sensors.

"Incoming!" came a call over the radio.

Dex hit the auto-scan setting on the viewscreen and it instantly

changed to show a fiery grenade arc over the lip of the rooftop.

"Cover! Do not return fire!" Dex ordered.

The Molotov Cocktail exploded on the tarmac and left a ring of flame that was quickly washed away by the heavy rains.

"The attacker is escaping, sir," one of the Commandos reported. "Should we rappel down and pursue?"

"That's a negative," the Commander replied. "Hold your positions and stay alert."

Retro turned back to Dex, shaking his head. "Warm welcome, eh, sir?" He laughed a humorless laugh. "This should be fun."

Dex exhaled heavily, looking to the viewscreen and the remnants of the crude grenade. Crude, but effective nonetheless. It was mostly luck that it had not impacted nearer any of his men. And while Dex did not intend to let terrorists take pot-shots at his squad, he also had no intentions of mowing down poorly-armed civilians.

How he would accomplish one goal without ignoring the other, however, he had no idea.



A dispersed but pervasive rumbling shook the bridge, a building symphony of sound that would soon crescendo into its unmistakable cacophonous roar. Anastasia kept her face purposefully rigid as she stared at the viewscreen, her mind awash with thoughts of friends and foes and unknown strangers—strangers put to death by these same Lucani Ibron, strangers put to death by her own terrible weapon, strangers about to die today.

A short tone from the sensors intruded on the Captain's tortured reverie. A glimpse at her tactical console informed her that another ship was about to arrive.

"Captain, we have an unidentified ship, incoming at 117 mark three," Lieutenant Romano reported. "It's coming in pretty quick."

Not another one, thought Anastasia apprehensively. After all, she had seen what a single Lucani Ibron ship could do. "On screen."

The viewscreen resolved to show an empty area of space, and for a moment nothing was visible but stars.

An instant later, however, a bright white glow appeared on the screen, quickly receding back into a single ship. The ship was small, not quite the size of a Corvette, but larger than a fighter. It was aerodynamically shaped, and its swept-back wings merged into a large bank of engines. The ship rushed toward them at incredible speed,

spinning to a stop between the *Inferno* and the Lucani Ibron ship. Anastasia's view was now of the rear of the magnificent vessel, and—belatedly—she realized what—and *who*—it was.

The viewscreen changed to show the bridge of the new ship. Its captain, alone on the bridge, possessed an almost tangible presence, and as soon as they saw him, the aspect of the entire crew was radically changed.

"Greetings," began the man, speaking to the Lucani Ibron ship. "This is Admiral Daniel Caesar Atgard, captain of the *Apocalypse*." He leveled his formidable gaze at the aliens. "Remember me?"

Anastasia released a long breath. She seriously doubted that she had ever been so happy in her entire life.



On the bridge of the *Apocalypse*, multihued status lights blinked their variegated chorus, tactical display consoles streamed data garnered from the enemy vessel, and the ship's computer silently tended to a myriad of pre-programmed functions. The ship was seven short of its normal complement, leaving only one man—Daniel Atgard—but his attention was not concentrated on blinking lights or scrolling read-outs. Daniel Atgard's attention was, instead, focused rather intently on the viewscreen, which displayed an image that was, though from a decade ago, hauntingly familiar.

Seconds passed and seemed like eons. There was no sign of activity from the alien ship. No movement, no attempt at communication. The categorical indifference was, indeed, the very hallmark of the alien species, which had only once been known to communicate or show any recognition whatsoever of the ships it encountered.

Actually, Daniel remembered morosely, that was not entirely accurate. Though he himself had been part of the only known communication with the Lucani Ibron, claiming that incident as the only time the egg-shaped silver ship had ever showed sign of recognition went too far.

After all, the Draconian bastards had recognized the *Indomitable* before they destroyed her.

Suddenly, the viewscreen changed, resolving to show the bridge of the alien ship, a sight with which Daniel was also all too familiar. Though he had last seen it ten years ago, his recollection was as vivid as any memory he had. Every detail of the alien bridge was exactly as he remembered it: hovering light-beings clustered around indecipher-

able patterns of light, flickering and changing shape seemingly at will. In the center was a being more brilliant than the rest, and the Admiral was forced to squint in order to prevent the entire scene from merging into a single luminous blur.

“Yes, Admiral Daniel Caesar Atgard,” came the being’s delayed response. “We do indeed remember you.”

The words—or, more accurately, the thoughts—of the creature were not spoken aloud, but instead reverberated only in Daniel’s mind.

“Good,” replied the Admiral, leaning forward in his command chair, uncomfortably aware that he was alone on the ship. “Then you remember what happened the last time you killed innocent people without provocation.”

“Yes,” replied the being, in the same manner as before. “We do indeed remember what happened.”

“Yet you destroy entire planets,” spat the Admiral, only peripherally aware that his emotions were threatening to overcome him. “And you come again to destroy another. Must we trade death for death? How many will be enough? How many humans do you have to kill before the ‘justice’ you claim you seek has been meted out?”

The aliens appeared to ponder this for several moments, flickering in unison as they presumably discussed their response. Abruptly the flickering abated, and Daniel thought he sensed an increase in the beings’ luster.

The light-being in the center seemed to float slightly closer as it spoke.

“All of them,” it said.

The viewscreen suddenly went black.



Zach reflexively jerked on the control stick, veering his fighter away from the Lucani Ibron vessel, instinctively expecting it to begin pursuit, fire upon him, or at least show some sign that it even perceived his existence.

But Zach knew it would do no such thing. It had come to destroy the planet, and the single-minded Lucani Ibron would not be distracted from that goal by a puny fightercraft.

Nor even an entire battle fleet.

In fact, as Zach spun his ship back around to face the dreadful enemy, he could already see a thin point of light appearing on the

surface of the ship, a point that gradually increased in intensity before spawning a small but intensely luminous beam that shot through the forlorn planet of Zebulon Beta far below.

This is why you came, you idiot! Zach thought. *Do something!*

Zach slammed his palm down on the firing stud, releasing an unheard battle cry along with a devastating array of firepower that sped toward the silver ship. Lasers and supercharged plasma streams pulsed toward the aliens, converging on the spot where the light beam originated. Following them to their targets were several conventional missiles and one that carried the Hellfire warhead.

The light beam intensified just as the missiles impacted their targets. Zach had to avert his eyes, and could not tell if the glare was a product of the aliens' weapon firing or his missiles' explosions, or both.

The self-tinting cockpit plasticite became nearly opaque for the next several moments, and Zach strained to see if his weapons had had any effect.

Abruptly, the cockpit turned transparent, and Zach could once again see the Lucani Ibron ship. No sign of damage on the alien ship, but also no sign of their omnipotent weapon. A quick glance assured Zach that the planet of Zebulon Beta remained intact.

Before he could even begin to surmise what had happened, a prismatic beam shot forth from an invariant spot on the alien vessel's hull and struck his ZF-575. The impact jarred Zach violently against his restraint harnesses, and he could feel his fighter being pulled toward the enemy ship. He struggled with the controls, but the engines could not so much as slow his progress. He thumbed the firing studs, only to find that all weapons were off-line. His shields were down, and, though every warning light on his console was blaring crimson, the computer seemed to have nothing to say.

He was trapped.

The mesmerizing hull of the alien ship loomed closer and closer in Zach's field of vision, until it was the only thing he could see. There was no discernible hangar bay, no doors opening to accept his captured ship, only the gyrating silver soup that coursed like a living liquid around the exterior of the vessel. Zach found he was unable to avert his eyes from the spectacle, and hardly even noticed that he had suddenly begun to feel very fatigued.

By the time the ZF-575 was captured, Zach was already unconscious.

CHAPTER 15

Dex marched down one of the Consulate's wide hallways, lavishly adorned with portraits and rich wood furniture that served no conceivable purpose. *What is the point of those little two-legged tables?* Dex wondered idly. *Are they supposed to help hold up the wall?*

The hallway ended in a thick wooden door, held open by a fat, balding man in his late fifties. He wiped his forehead with a white handkerchief and beckoned for the Commander to enter.

"Commander Rutcliffe, I assume. Yes, yes," he continued, not waiting for a response. "It is so good to have you here. You have no idea how harrying this situation has become down here."

Dex walked past him and into the room, an office of some sort, large enough to hold three more heavy wood desks like the one that dominated the center of the room.

"Yes, yes," repeated the Consul. "Please do sit down. I do hope you can get started right away."

To his surprise, Dex found that the man paused long enough for a response. "Yes, sir. My men are already covering covering the perimeter. There will be no more attacks on this building."

"Of course, of course," the Consul intoned, dismissing the Commander's words with a wave of his hand. "But when will you begin the real task at hand?"

"Excuse me, sir?" Dex replied. "What would that be?"

"Oh, well, you know, you know." He dabbed fitfully at his brow once again. "Eliminating the terrorist element that has been plaguing this city."

A peal of thunder reverberated through the windowless room, and the Consul flinched nervously, scanning the walls with his largish eyes. Dex sighed impatiently.

"I assure you, sir, that my men have the situation under control. You have nothing else to fear from terrorist attacks while—"

"Yes, yes, I'm sure. But that's only a temporary solution, now, isn't it? What will happen once you leave? Oh, no, no, that just won't do at all. I'm sure the weasels are out there now, regrouping, just waiting for you to leave."

The Commander closed his eyes and took a measured breath. If he had to put up with much more of the Consul's condescending manner, the terrorists would be the last of the portly man's concerns.

"What would you have me do, sir?"

"Well, of course. Well." The consul cleared his throat. "The threat needs to be eliminated." Sensing the Commander's tone for the first time, he appended, "Right?"

Dex straightened his collar. ConFedCom had made it very clear that he was to obey the Consul's orders, to deal with the threat as the Consul saw fit.

"What would you have me do, sir?" Dex repeated.

The Consul shifted nervously in his seat, dabbing his forehead again with his infernal handkerchief. He licked his turgid lips nervously before he spoke, his voice hushed.

"You ... you need to kill them." The words came out with glacial stupidity. "Right?"

Dex ground his teeth together hard. The Consul was a diplomat. A politician. Dex would wager that he had never touched a weapon in his life, never faced down the barrel of one, either. He had no concept of battle, had never seen the charred corpses of civilians gunned down in a crossfire. All he knew was that he wanted the attacks stopped. As for how a squad of elite Commandos would stop them—well, what else did Commandos do, after all, but kill people? Why else would they have sent him?

There was a long pause as Dex narrowed his eyes, staring forcefully at the bulbous Consul. "No, *sir*, I don't need to kill them. I'm sure there are other ways to end the threat. Do we have any idea why—"

The Consul interrupted him again. "Oh, of course, we've tried talking to them. But you know how they are. Ridiculous demands. They're all just animals, really. All they really want to do is murder and kill."

Dex let the repetition pass. "Perhaps we could talk to someone in charge ... find a way to stop the bloodshed."

"No," bellowed the Consul, speaking with surprising vehemence. "The terrorists must be hunted down and killed. That is all there is to it. My men have located some possible headquarters of terrorist operations. You will clear them out."

The Commander rose from his chair. "You don't really want my squad to fan out through the city and mow down civilians, do you?"

"They are not civilians," the Consul replied, suddenly animated. "They are terrorists. You've seen them throw bombs at the compound. I can't even go outside unless I'm in an armoured aircar. They've even injured two of our guards."

The Consul paused for a moment, and Dex took a heavy breath. He couldn't let the attacks continue, and he did not believe in negotiating with terrorists either. But sending Dex's squad to eliminate the threat seemed a somehow disproportionate response.

"Now, Commander," concluded the Consul, his words sickeningly patronizing, "unless you have any further questions, I suggest you get started."

Dex had a momentary vision of himself lunging across the table and squeezing the Consul's neck like a sausage. Instead, he turned on his heels and stalked out of the room before he could no longer refrain from making that vision a reality.



During Atgard's conversation with the aliens, which Captain Mason witnessed on her own viewscreen, she had noticed a slight but deliberate movement of the *Apocalypse* on her tactical display. She knew from countless years of working with the man that Daniel was maneuvering his ship so as to spread the aliens' field of fire when they counterattacked, while still allowing both ships to concentrate their fire at the same point on the enemy vessel. To this end, he had moved his ship approximately 90 degrees from the *Inferno*, theoretically forcing the Lucani Ibron to face one ship or the other, thus leaving themselves open to attacks from the sides or rear.

Anastasia had seen Daniel perform the maneuver several times in similar situations, and it had usually served to leave the enemy vulnerable. Unfortunately, thought the Captain, this particular ship seemed to have no front, no rear, and no weak areas to exploit.

The transmission between Atgard and the aliens quickly cut out, but was just as quickly replaced on the viewscreen by a shot of the *Apocalypse's* bridge.

"Ana," Daniel began hurriedly, "I need you to re-modulate the SDU before you fire. I'm beaming the harmonics over now."

"Understood," Ana replied, sending the data directly to main engineering as soon as it arrived. "Remodulation complete."

"Very good," replied the Admiral. "Fire on my command."

Anastasia belatedly realized that, in moving his ship, Daniel had

also removed himself from the SDU's lethal range.

"Now!"

Anastasia hit the fire button, releasing the pent-up energy that had been accumulating in the SDU's massive collectors. A wave of energy began to radiate from the ship, and, as it did, Anastasia noticed a similar reaction taking place on the *Apocalypse*.

But the Apocalypse doesn't have a Subspace Destabilization Unit, Anastasia mused, just as suddenly realizing. But it does have an Omega Cannon.

The space in front of the *Apocalypse* shimmered as the characteristic deformation of the Omega Cannon shot from the vessel's nose and reached the enemy craft just as the discharge from the *Inferno* did. Where they collided, a spectacular reaction took place, almost bright enough to overpower the self-dimming viewscreen. The distortion of the Wind of Death seemed to spread over the surface of the Lucani Ibron vessel, deforming the spherical fluid skin and causing it to expand erratically. The silver liquid seemed to become translucent, as several points of light could be seen behind the watery façade. With an abrupt shimmer, the entire hull instantly disappeared, leaving several floating lights bobbing silently on the viewscreen. Aside from their slight movement, they were nearly indistinguishable from the faraway stars.

"My God," breathed Victor. "We destroyed the ship."

Before celebrations could ensue, the light-points on the viewscreen promptly elongated and shot away. Ana blinked quickly and scanned the starry background to be sure the aliens had really disappeared.

Her eyes involuntarily wandered to New Burma, rotating peacefully below, blissfully unaware that mere seconds were all that had separated it from outright annihilation.

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Zach awoke slowly, and his mind took a few moments to clear. At first, he thought he was perhaps still in the infirmary, but as soon as he opened his eyes he knew that not to be the case.

Instinctively, Zach tried to get up, but found to his horror that he was unable to move from the neck down. He squirmed his head violently and tried to will his extremities into motion, to no avail.

My God, he thought helplessly. I'm paralyzed.

It was the realization that the room he was in was abnormally cold that snapped the Commander's mind back into motion. He could,

after all, feel the chill in several parts of his body, which led him to believe—or hope—that he was merely being confined by unseen restraints. It did seem to him that he could feel his entire body, and was simply unable to move it.

Commander Wallace closed his eyes as a wave of drowsiness passed over him, then slowly reopened them and took stock of his surroundings. Through his narrowed field of vision, he could see only a plain white ceiling and four unadorned white walls. It appeared, he thought, to be some sort of antiseptic hospital or operating room, except with no doors, machinery, or equipment of any kind.

Actually, he hastily appended, it seemed far more like a laboratory than a hospital or place of healing.

Zach looked about the room, and a light at the periphery of his vision caught his attention. As it hovered closer to him, Zach recognized the being as a Lucani Ibron, and he reflexively strained to free himself from his unseen shackles.

“Do not try to move, human,” the being spoke into his head. “You will find such attempts totally fruitless.”

The light-being drew nearer, and Zach was forced to close his eyes, unable to shield them with his hands. The intense light of the alien, now only a few centimeters away, lit the inside of his eyelids with a diffuse pink glow. Zach thought he felt a faint warmth on his face as the being hovered over his body, but the alien had no odor, and no air wafted over his face as the Lucani Ibron scrutinized him. It hovered there for a moment, and then the diminution of the light penetrating his eyelids informed the Commander that the being had retreated to a greater distance.

“What are you going to do with me?” Zach asked, slowly reopening his eyes. “Why have you brought me here?”

The alien’s body flickered erratically, and it hovered closer once again. “We are going to use you, human. We are going to use you to help us wipe out your own race.”

Zach’s jaw hardened as the alien floated out past his limited field of vision. “I won’t help you, you know. You may as well just kill me now, because whatever you want me to do, I won’t do it.”

He was answered only by silence.

“Did you hear what I said?” he shouted into the empty air. “I won’t help you. I won’t!”

But Zach’s last words were spoken only to himself. His Lucani Ibron examiner had already disappeared through one of the room’s

plain white walls.



Daniel released a long breath, one that he was not aware he had been holding. He looked again at the viewscreen, which showed nothing but empty space, and scanned the stars for some remnant of the Lucani Ibron vessel. He scoured the tactical displays, finding nothing, and felt almost foolish as he triple-checked that the planet of New Burma still spun lazily beneath him.

Anastasia's face quickly filled the viewscreen. Her expression was one of relief, but also continuing concern. "I have an incoming transmission from Admiral Wright. I thought you might like to see it."

Daniel nodded and the screen changed to show a split view of the bridge of the *Inferno* and the incoming transmission from Wright. Within a moment, the right half of the screen flickered to life, and Wright's wrinkled face dominated the screen. Daniel could not help but think that the viewcam should be zoomed less—the years had not been kind to Wright, and he had visibly aged even in the last few years.

"Commander Mason," he began, "I see you finally have some good news for me."

"Yes, Admiral. New Burma is safe. The Lucani Ibron ship has been destroyed."

There was a slight delay as the message was relayed back to Earth. "One of the Lucani Ibron ships," Wright corrected her.

Daniel could sense that Anastasia was fighting to prevent her feelings from showing. "Yes, sir. One of the ships. Have there been other attacks?"

Daniel awaited the Fleet Admiral's reply, content for the moment simply to observe the discussion.

A long sigh escaped Wright's lips. "Well, Captain, two other ships attacked two new planets, just as we had anticipated. The good news is that we were able to prevent the destruction of one of them—Zebulon Beta."

"Zebulon Beta?" Atgard interrupted, forgetting his role of observer. "Didn't Commander Zach Wallace head to Zebulon Beta several hours ago?"

Captain Mason stared heavily at the Admiral. "Zach was there?"

The Fleet Admiral's delayed response cut short Daniel's reply. "Yes. Whatever your sources, they are correct." A brief twitch flashed

across Wright's face, and his expression became troubled. "In fact, it was Zach Wallace who was responsible for saving the planet."

Anastasia's concerned expression did not disappear. "What happened to Zach?" she asked, evidently picking up on Wright's listless tone. "Don't wait for the relay—*what happened to Zach?*" Her voice had reached a fever pitch. She looked at Daniel, a sense of panic evident in her eyes.

The response seemed to take longer than usual to arrive. "I'm sorry, Anastasia. Zach—it appears he was captured by the Lucani Ibron ship."

Daniel saw Anastasia's hand go involuntarily to her mouth.

"I am sorry," continued the Fleet Admiral. "I know he was your friend. But what he did was incredibly heroic. He single-handedly was able to stop the alien vessel from deploying its superweapon. We're still not exactly sure how he ..."

Wright's voice trailed off. He could see that Anastasia had begun sobbing.

"Admiral," Daniel interjected, eager, for Anastasia's sake, to change the subject and complete the communication, "what happened to the third planet?"

Wright nodded his bony head. "The third planet has been destroyed by the aliens." His eyes perked up, as if trying to breathe hope back into the situation. "We destroyed one of their ships, had a stalemate at one planet, and lost a planet. I guess you could say it was a draw."

Anastasia abruptly looked back up. Daniel caught a glint of fury flash through her cobalt eyes.

"A draw?" she asked, enraged. "Three billion people are killed and you call it a *draw*?"

Wright was speechless, though as a result of Anastasia's words or the transmission delay, Daniel was not sure.

"Zach Wallace is captured by those monsters and you call it a *draw*?" She looked as if she were on the verge of leaping through the viewscreen, oblivious to the scores of parsecs that separated her from Joseph Wright. Daniel could see a faint tremor wrack her body.

"I am sorry about your friend," came Wright's belated reply. "And mere words can not express my sorrow that another planet was destroyed by these Lucani Ibron butchers." He straightened himself in his seat. "But sorrow for those losses will not help us now, will not help the rest of the planets that are counting on us for protection. Zach

Wallace's sacrifice, while tragic, has given us invaluable information, information that even now is being picked apart by our top weapons specialists. Not only did he save a world, but he may have given us the intelligence we need to save countless more lives. And your own heroics today have similarly given us hope. For the first time in a long while, humanity has a fighting chance against these monsters. You have shown they are vulnerable. You have shown they can be beaten, that other worlds can be saved. I did not mean to make light of your friend's sacrifice, or the tragedy that has befallen the lost world of Mynos III—my own home planet. But today may well be remembered as the day we turned the tide. The day humanity saved itself from extinction."

The Fleet Admiral pursed his lips, and continued. "I need you, Captain Mason. I need you to protect another planet. I need you to help end this terrible threat."

The Captain composed herself quickly. "Yes, sir," she replied. "Just tell me where they're going to be."

"Good. Our people are trying to track the remaining ships now. I will send you both your new destinations as soon as I have word. Wright out."

Daniel leaned toward the viewscreen. "Destinations?" he repeated. "Did you say destinations?"

The right half of the viewscreen winked out, and the viewscreen changed to show only the bridge of the *Inferno*.

"Daniel," asked Anastasia, visibly upset, "did he say destinations?"

CHAPTER 16

The rifle felt comfortable in the Commander's hands, his fingers closing naturally around its molded grip. He had used it so frequently, the weapon was almost an extension of himself, an appendage he could control almost without conscious thought. Dex no longer had to think of his finger squeezing the trigger—he just willed the weapon to fire, and it did.

But something about it did not feel comfortable now.

Dex crouched behind the corner of a dilapidated cement building. A light rain spattered noisily on the broken ground. His bulky combat armour shifted about his frame as he inched toward the edge, peering into the dark, muggy night air. He moved silently, gracefully, as if unaware of the awkward armour he was encumbered with or how uncomfortably warm it was. With practiced movements, he peered around the building's edge and quickly scanned the alley with discerning eyes.

The same two vagrants were patrolling the entrance to the far building. Though disguised, Dex could see that the two men actually carried heavy rifles, shifting beneath their ragged clothing as they walked.

Amateurs, thought the Commander. Smaller, more easily concealed weapons would have worked just as well, and would have helped sustain the ruse. Not that the Commander would have been fooled. It was clear to him by the way neither man let the alley entrance out of their sight—and just as clear by the way they each tried too meticulously to act like derelicts.

Dex sighed. It was precisely because they were amateurs that this mission troubled him. Though he had conclusive evidence that at least a terrorist cell was based in this building, he was afraid that they would not realize the superior force arrayed against them, and would foolishly fight to the death. And when an enemy, no matter how inexperienced in combat, was firing real bullets, the safety of Dex's men came first. As much as he wished to avoid bloodshed, Dex would not alter his strategy in a way that would place his men at heightened risk.

At least these first two can be neutralized without killing them, thought the Commander. Even as he thought it, he could see the tiny droid that carried the silent gas bomb roll down the shadows of the dark alley toward the two guards. A moment later, there was an almost inaudible *poof*, and a colorless, odorless gas surrounded the men, who collapsed a moment later.

Without a word, Dex fastened his gas mask and motioned for his men to advance, and began swiftly moving down the alley himself. Up above, several Commandos entered the building through windows and ventilation ducts, gas bombs at the ready and their weapons set on stun. But if the terrorists inside the building had gas masks or body armour, deadly force would have to be used, and his men were authorized to use it.

The lock on the door was rudimentary, and Dex had it open in seconds. He silently swung the door open, leveling his rifle as he scoped down the hallway. No one was visible in the darkened interior, and little light streamed in from the unlit alley. The building appeared to be an apartment complex, but Dex knew from recon reports that all four apartments on the second floor were occupied by terrorists. He hoped none of the civilians in the building came home or left their apartments at an inopportune time.

Dex's men quickly fanned out and silently started up the stairs two at a time. Dex followed, and motioned for his men to hold back on the landing halfway between the floors.

Commander Rutcliffe peered around the corner, and heard a pair of voices from the hallway upstairs. A faint light from the floor above illuminated the landing, and Dex could see the shadow of one man coming across his field of vision from the left. From the sound of his voice and lack of shadow, Dex surmised that the other man was to his right.

Reaching to the holster on his waist, Dex gripped the pistol and flipped off its safety, ensuring that the weapon was set to stun. He glided up the stairs without sound, pointing his rifle toward the shadow on the left and readying his pistol in the other direction. In a moment, he was in the hallway, and two shots rang out, catching each man in the chest and causing them to slump loudly to the floor. From the other stairway, four of his men descended, training their rifles down the hallway, each pointed at a different door. Soon after, a second group of four came up from below and situated themselves similarly.

A door opened and a pair of flashes reached in, striking the man before he could even step into the hallway. But Dex could see the glint of the man's stolyrne armour as he stepped into the hallway, and quickly flipped the switch on his rifle to kill. He hesitated for an uncharacteristic instant, then burned a hole through the armour plating's left breast. The man's eyes went wide and his rifle dropped from his hand. He followed it to the ground a moment later.

A muffled *thump* heralded a gas bomb being launched into the empty apartment, and all three other doors opened simultaneously. Lasers shot from the apartments even before the doors were fully open, firing blindly into the hallway. Dex's men returned fire, and several more rounds from the gas bomb launcher were poured into the doorways. The air in the hallway was soon thick with the gas, so concentrated now that it distorted the Commander's field of vision like heat-haze on a humid day. Soon, the firing from the apartments had ceased, and his men began methodically checking the rooms for conscious survivors. A few men lay sprawled in the doorways, most unconscious from the gas, but two with blaster marks in their chests. Dex looked to the man he had killed, crumpled lifelessly across the doorway, his rifle centimeters from his lifeless hand. His open eyes stared unblinkingly at Dex.

The Commander lowered his rifle to his side. The man looked no more than twenty.



Anastasia slumped lower into her chair. "I still don't like it."

"Neither do I," Daniel replied over the viewscreen. "In fact, I'm looking over the sensor readings from our last attack, and I may have found a clue as to why we were able to destroy the ship."

The Captain leaned forward.

"During our attack," he continued, "I was monitoring the alien ship's hull. My sensors were scanning for changes in density, energy readings, radiation emissions, and even molecular composition."

"Molecular composition?" Anastasia repeated.

"Yes, well, I thought that one was a long shot. But it turns out the ship's hull actually changed its molecular composition according to what type of attack we directed against it."

Captain Mason looked perplexed. "You're not saying that they can actually anticipate our attacks and somehow change what their ship's hull is made of, are you?"

"That's exactly what I'm saying. When we attacked with conventional weapons, the hull formed into some sort of galvanized titanium alloy. But," he continued, staring down at his console, "when I fired the Omega Cannon, the entire hull transmuted into an element I've never seen before. The computers have no record of it ever being discovered or even made in a lab."

"So that's how they make themselves invincible," Anastasia replied. "Since no one hull could withstand any type of attack, they actually change the hull in response to what we throw at it."

"Precisely," agreed the Admiral. "But when the effect wave from your SDU impacted the hull ..."

"Which was already formed to withstand your Omega Cannon ..."

"It was not able to defend against both attacks at once," Daniel concluded.

Anastasia leaned back again. "So, as I said before, I especially don't like the idea of the two of us splitting up now."

"The orders have already been given."

"Don't you think, if we explained your new findings to Admiral Wright, he would change his mind?"

"Not likely. Besides, which planet would we defend, and which would we leave helpless? And, it'll take me too long to reach Cordova. It may be all over before I ever get there. Charnus Prime is much closer."

Anastasia sighed, the thrum of her ship's powerful subspace engines reminding her that he was right. "Yeah, well, the only problem is that, once I fire the SDU, the entire ship is useless for 90 seconds. Unless I can get out and throw rocks at them, I'll need some help."

Daniel nodded solemnly. "I haven't quite figured that part out myself. But we had better get underway. We don't know how long until the ships will be back."

"You're right," she admitted. "But I still don't like it."

"Neither do I, Anastasia," Daniel replied. "Neither do I."

• • •

Though he had been unable to move for some time—how long, Zach had no way of guessing—he still strained against his unseen bonds. He felt no discomfort, but he was held as if his entire body was bonded to the table.

He looked around him for the hundredth time, suddenly aware

that he had no idea how large his prison was. In fact, what he had assumed was a plain room with perfectly white, featureless walls, suddenly appeared to be infinite in size. Upon further reflection, he could not even positively claim that the room had walls.

Zach jerked his head to his right to see a Lucani Ibron appear, seemingly from nowhere. As much as he strained, he could not turn his head more than a few degrees.

"What do you want with me?" Zach asked, aware that a soft, almost inaudible hum had begun to resonate throughout the space. "What do you plan to do with me?"

The light-being floated closer, until it was only centimeters from Zach's face. At this distance, Zach could see through squinted eyelids that the light energy that comprised it was not uniform. Areas of varying luminescence roiled within the being's body, and small flashes of light could be seen, as if miniature thunderstorms had erupted beneath its surface. The Lucani Ibron was smaller than a man, and roughly circular in shape, though Zach could see that the being's shape, too, was elastic. Zach reasoned that he was probably the first human to see a Lucani Ibron at this distance.

A jolt of electricity suddenly arced forth from the alien, striking Zach's forehead and coursing through him. Though its abruptness elicited a gasp of surprise, the sensation was not overly unpleasant, merely a faint tingling that permeated Zach's body and reassured him that he did indeed have feeling throughout.

"You must be very proud of yourself, human," came the being's thoughts, projected directly into Zach's mind. "But know that your actions are futile. Your race will be destroyed for its transgressions."

Zach tried willing his body to move, his body quaking with the effort. He imagined that he could see the Lucani Ibron smiling.

"Your species has an amazing unwillingness to accept the inevitable," his captor continued. "It is one of the more fascinating aspects of human psychology. It is regrettable that your species will not be subjected to further study."

"No?" Zach asked, peripherally aware that the hum had grown louder. "And why is that?"

The being's response was without emotion, as if stating a simple fact. "Because your species will soon be extinct."

"We've beaten you before," spoke Zach, defiantly. "We'll beat you again."

The phosphorescent undulations within the being's body intensi-

fied. "That was an aberration. Your punishment has merely been delayed."

Zach strained to face his captor more squarely. "And who gave you the right to mete out punishment?" he asked, raising his voice to counter the ubiquitous rumbling. "What makes you the arbiters of justice for the entire Universe? Why do your judgements come before those of any other race?"

The light-being inched closer to Zach's face. "The precept that our judgements receive ultimate primacy is not an arbitrary one, human," came its voice in Zach's mind. "Whose judgements should come first in the Universe," it entreated, "if not those of its first inhabitants?"

CHAPTER 17

The conversation was going nowhere, and Anastasia was growing more and more frustrated.

"Isn't it possible," she asked, "to section off a portion of the energy reserves, so they're not drained by the SDU when it fires?"

"Captain," Vance replied apologetically, "it just won't work. First of all, we need every drop of energy we have to cycle through that thing. Second, other than the emergency generators, which can't power anything more taxing than emergency life support, there's no way to partition the ship's energy banks. It's all interconnected."

Anastasia sighed heavily.

"I'm sorry, Captain. Once we fire, there's just nothing we can do offensively for the next 90 seconds. Even worse, we'll be without shields or engines as well. We'll be almost completely defenseless."

"So throwing rocks appears to be our best option, then," she muttered.

"I'm sorry?" asked Vance.

"Nothing," Anastasia replied. "Thanks for your help. Let me know if you think of anything."

"Sure thing," he answered, turning back to his diagnostics. "I'll be optimizing the power grid if you need me."

Anastasia spun around and headed back to the bridge. She entered to find her crewmembers in the midst of a discussion.

"Captain," Lieutenant Matthews asked as soon as she entered, "couldn't we fire just before the Wind of Death engages, and have them both reach the ship at about the same time?"

Anastasia shook her head as she slumped into her seat. "We can't even fire while the SDU is charging up. I already had Vance go over the numbers. If we fire at the last possible moment, charge the SDU and fire immediately, the effect wave wouldn't reach the enemy until almost thirty seconds after the lasers hit."

"Do you think that would be close enough to disrupt their hull?"

"No, Cody, I told you," interjected Victor, "I've been analyzing the data from our encounters with the Lucani Ibron. Their hull can reform in much less than that time. Almost instantaneously. A few seconds,

tops.”

“I’m sure you’ll think of something,” chimed Ariyana from her navigation console. “We still have a couple hours before we even reach the planet.”

“I wish I shared your optimism,” Anastasia replied. “Maybe when we get out of hyperspace we’ll have enough time to contact Admiral Atgard.” More quietly, she added, “He could always think his way out of situations like this.”

Victor flashed her a warm smile. “You haven’t needed him for the past six years. He’s been back on Earth, and you’ve done just fine for yourself. ConFedCom wouldn’t have given you the *Inferno* if they didn’t have confidence in you.” He looked his Captain directly in the eye. “And none of us would have signed up if we didn’t, either.”

“Thanks, Victor,” Anastasia replied. “But I’d still feel better if Daniel and the *Apocalypse* were on their way to meet us.”

Victor stifled a chuckle. “You know what, Captain?” he asked. “You know what I bet Daniel’s saying right now?”

Anastasia rolled her eyes. “What’s that?”

“He’s saying, ‘I’d sure feel better if Anastasia and the *Inferno* were on their way to meet me.’”

Anastasia laughed the Commander’s comment off. But it did make her feel just slightly better to realize that it was, most likely, true.



No matter how long he stared at the screen, it did not change. Fifty-two dead, over one hundred injured. Dex replayed the video of the explosion for the hundredth time. Snake-like girders trailed from the nose of the incomplete ship like the tentacles of some great space-faring jellyfish. The movements of space-suited construction crews could barely be seen at this level of magnification, but Dex knew they were there. Completely unseen were the scores of technicians already aboard the completed portion of the vessel.

The explosion ripped the ship’s nose from its unfinished frame. In the debris, thankfully too small to make out, several bodies spewed forth in every direction. Many of them burned up in the Earth’s atmosphere before they could be recovered.

On the viewscreen, the two halves of the incomplete *Categorical Imperative* began to drift slowly apart.

And ConFedIntel had traced the attack to Charnus Prime.

In a sudden fit of fury, Dex hurled a datapad across the room,

shattering it against the far wall. He smashed the viewscreen on his desk, splintering the plasticite and acutely deforming the image. He raised his hands above his head to crush it again, but slumped into his seat instead. He found himself quivering with rage.

I was such a fool.

Dex's stomach churned at the thought that he had sought to defend these madmen, that he had put forward the idea that anything less than complete annihilation of the bastards responsible for such acts was called for.

The door chime snapped the Commander back to the present.

"Enter," he growled.

Zip rushed in, phaser drawn, and surveyed the room quickly. He returned the weapon to his holster and picked up a chair that had been knocked over. He straddled the chair and faced the Commander.

"What do we do now, sir?"

Dex stared past his Lieutenant, his eyes burning a hole into the far wall. "Prepare the squad. We hit the base tonight."

Zip nodded, and rose. Halfway to the door, he paused, turning back to the Commander. "Standard combat equip, sir?"

A faint, cheerless smile found its way to Dex's face. "Full tactical," he replied. "We'll leave the gas bombs at home this time."

Wordlessly, Zip nodded, and left the room.



The *Inferno* dropped out of hyperspace barely fifty thousand kilometers from the nearest planet, and barely a minute from the orbital refueling station. Anastasia realized that time was of the essence, and had utilized the *Inferno's* impressive new hyperspace capabilities to shave almost an hour from the refueling stop. It was unfortunate that the ship had to stop at all, but its prodigious rate of Duopasqualonium consumption over the past few days had totally depleted their reserves.

Cody sidled the ship up to the fuel depot, expertly docking with the fuel pod, and with a resounding thud the docking clamps snapped into place. The Captain monitored the fuel flow from her console, the gauges filling rapidly. The whole process would take about five minutes.

Anastasia idly looked out the viewscreen at the planet of Boreal below. A barren world, it was used mainly for energy production and as home to several shipbuilding facilities. Most of the habitable por-

tion of the planet was covered by nuclear power stations, and, as such, not many civilians made their home on the planet.

Captain Mason jerked back as an alarm rang out and the viewscreen changed its view to an area of space beyond the planet and the system's feeble orange sun. Several flashes lit the screen, and a formation of military vessels appeared. "Byron," she snapped, "what the hell is going on?"

"Scanning," he replied, his eyes darting around his console. "Captain, the vessels are of human origin, but they are not broadcasting Confederation military identification codes."

"SPACERs?" ventured Commander Zeeman.

"They must be," replied the Captain, straightening in her seat as she checked her own tactical console. The SPACER attack party consisted of four capital ships, several Corvettes, and about two dozen fighters. Not especially large for an attack party. "Byron, scan the rest of the system for Confederation military presence."

Byron complied with the order. "There are a trio of gunboats on the far side of the planet, and a pair of Corvettes flanking a larger Cruiser on the near side. Half a fighter squad is refueling here at the depot."

And the *Inferno*. That was all.

The Captain cursed under her breath. She had not realized just how thinly the Confederation's defense forces were spread. But the defense of seventeen systems and countless shipping lanes, combined with evacuations of several major planets, had left only the skeleton force Anastasia saw here.

"Cody, disengage us from the fuel pod. Form up with the Cruiser, all possible speed."

"Aye," replied her pilot, punching in the command to disengage from the depot. There was a whining sound, and an awful screech of metal on metal, followed by an ominous crack.

"Captain," he shrieked, spinning in his seat, "the docking clamps have failed. They are not disengaging!"

Anastasia cursed under her breath. "Can we shoot the clamp off?"

"Negative," Victor quickly replied. "With fuel flowing, we could detonate the entire ship, not to mention the fuel depot. We'd have to at least wait until we've finished refueling."

Anastasia looked back to her console, at the SPACER ships screaming toward the horribly outmanned defense force. "How long until fueling is complete?"

Victor checked his console. "Three minutes, fifty seconds."

She pounded her fist into her armrest. "Damn! This could all be over by then!"

Victor shrugged helplessly. "The mechanism is completely disabled. It won't even let us interrupt the fuel flow, and we can't break free until it's finished."

The Captain's eyes flashed back down to her console. "The Confederation ships are engaging the enemy," Byron reported.

Visible on the viewscreen were the opposing fleets, which erupted into a hailstorm of battle. It did not take long before it became apparent that the incomplete Confederation defense force would not withstand the barrage for long.

"I feel so damned helpless," Anastasia spat. "With us in there, it could be a fair fight." She looked over to the Commander, his face contorted by tightly clenched teeth. "They don't stand a chance."

Before he could respond, the battle stopped, almost as soon as it had begun. The Confederation ships had stopped firing.

"Captain," asked Ariyana, "why have they ..."

It soon became clear. The Confederation forces had surrendered.

The SPACER ships, calmly, and with more organization than Anastasia had thought they would possess, rounded up the remainder of the Confederation forces. A Cruiser and a pair of Corvettes broke formation, and headed straight for the depot.

Anastasia checked her console. The whole halfhearted battle had taken just over two minutes. Nearly ninety seconds still remained on the countdown.

"Incoming enemy vessels," Byron reported methodically. "ETA: sixty seconds."

"Captain," warned Victor, "one good shot would take out that depot. And if we're still attached ..." He glanced at his chronometer again, rechecking his math.

"I know," Anastasia replied, the nape of her neck tingling with fear. "We go with it."

• • •

Daniel sat alone on the bridge of the *Apocalypse*, the familiar whine of the hyperspace engines faded to the point where he hardly noticed the sound. It was cold on the ship. Cold, and silent, and dead. Like a tomb.

Normally, of course, there would be seven other people on board, and the Admiral would probably be passing the time before his

arrival by reading a book in his chambers. But with no one else to monitor the ship, he was forced to remain on the bridge. Somehow, he knew that even were he in his chambers the ship would feel uncharacteristically empty.

He had faced death many times over the years, but he could not shake a feeling of dread as he watched the starlines hurtle toward him on the main viewscreen. He soberly realized that, as captain of a starship, he had never before faced death alone.

Daniel leaned back in his chair, steeping his fingers before his chin. He did not think often on the subject of death. The Eugenics Movement of the late 23rd century had not only increased humans' life span, but had, more importantly, improved the overall health of the species, and had the effect of making people born after the Movement feel literally "half their age." That, combined with advances in medicine, had increased the average human life span to over 130 years, a number that had remained steady for over two centuries now. It was, in fact, the opinion of the scientific and medical communities that the human body simply was not designed to live longer than a century and a half, and that anything past a century was more the result of life-sustaining medicine and technology than the inherent will of the human spirit to continue life in a material form.

Most people, however, had become spoiled by their increased average life spans. Forgotten were the days when seventy and eighty years were considered a full and healthy lifetime. Indeed, most people seemed to think of a century as their God-given minimum allowance of life, as if the Universe inherently cared about humanity or their arbitrary base-ten numbering system and capricious method of dividing time into units based on the revolutionary period of their insignificant planet. Today, anyone who lived less than the magic 100 years was considered unlucky, and their deaths were universally mourned as a great tragedy.

Daniel Atgard, for one, was happy with what was behind him, whatever lay ahead. If this, his seventy-fourth year, was to be his last, he would have no great complaint to take before God or nature or the Universe. Though he still felt strong and reasonably able-bodied, and would, like everyone else, like to get in his requisite 100 years or more should he continue to feel that way, Daniel had no great desire to live forever. Unlike the Universe he lived in, man was mortal, given life for only a relatively meager period of time. The jaws of time always nipped closely at man's heels.

But that, thought Daniel, was precisely what made mankind great.

CHAPTER 18

A short tone blared from the bridge klaxons, and the lights reverted to the familiar, heavier crimson glow of wartime. Small pools of brighter pinkish light radiated from the computer terminals, bathing the entire bridge in a comfortable, sanguine hue.

A faint smile creased the Commandant's wide, toothed mouth. He slowly raked his claws across his chair's metal armrest, and his smile grew at the harsh screech it elicited from the badly-worn alloy.

"[Easy, Commandant,]" drawled the Supreme Commander, his words spoken in deep, guttural tones. "[Conquest close at hand.]"

Sa'ruth'lor eased his heavy, scaled hand off the armrest and tapped idly at his reinforced console. He cleared his mind of distractions, and focused on his inner anger, preparing for the battle ahead. He chastised himself for losing focus, and his smile was quickly replaced by a gruesome snarl.

The navigation officer at the front of the bridge broke the silence with a curt report. "[Hyperspace end in fifteen so'lits.]"

The Supreme Commander nodded, the armoured ridges on his forehead expanding slightly as they became turgid with blood. A faint scarlet tinge was visible at the edges of his scales. Without even realizing, the Commandant's own forehead ridges had begun to swell, and he could feel the blood pumping into his face. He supposed that ability was what made the Supreme Commander so effective a leader.

The nav officer growled. "[Realspace, now!]"

The viewscreen, switched off during the journey, flashed to life, revealing a trio of human ships ahead and to the left, and a slightly larger arrangement of human vessels clustered haphazardly farther off to the right. Several had Confederation military markings, while others seemed to be nothing more than a ragged amateur defense force. In total, there were only a couple dozen real ships. The reports of the massive damage the rest of the proud Vr'amil'een warriors had been inflicting on these soft humans were true!

Sa'ruth'lor quickly scanned his tactical console, instinctively focusing on the nearer ships. "[They go to refuel,]" he barked. "[They are vulnerable.]"

“[Attack!]” bellowed the Commander, slamming his massive hand into his firing console. A barrage of missiles erupted from the bulky Vr’amil’een Fighter Carrier, and sped toward the three enemy ships. The humans were completely unprepared for the attack, and barely managed to raise their shields before the missiles slammed into them. They veered wildly as they turned to face the threat.

“[All ships, attack!]” The Commander pounded on his firing console with glee. Most of the ships in the armada targeted the nearer trio of ships, eager to score quick kills against the overmatched and under-prepared foes. Predictably, the other vessels followed standard Vr’amil’een military strategy, focusing on the nearest targets first, seeking to overwhelm a weak point in the enemy’s forces and quickly reduce their number with a concentrated attack.

The three ships managed to return fire, and Sa’ruth’lor remembered to check his console for signs of damage. A spattering of hits splashed across the nose of the ship, and a concentrated attack by the Cruiser knocked out the feeble shields of the Carrier. A few more laser shots impacted against the hardy neutronium armour before the combined armada disabled the tenacious enemy Cruiser.

A few Vr’amil’een vessels had already broken off, eager to attack the mainstay of the ragtag Confederation defense force, and the Commander ordered the pilot to head for the middle of the fray.

“[Transmission,]” reported the nav officer.

The Supreme Commander grumbled, but it would be more than a minute before they were in range anyway. “[Show them,]” he barked.

Inset into a corner of the screen was an image of a human female—at least Sa’ruth’lor thought it was female, but he always had trouble discerning the genders of the repulsive humans.

“Vr’amil’een attackers,” came a voice, promptly translated into Vr’amil’een by the computers. “[Cease your attack! We are not your enemy. We are part of a force here to fight the corrupt Confederation and disable their military facilities on this planet. We have—]” The voice was cut off as the Supreme Commander bashed his console in annoyance. “[Attack that ship!]” he bellowed. “[These coward humans shall not live this day!]”

The viewscreen still showed the enemy fleet, and it was clearly in chaos. The enemy appeared to be trying to split their force to attack from two sides, with a small group of marked Confederation ships trying to form to the left and the larger, more haggard group of human vessels veering off to the right. Perhaps the regular soldiers at

least retained enough honor to refuse to fight alongside mere mercenaries.

"[Destroy all humans,]" ordered the Commander, and the Vr'amil'een armada neatly split in half, each vessel turning to attack the group nearest them. The human ships were outnumbered, a disadvantage made especially clear once they weakened themselves further by dividing their forces.

Sa'ruth'lor checked the ranges on his console. One enemy ship was much farther away than the others—a deserter? It was still back at the fuel depot the other three ships had been trying to reach, and it was just now disengaging from the fuel pod. Sa'ruth'lor scratched at his armrest again. The ship was not fleeing. It sped toward the armada.

"[Supreme Commander,]" the Commandant said, "[another enemy vessel comes from fuel pod. It comes to attack from behind.]"

The Commander grunted, checking his own displays. "[Tiny vessel no match for Vr'amil'een. Send fighters to destroy.]"

Sa'ruth'lor grunted his assent, keying for the launch of the Cruiser's two squadrons of snub fighters. One he sent toward the main battle fleet, and another entire squad he sent toward the incoming enemy fighter approaching from the rear—just in case.

• • •

She would have to give the order. She would have to try to disengage the ship from the fuel pod somehow, or the incoming SPACER ships would surely do it for her. She had no intention of giving them the satisfaction.

The ships were closing on the depot rapidly, the chronometer ticking down far too slowly as the volatile Duopasqualonium was piped into the ship.

"Byron," she said, "adjust the wing lasers to minimum power. We'll—"

The Captain was cut off from an alert from her control board, as if chastising her for the thought.

"Captain!" shouted Byron. "More incoming ships, on-screen."

The Captain's breath caught in her throat. Reinforcements?

But her heart quickly dropped. Even at this distance, she could see that the angular shapes approaching on the viewscreen were quite clearly Vr'amil'een warships. And she doubted they had come to help.

Without warning, the Vr'amil'een attack party launched a fusillade

of missiles at the trio of SPACER ships approaching the *Inferno*. They screamed through the void of space, striking the ships and gushing fire from one of the Corvettes' flanks.

"I'll be damned," breathed Victor. "The lizards are attacking those bastards."

Ariyana stared at the viewscreen in wonder. "They must think they're us! Confederation, I mean."

It made sense. The Vr'amil'een would have no idea that the SPACER ships were here to attack the planet, a valuable military target to both sides. In fact, being human ships, and commingled with the other Confederation ships as they were, there was no reasonable way for them to surmise otherwise.

Stunned by the sudden attack, the trio of SPACER ships changed course to defend themselves against the new threat. Pandemonium ensued as the SPACER and Confederation ships farther away both turned to react to the Vr'amil'een. The nearer ships, however, stood little chance. The Vr'amil'een armada consisted of over twenty ships, and it did not take them long to disable the three surprised SPACER vessels.

For a split second Anastasia watched helplessly, and then the Vr'amil'een forces slowly, ponderously turned toward the larger group of SPACER and Confederation ships. The Confederation vessels were moving again, and the SPACERs were not attacking them, but both groups seemed to be splitting off from each other.

"Captain," Cody joyously reported. "Fueling is complete. External fuel hatch closed."

"Byron," ordered the Captain, "separate us from that damned station."

"With pleasure, Captain." A quick burst from the wing lasers melted the docking clamp, and with a sudden surge, the *Inferno* was free.

"All speed to the Vr'amil'een fleet," she ordered, and Cody complied. The restraint system snaked into place and Anastasia was forced into the memory-gel backing of her captain's chair as the ship surged to unthinkable speed. A swarm of snub fighters had poured forth from the lead carrier and were vectoring toward the speeding *Inferno*.

"Don't even slow us down, Cody," said Anastasia. "Byron, spray them with the flechette turrets as we go by. Hit as many as you can."

"One squad of fighters?" asked Victor, incredulous. "They thought

that would stop us?"

Anastasia shrugged. "Obviously the Vr'amil'een are more thick-headed than I thought. They haven't learned their lesson at all." She looked to the immense Vr'amil'een flagship. "We're about to show them that size doesn't matter."

Victor chuckled.

The *Inferno* shot through the web of fighters, taking a couple of hits that were easily absorbed by the shields. Byron aimed a spattering of return fire at the snubs, but his aim was mostly ineffective at such high speed.

"Cody, bear down on the group attacking the Confederation warships," ordered the Captain, watching as the SPACER and Vr'amil'een fleets traded fire. "Let's make them fight on two fronts. Byron, target the Fighter Carrier in the center. Let's see if we can't throw them into disarray."

It was only a few moments before the *Inferno* reached the battle, and Cody slowed to make a pass at the massive Vr'amil'een Carrier. The ship was concentrating on the larger Confederation ships, and barely managed to return fire as Byron raked the engines with a concentrated attack of lasers and plasma burst cannon. A volley of missiles followed the lasers to their targets, and the starboard engine erupted, spewing fire back toward the *Inferno*. The ship listed to the right, and flames engulfed the port engine as well.

"Nice shooting, Byron," said Anastasia. "I think those explosions took out the reactor."

The response from the Vr'amil'een was immediate. The remaining ships swung around to face the *Inferno*, exposing themselves to the Confederation fleet, which advanced and hammered at the enemy craft mercilessly.

The viewscreen was quickly awash with return fire, and Cody jerked the ship away from the barrage. Nonetheless, the concentrated attack hammered the smaller *Inferno*, nearly overwhelming the shields and sending the ship into a frenetic spin.

"Stabilizers!" shouted the Captain, held painfully in place by the restraining harness as the ship somersaulted through space. A spattering of continuing hits reminded her of the vast counterattack directed against the flailing *Inferno*.

With a snap, the stabilizers came back on line, righting the ship and bringing the viewscreen back into focus. A sharp pain flared in Anastasia's right temple, and her knuckles were white where she

furiously gripped the armrests. "Byron, return fire at the nearest ship, and Cody, get us moving!" The ship surged to speed again, and the Captain repressed a wave of nausea.

Out of the corner of her eye, Anastasia noticed that Byron's movements had become slow and imprecise. The *Inferno* fired, but the shots clustered beneath the approaching Vr'amil'een Corvette, with only a couple of shots hitting its armoured belly.

"Byron?"

"Sorry, Captain," he replied, all the blood drained from his face. He steadied himself with both hands on his console. "I just—"

"I'm on it," interjected Victor, his hands flying over his controls. A second burst from the lasers found its target, ripping a heavy gash in the Corvette's nose. A well-timed assault from a Confederation Corvette to the rear disabled the vessel.

A second wave of confusion visibly washed over the Vr'amil'een attack party, as several ships turned back to the charging Confederation ships, while a few remained focused on the *Inferno*. A couple even started to turn and stopped, leaving a broad area for both sides to target.

The removal of the central Fighter Carrier proved to be decisive, and the remaining smaller ships took an astonishing amount of damage in a short period of time, hammered by the Confederation defenders on one side and expertly harassed by the *Inferno* on the other. Cody, displaying the supreme aerobatic skill he had been selected for, managed to avoid the majority of the Vr'amil'een attacks, and Victor's aim proved true, repeatedly striking at wounded enemy vessels to briskly disable them. Within a few minutes, the Vr'amil'een were suddenly outnumbered, and several ships broke off to rejoin the remainder of their fighting force, still embroiled in battle with the SPACER ships.

"Stay after them," ordered the Captain, and the nimble *Inferno* paced them easily, firing at their rears as the vessels moved away. Anastasia glanced to her tactical console, trying to make sense of the battle between the SPACERs and the rest of the Vr'amil'een armada. The undisciplined SPACER vessels seemed to be taking the worst of it, as the Vr'amil'een battle group acted with more precision, enjoying numerical as well as strategic advantage.

The unexpected arrival of a half-dozen enemy ships behind the Vr'amil'een lines, however, quickly disrupted their temporary supremacy. Victor, working well in concurrence with Cody's piloting,

vaporized a smaller Vr'amil'een vessel with a fierce attack from behind. The remaining Confederation ships, following close behind the *Inferno*, pounded the armada with surprising intensity.

"Take us toward the largest ship you can find," ordered the Captain, and Cody willingly obliged, lining up the remaining Carrier for Victor to release a full salvo. Several explosions blossomed from the rear of the ship, and a pair of alert Corvettes followed up the attack with one of their own, inflicting heavy damage on the Vr'amil'een ship.

Cody swung the ship around for another pass, keeping the remaining armada between the *Inferno* and the SPACER ships. Uncharacteristically, a pair of Vr'amil'een warships broke from the battle, heading for deep space. A few moments later, a disheartened Cruiser took the same route, leaving holes in the armada's defense. The SPACER fleet seemed confused by the activity, but the Confederation gunboats took advantage of the situation, hammering the exposed flank of the Vr'amil'een forces.

This time it was the *Inferno* that followed up the gunboats' attack, and Victor disabled a pair of ships in rapid succession. Anastasia checked her tactical console to find the remaining Vr'amil'een ships speeding away.

"All stop," she ordered, and Cody complied after just a moment's hesitation. His breathing was heavy and shallow, and Anastasia could see how tightly he gripped the control stick and how eagerly he wanted to chase the fleeing Vr'amil'een.

"We may have other problems, Cody," the Captain warned, indicating the SPACER fleet reassembling on the viewscreen. The Confederation ships arrayed themselves behind the *Inferno*, apparently waiting for either side to make a move.

"Alright, Ariyana, open a channel to the SPACER fleet." The Captain breathed deeply, willing her heart to slow.

Without responding to Ariyana's hail, the SPACER ships turned away from the planet and headed for open space. As soon as they had reached a safe distance, one by one the ships elongated and launched themselves into hyperspace.

Anastasia released a long breath, slumping back in her chair as the restraint system disengaged and her tactical console cleared of enemies. She looked to Victor, shaking her head as he returned her gaze. A moment passed, and then several, and it quickly became apparent that no one had the energy to speak.



Dex pored over the map for the hundredth time. He had memorized every room, every corner, every way in or out of the underground complex. Zip sat across from him, fingering a datapad as he visualized their plan of attack. The dark probe droid hovered unobtrusively in the corner.

"We're sure this is the guy?" Zip asked solemnly. "An operation like this ..." His voice trailed off. "We had better be sure."

Dex snickered. "We're sure. I've confirmed it against ConFedIntel files. Everything traces back to Malloy."

Zip nodded. "How a guy like this could ascend to basically control the SPACERS, I don't know." He shook his head. "The guy's a monster."

"He's been with the organization for years. And, aside from his considerable expertise," Dex paused before continuing, "with explosives, he is very politically savvy. I'm not surprised at all that he was able to assume power once the more moderate leaders in the organization were wiped out at New Berkeley."

Zip looked to the droid in the corner. "Are you sure he's still there?"

Dex nodded. "The complex has been under constant surveillance since the droid found him," he confirmed. "No one has left since then."

"Then we go," Zip agreed. "I'll ready the men." Zip turned to go, but stopped and faced the Commander. "Sir?"

Dex looked up from the map. "Yes?"

"What do we do, sir? When we find Malloy?"

The Commander did not hesitate before replying. "It was only once Malloy took over that the SPACER attacks have escalated to include mass civilian casualties. The SPACERS have progressed from blockades to attacks, and from surgical strikes on military targets to more wholesale terrorism against civilians. He and his lieutenants must be removed from power, and then hopefully control of the SPACERS will shift to more moderate factions."

"Yes, sir," Zip replied, his eyes fixed squarely on Dex. "But what do we do when we find Malloy?"

Dex smiled involuntarily at the perceptiveness of the question. "Officially, the rules of engagement require us to disrupt the leadership hierarchy and capture alive any personnel it is reasonably pru-

dent to. All possible care must be taken to prevent the harm of diplomatic officials during such an operation."

Zip did not flinch. "I know the rules of engagement, sir."

"Those are your official orders, Lieutenant."

"And yours."

Dex nodded. "Yes. And mine."

Zip paused for a moment before his reply. "Understood, sir. The men will be ready on your command."

"Very good." Dex turned back to the map projected on the table. "We leave within the hour."

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The *Apocalypse* emerged from hyperspace and Daniel instinctively checked his displays, finding a minimum of activity. A few SPACER ships quietly orbited the planet, and no Confederation vessels could be found. Though still technically under Confederation control and protection, the protests, riots, and increased SPACER activity on the planet must have persuaded ConFedCom to all but desert it, sending what few ships they had here to shore up undermanned defenses elsewhere. Though Daniel could not bring himself to agree with that decision—no matter how compelling the Confederation's needs were in other systems—at least they had decided to send the *Apocalypse* to intercept the incoming Lucani Ibron ship.

One ship, and one man, to face those faceless butchers.

Atgard looked back to his tactical console. A mere trickle of passenger ships departed the planet, though ConFedCom had surely contacted them and warned of the impending threat. But the inhabitants of the sparsely-populated world—many of whom now sided with the SPACERs—seemed convinced they would be spared because of their ideological differences with the Confederation they thought the Lucani Ibron had come to destroy. They believed their pacifism would shield them from those who pronounced judgement by murdering innocents by the millions.

Daniel sighed and called up data on the perplexing planet. The population was only about 70 million, and the planet was led by a small bureaucrat who had, according to reports, been one of the few to heed ConFedCom's warnings. He had, in fact, already fled the planet, as had most of his delegation. The Admiral scrolled down the listings, and found that one Confederation Commando squad had been assigned to the planet.

His breath caught in his throat. Listed as Commander of the squad was Dex Rutcliffe.

Daniel jabbed at his nanocomputer, dialing Dex directly over the communications net. Getting through on Dex's personal frequency would take far less time than using standard communication channels.

Several seconds passed, and it became apparent that Dex was not answering the call. Daniel had designated the transmission as urgent, and even if Dex was asleep, his nanocomputer would wake him. He ran a trace subroutine that pinpointed Dex's location at the outskirts of the planet's capital city, far from the city's spaceport. It did not appear that he was preparing to evacuate the planet. In fact, the tracer showed no movement at all.

A stirring on the viewscreen caught Daniel's eye, and he fired off a message to Dex imploring him to leave the planet quickly, then refocused his attention on his present surroundings. Three SPACER vessels—two Corvettes and an overhauled cargo frigate—had broken orbit and headed for the *Apocalypse*.

On cue, a transmission came from the ships, and Daniel keyed it on-screen.

"Confederation vessel," began a uniformed man, young enough to be Daniel's grandson, "you are not welcome here. Depart this system immediately."

Daniel's face crinkled with confusion. "Are you aware that a Lucani Ibron ship is headed this way?" he asked. "Why have you not evacuated the planet?"

The man scoffed. "The Confederation *claims* a ship is heading toward this planet. But what proof do you have? Why would the aliens come here? We are sympathetic with their cause. We, too, think the Confederation is a cancer." He shrugged his shoulders dismissively. "You are not wanted here."

The Admiral ground his teeth together, unwilling to argue with the man. "Whatever you think, that alien ship is coming," he replied. "And when it gets here, it will try to destroy your planet, and kill everyone on it. So do not tell me that I am unwelcome here. This is still a Confederation planet, and, more importantly, there are 70 million people in danger down there. I will protect them."

"That will not be necessary," he began, only to be interrupted.

"If you're right, then I'll just be sitting here wasting my time," spat the Admiral, losing his patience. "But sit here I will. Your ships will

not protect that planet, and neither will your naiveté." The Admiral waved his hand. "Now get the hell out of my way."

"That's an awfully small ship you have there," challenged the man, smirking.

Daniel leaned forward, just slightly. "Try me."

Before the insouciant captain could respond, a shrill alarm trilled from Daniel's console. But he had already seen the blip on his tactical display, and the argument had become moot. Ignoring both the *Apocalypse* and the SPACER warships, the alien craft advanced toward the planet.

The Admiral looked back to his nanocomputer, which he had programmed to redial Dex until there was an answer. The trace subroutine again stoically confirmed that Dex remained on the planet, oblivious to the silent assassins above.

CHAPTER 19

Dex motioned for a pair of his men to guard the hallway, and retracted the lockpick from the door. He slid it silently open, and crept inside, Zip close behind him.

The complex was quiet, as it should be in the dead of night. The sentries guarding the entrance had been taken out easily enough, and there were surprisingly few guards inside the stronghold's walls. The Commander stalked silently down the hallway and peered around a corner. Around the bend in the hall, a lone guard lazily held his post just outside a large room that housed several sleeping men. Dex adjusted his night-vision contacts, blinking twice to bring the scene into clearer focus. At the far end of the hallway, beyond the guard, was another door.

A chill crept through the Commander's body as he looked to the far door. He switched his contacts to thermographic sensing, and could make out the faint outline of a single person in the room, reclining as if asleep. He reverted his contacts to night vision as he turned to Zip, signaling for him to be silent.

Dex crept around the corner, concealing himself in shadow, and moved slowly down the hall. He slid the vibroblade from its sheath, crouching as near the guard as he dared to go. A faint pool of light streamed from behind the sentry, and any noise would surely wake the men in the barracks.

The Commander remained perfectly still, his muscles tensed, and his blade at the ready. The guard sighed, scratching at his rifle absently, and turned to look back into the barracks behind him.

In that instant, Dex uncoiled from his crouch, thrusting the blade into the sentry's larynx before he had even turned back around. Dex cupped his hand over the dying man's mouth, and jerked him quickly into the air, carrying the lifeless form back to Zip.

Zip's eyes opened wide when the Commander deposited the body at his feet, but said nothing. Dex signaled for him to stay and began to turn, but Zip's hand shot out and grabbed his arm.

"I'm going with you," he whispered.

Dex shook his head. "I go alone."

Zip's hand stayed on the Commander's arm for several moments. Wordlessly, he released his grip, and Dex crept back down the hallway, past the barracks and to the single door beyond.

The thermographic lenses still showed the room's occupant to be prone, so Dex tried the door's handle, marginally surprised that it was not locked. He opened it the first centimeter in total silence, and then threw the door forth and leveled his phaser at the bed, squeezing the trigger and sending two bolts through the sheets.

A hand struck out and knocked the weapon from Dex's grip, and was followed instantly by a blow to the head. The contacts shifted painfully in his eyes, and he opened them to find that he could no longer see.

Instinctively, Dex rolled into the room, just as another blow from his unseen assailant hit the doorframe behind him. The noise had surely roused some of the men from the barracks, but there was little Dex could do about that now.

The Commander turned to his other senses, and heard a rustle of clothing in time to avoid a blow that glanced across his shoulder. Dex grabbed the man's arm and twisted it, bringing his own arm across his assailant's neck, and squeezed hard.

Malloy groaned and dug his elbow into the Commander's ribs, painful even through Dex's armoured stealthsuit. From outside, Dex heard the reports of Zip's rifle, firing not in stealth, but in full auto mode.

Dex's eyes had begun to adapt to the darkness, and he could see Malloy's face as he struggled for air. One of his arms was still pinned behind his back, and with the other, he was flailing in the direction of Dex's face, trying to rake out his eyes. The noise from outside abruptly ceased, and the Commander could hear Zip rushing to his aid.

Without hesitation, Dex cupped his hand under the terrorist's chin, and, with a sudden tensing of his muscles, snapped Malloy's neck and dropped him to the floor.

Zip rushed in as the Commander retrieved his rifle, sparing a quick glance at the motionless body on the floor. "We've got to get out of here, sir," he reported, turning back to the doorway. "There may be more coming."

Dex nodded and raced out of the room and around the bend in the hall, back to where his men were waiting. They met no further resistance as they escaped from the building, sprinting from the fortress to

where the rest of the squad was positioned outside. A few people chased them from the entrance, but were quickly cut down by the remainder of Dex's men.

Fingering his nanocomputer, Dex called out to his squad. "Fall back. Return to base." His feet thundered on the packed dirt as he ran back to the center of town.

Once reactivated from stealth mode, his nanocomputer vibrated to alert him that he had a call. He glanced at it as he ran, and would not have answered it were the call from anyone other than Daniel Atgard.

"Admiral," he panted, following Zip as best he could. "Something urgent?"

Daniel's face clearly betrayed his concern, though the small projection bobbed as Dex ran. "Get the hell off the planet, Dex. Get the hell out of there right now."

Dex turned to Zip. "Call Retro and get him to pick us up in the *Cerberus* right away," he ordered, turning back to the Admiral's image. "Admiral, where are you?"

The pain on Daniel's face was evident even through the tiny representation. "I'm in orbit around Charnus Prime," he replied gravely. "Between you ... and a Lucani Ibron ship."



It was hard to believe the speed at which the *Inferno* was traveling, but Captain Mason's readouts confirmed that they were only a few minutes from Cordova. Even the starlines on the viewscreen seemed to be shooting by faster than Anastasia remembered, though it was probably merely her imagination.

The encounter with the Vr'amil'een had cost them precious time, and she had pushed the ship to its limits in an attempt to compensate. The sonorous pulse of the hyperdrive engines resonated throughout the ship, which screamed through the void at unthinkable speed. Anastasia rechecked the ship's trajectory, a path she had nervously plotted in order to avoid the lengthy sublight journey to the system's fourth planet. The *Inferno* would—theoretically—emerge from hyperspace a mere fifty thousand kilometers from the planet, more than ten times closer than a standard hyperspace core would allow. Vance had assured her that the system had been tested and would perform as advertised, but Anastasia had been on starships for over three decades, and her old instincts proved hard to ignore.

With just under three minutes remaining to realspace emergence,

Cody turned to the Captain. "What are we going to do?" he asked from his pilot's chair. "I mean, how will we stop the ship without any help?"

Anastasia pursed her lips. "I don't know, Cody. We'll figure something out. We won't let that ship destroy another world."

Cody nodded, but said nothing. The Captain wished she could really feel the optimism she tried so desperately to portray, but she had always been poor at hiding her own feelings.

Ariyana seemed to sense the Captain's thoughts. "We've stopped them before," she replied with confidence. "We know their weakness."

"That's right," agreed Victor. "We'll overwhelm their defenses just like we did the last one."

Only Byron was conspicuously silent. But Anastasia knew what he was thinking: they had destroyed the last ship with the help of the *Apocalypse*, a ship now dozens of parsecs away.

"Captain," Byron finally announced, "realspace emergence in thirty seconds."

Anastasia nodded, noting that only a fraction of a second differentiated their course from a standard approach, and that the extra instant translated into hundreds of thousands of kilometers. If the hyperspace core did not work as promised, the star system's gravitational field would rip the ship apart as it approached. The Captain tried not to dwell on it.

At the precise time, the ship dropped into realspace, and Anastasia jerked back in her chair when the yellowed planet of Cordova suddenly appeared before her, frighteningly large on the viewscreen. Instantly, an alarm rang out, and the Captain's tactical display showed frenzied activity on the far side of the planet.

"Get us over there," she ordered, and Cody complied, rocketing the ship toward the planet, skimming the atmosphere as he raced for the planet's far side. A pink glow surrounded the ship, which streaked high through the ionosphere and quickly shot back into the familiar darkness of space. Visible now on the viewscreen was a tiny silver ship approaching the planet, and a phalanx of Confederation warships maneuvering to intercept.

"Send a message to those ships," ordered the Captain, but before Ariyana could comply, the Lucani Ibron ship fired a series of pulsing white balls at the incoming human vessels. The balls each pursued a different target, and each found its mark, igniting a series of explo-

sions from within each ship as it was struck. In moments, not a single human ship stirred.

Victor pounded his fist on his console. "So much for getting any help." He looked to the Captain. "I thought those bastards usually ignored us."

"Maybe they realize we can hurt them now," the Captain replied.

Cody turned back to face them. "Maybe we just made them angry."

Anastasia leveled her gaze back on the viewscreen. "Byron, prepare to fire weapons on my mark. Modulate the ion cannon to random frequencies, and cycle the plasma burst cannon harmonics."

Byron nodded, and Anastasia felt a voice in her head. She jerked back, realizing that the other crew members were hearing the same thing.

"Human transgressors," began the message, "do not resist us. Your punishment must be imparted."

"What is that?" wondered Cody aloud.

The voice went on. "Do not resist us."

"The hell we won't," shouted Victor, looking about helplessly. "We'll blow you out of the sky, just like your friends."

The voice suddenly seemed even more cold, lifeless. "I do not think your friend would appreciate that."

"Friend?" asked Victor. "What are they talking about?"

But Anastasia could not respond, for she found no air in her lungs. Still the voice went on.

"We have underestimated your species for the last time."

The viewscreen, unbidden, seemed to explode in a deluge of light. The void of space was replaced by an image almost unbearably bright.

When the Captain's eyes had adjusted, she could plainly see a perfectly white table in the center of a perfectly white, featureless room. Ensnared on the table, held motionless but clearly alive, was Zach Wallace.



Daniel surged the *Apocalypse* away from Charnus Prime, streaking toward the Lucani Ibron vessel. He aimed to intercept it as far from the planet as possible. A glance to his tactical display confirmed that the SPACER ships, so fearless only a few moments ago, were headed in the opposite direction, abandoning the planet and its inhabitants for the safety of deep space.

The Admiral inhaled deeply, knowing there would be no negotia-

tion with the faceless Lucani Ibron assassins. His hatred for the Lucani Ibron was palpable. He abhorred the nefarious aliens as much for their depraved sense of justice as for the results of their formula of punishment. Ten years did little to dull the agony wreaked by their systematic annihilation of humanity, a process that had claimed the life of Daniel's own son.

As soon as the *Apocalypse* was in range, Daniel opened fire on his enemy. A barrage of lasers reached out to the swirling silver ship, and was swallowed by its liquid metal hide. The gyrations of the ship abruptly changed, and the Admiral instinctively rolled the *Apocalypse*, evading a prismatic beam that had issued forth from the vessel. His own shots had no impact on the enemy ship, and he ran his fingers along his console, powering up his ship's mighty Omega Cannon without a second thought. The bridge lights dimmed, and the *Apocalypse* slowed as the ship's power was funneled into the incredible superweapon. The sound quickly intensified to a sustained roar, and Daniel leveled his flight, aiming the ship at the Lucani Ibron. The *Apocalypse's* nose split into four segments, separating to reveal the barrel of a massive cannon.

The Lucani Ibron ship fired again, and Daniel was not quick enough to evade a small ball of light, which penetrated the shields and coursed throughout the ship. A surge of electricity wracked the Admiral's body, throwing him against the restraints. The computer wailed a sickly, ululating alarm, and sparks shot from Daniel's tactical display, singeing his arm. He quickly focused himself, sliding his fingers across his console to the firing stud. The trace of a smile played at the Admiral's lips. He pressed the button hard.

The thunderous sound continued to build. The Omega Cannon did not discharge.

The Admiral called up the weapon's status, and his display dutifully informed him that the firing coil had been overloaded by the aliens' assault. Without the coil, there was no way to release the waves of energy accumulating within the Omega Cannon's reactors.

Daniel instinctively reached to shut the weapon down, but his hand froze over his control console. Without the Omega Cannon, he had no chance to stop the Lucani Ibron ship from destroying the planet below. A quick glance assured him that the counterattack had rendered all other weapons inoperative. The Admiral retracted his arm, settling it on his chair's armrest. He let a long, slow breath escape his lungs.

Unchecked, the Omega Cannon continued to collect power from the ship's energy banks, far past the point at which the firing coil would have discharged the weapon. The sound became nearly unbearable, a piercing reverberation that caused the ship to tremble with the awesome power that the weapon continued to harvest. A small rivulet of blood trailed from Daniel's left ear.

It was too late to stop the reaction now, even had Daniel decided to. The Omega Cannon would continue to collect power until the charge simply became too great to be contained. What would happen when the weapon finally overloaded, Daniel could hardly speculate. All he knew for certain, is that it would be bad.

CHAPTER 20

Zach had finally tired of struggling against his invisible restraints, as his best efforts had not yielded the slightest hint that he could escape from their clutches. But he knew something was afoot. It felt to Zach as if the ship had emerged into realspace, which meant that they must be approaching another planet. And the rumbling sound that echoed throughout the ship had seemingly reached a fever pitch. Zach knew the aliens' superweapon was nearly fully charged.

Suddenly, a visible distortion played across the walls in Zach's field of vision. The ship was beset by a series of small vibrations, and Zach tried in vain to find some clue of what was going on. "Maybe we're attacking," Zach wondered aloud, just to hear the sound of his own voice again. He scanned what part of his surroundings he was able, and began his struggles to break free anew.

The ship shuddered, and a high-pitched buzzing sound assailed Zach's ears. The walls flickered, and Zach could make out a group of luminous blurs on the far side. He felt a tingle in his wrists and ankles, and he jerked up with all his might, ripping his hands free from the table, which shimmered momentarily before it re-solidified.

Zach leapt from the table, crashing into the ground as his legs failed to support him. He shook himself to get his blood flowing again, and got back to his feet, walking to the far wall of the room. He reached out, but jerked his hand back as it encountered some sort of electrical field where the wall should be. He recoiled from the shock, and looked for any exit from the room. But all around were plain white walls, ceiling, and floor. Zach stepped back three steps, rolled his head from his left shoulder to his right, and dove at the wall before him.

Energy coursed through the Commander's body, and he sailed through the wall, crashing to the ground on the far side. He struggled to his feet, his every nerve tingling. Zach balled his hands into fists as he looked around him. He was surrounded by a half-dozen Lucani Ibron.

A voice tunneled itself into his mind. "Congratulations on your escape," it remarked stoically. "You can watch us destroy another one

of your worlds.”

“No!” he screamed, and lunged at the nearest Lucani Ibron. The shock he received when he touched the creature was much more severe, and he crumpled to the ground, dazed.

“Your fellow humans dare not destroy us, knowing you are on board,” the voice continued. “You see they only attack us with ineffective energy weapons. We will complete our primary objective. We will destroy the planet.” The voice paused. “And then we will destroy that ship.”

Zach staggered back to his feet, noting that the ever-present rumbling had finally ceased.

Almost without thinking, Zach pounded at the displays around the perimeter of the room, his arms passing through the insubstantial manifestations with no effect. He looked to the main display, where a yellow, desert planet loomed defenselessly. Off to the side, a small ship continued to pour ion cannon fire into the vessel. Each impact resulted in nothing more than an almost imperceptible flicker of the displays and the gentle vibration of the ship.

Zach looked around the bridge for something to throw, something to strike the Lucani Ibron with. But there was nothing but energy and light, and nothing that Zach Wallace could do.



The *Cerberus* strained to break the hold of the planet’s gravity, rising through the last traces of atmosphere and into space. Dex and Zip peered at their tactical consoles, while Retro concentrated on piloting the transport away from the planet.

“There!” shouted Zip, and Retro veered toward a pair of ships far from the planet. Dex’s tactical display confirmed that the human vessel was the *Apocalypse*. He did not need help identifying the other ship.

“Get us out there,” Dex ordered, rising from his seat. He glanced between the viewscreen and his displays as the lethargic *Cerberus* closed the distance to the dueling ships.

The *Apocalypse* was firing on the Lucani Ibron ship, but had just been struck by an intense ball of white light, and now coasted lifelessly toward its enemy. Dex pounded his control console, cursing the sluggish transport. The battle would be over far before he could intervene.

Dex increased the magnification on the viewscreen and could see

that the nose of the *Apocalypse* had split open to reveal a great cannon, and sparks of electricity arced along its length. As he watched, current surged across the entire hull of the ship, enveloping the *Apocalypse* in a sheath of dazzling energy. Still the resplendent vessel tracked toward the Lucani Ibron.

"Is that supposed to happen?" asked Zip.

Dex shook his head, straining his eyes at the faraway ship. In an instant, his heart froze.

The electricity surrounding the *Apocalypse* became intensely bright, and a magnificent explosion engulfed the ship, nearly filling the viewscreen even at this distance. A shock wave of blindingly pure energy expanded outward, swallowing the Lucani Ibron ship and forcing Dex to cover his eyes.

"My God," he cried. "It can't be."

The blast slowly subsided, leaving nothing in its wake. The Lucani Ibron ship was gone, but so too was the *Apocalypse*.



Anastasia sat in stunned silence. Time slowed as the image finally disappeared from the viewscreen, but remained permanently etched in her retinas. Zach was on board the ship she had come to destroy, the ship that had itself come to destroy a planet and all its inhabitants. She could not simply let the alien executioners do what they came to do.

But she could just as surely not bring herself to kill her friend Zach Wallace.

It was Victor who snapped her from her trance. "Captain," he said. "What do we do?"

The Captain was slow to respond, as too many thoughts and emotions fought for her attention. She knew her mission, what she had to do. She had to stop the Lucani Ibron at all costs.

At all costs?

Would killing Zach be just too much for her to bear?

Anastasia shook her head. She realized that the decision may very well not be hers to make, and that thought enraged her. She still had no idea how she would destroy the Lucani Ibron ship.

The Captain looked to Victor. "We have to stop that ship."

The *Inferno* continued to pump ion cannon fire into the enemy vessel. Anastasia had thought the weapons might somehow disrupt either the Lucani Ibron themselves or their ship, but they seemed to

have no effect. It would take far more to breach the exotic armour, perhaps the Wind of Death combined with some other powerful form of attack.

The Captain realized she was going in circles. There could be no other attack once the Wind of Death fired.

"What can we hit that ship with?" asked Victor. "We need help. We needed those other ships to attack while we fired the Wind of Death."

"Those ships are gone," the Captain reminded him, disappointed in his defeatist tone. "We'll have to do it ourselves."

The Lucani Ibron ship, still ignoring them, had approached to within two hundred thousand kilometers of the planet. It stopped there, hovering above the tan sphere of Cordova. The vessel's skin changed its rhythm, and a small white point appeared in its center.

Without thinking, the Captain cried out, "Charge the Wind of Death! Maybe we can at least disrupt it from firing."

Ariyana looked back to the Captain. "Even if it works, wouldn't it kill Zach?"

Anastasia ground her teeth together. "I don't know. Maybe the ship's hull will protect him." She stared at the ship that held her friend. Her lips silently mouthed the words, "I'm sorry. I have no other choice."

A bright beam of light shot from the nose of the Lucani Ibron ship, embedding itself in the planet below.

"This is it," Anastasia sighed. "Prepare to fire."

"Maybe you were right," Cody laughed humorlessly. "If this doesn't work, maybe our only option will be to get out and throw rocks at the damned thing."

"Hold it," ordered the Captain, her mind racing furiously. "That's it! Byron, load the side missile tubes—every type of warhead we have. Conventional, nuclear, Hellfire—the works. Target the Lucani Ibron ship and fire."

"But, Captain," he stammered, clearly flustered. "Don't you mean the forward missile tubes?"

"No! The side tubes! Launch them now!"

Byron complied, and with a series of hissing sounds, a dozen warheads fired from the *Inferno*, half to each side, and began slowly arcing back toward the Lucani Ibron.

"You're a goddamned genius!" shouted Victor, realizing her plan. "Firing Wind of Death ... now."

The Captain nodded, whispering a silent prayer as the weapon

discharged.

A hazy, rippling distortion cascaded from the *Inferno* in all directions. The wave front flowed toward the enemy ship, the light beam still emanating from its face. From each side of the viewscreen, a half-dozen missiles slammed into the alien vessel, each erupting with a distinct flash. The alien hull solidified, repulsing the attack, but, as the barrage continued, the effect wave reached the bizarre craft and enveloped the ship. The hull deformed as the undulating spectacle surrounded it, becoming translucent, then shimmering away into nothingness. A group of light-beings remained, surrounding the body of a single human.

"Cody!" shrieked the Captain. "Get us over there!"

Cody already had the ship moving. "Engines are off-line," he reminded her. "I'm using maneuvering thrusters."

The Captain punched the intercom button. "Vance, get to the airlock right away. We're picking someone up."

Ariyana looked back to the Captain, her hand covering her mouth. "How long can he survive like that?"

Victor answered for her. "About thirty seconds, if he's strong." He looked to the Captain.

Her voice was hoarse. "He's strong," she gasped, her hand balled into a fist and covering her trembling lips.

Cody switched the viewscreen to show the view from the airlock on the belly of the ship. He expertly raised the nose of the *Inferno*, gliding the ship over the body, and guiding it into the opening airlock.

"Vance," the Captain shouted, "pressurize that airlock now!"

"Already on it," he replied, and if he said anything further, the Captain did not hear it. She was already dashing down the corridor to the airlock. When the inner door opened, she was there, and rushed in to the shivering form of Zach Wallace on the floor. She cradled his head in her arms, and felt his breath on her arm, ragged, shallow, and cold. But alive, very much alive.



The Commander buried his head in his hands, expelling a tortured breath with an audible, anguished wail. This time, Dex did not even try to fight the tears. He let them come, warm and burning on his face. His mind reflexively thought back to the years he had known Daniel Atgard—the experiences, the adventures, the friendship with a man

Dex respected more than any he had ever known. At that moment, he knew nothing but pain.

"Commander," injected Zip. "Commander, I'm sorry. But we have an incoming transmission."

Dex bit his lip, completely unconcerned with whoever was trying to contact him. Almost automatically, he replied, "On screen."

The Commander did not look up until he heard the speaker's voice.

"Hey, Dex," it called. "I could use a little help over here."

Dex stared directly into the face of Daniel Atgard.

"B-But, sir," Dex stammered. "You're dead."

"Thanks, Dex," Daniel replied. "You look like hell yourself."

"But, I don't understand." Even as he said it, the Commander looked to his tactical console. Drifting in space was a tiny fighter, identified by the computer as a ZF-232, the type of ship carried in the *Apocalypse's* miniscule hangar bay. The Commander smiled. "You son of a bitch."

"I had to get off the *Apocalypse*," Daniel explained. "So I took the fighter. I made sure to fire a few missiles at the Lucani Ibron just as my old ship exploded."

Dex was speechless.

"So," continued the Admiral, "are you going to pick me up, or what?"

CHAPTER 21

Daniel brushed himself off as he extracted himself from the diminutive fighter, squeezed into the *Cerberus*' hangar bay with the larger dropshuttle. He dropped to the metal deck and walked to where Dex was waiting for him.

"It's good to see you, sir," Dex saluted, his features firm. Daniel smiled, and the Commander stepped over to him, gripping him in a warm embrace. "I thought you were gone," he whispered into the Admiral's ear.

Daniel clapped his friend on the back. "I'm not ready to go quite yet."

Zip interrupted their reunion. "Sir, you told me to inform you when Captain Mason arrived."

"Thank you," replied the Commander. "Admiral, would you accompany me to the bridge?"

Daniel nodded and walked down the short hallway, and found Anastasia's face beaming at him from the viewscreen once he stepped onto the bridge.

"Good to see you, Daniel," she said. "I'm glad everyone's all right." She looked to Zach, who was sitting in a chair to her left.

"Good to see you as well," the Admiral replied. "And we're glad to have you back with us, Zach."

"Thanks, sir," he replied, shuddering. "I don't want to see the inside or outside of another Lucani Ibron ship ever again."

As if on cue, both Zip from the *Cerberus* and Byron from the *Inferno* rang an alarm.

"Incoming ships!"

The bridge of the *Inferno* was removed from the viewscreen, replaced by a quartet of ships. Three were clearly Lucani Ibron. The fourth, ringed by the other three, had a skin composed of the same convolving silvery metal. But it was much larger, and asymmetrical in shape, with a sharp, pointed nose jutting from an ovoid fuselage. It was easily larger than the other three ships combined.

Daniel rubbed his eyes, sure the apparitions were merely a mirage. They had destroyed all three ships. But there they were, dwarfed by

the ominous flagship.

And if they were a mirage, merely a result of Daniel's recent overstimulating experiences, then why had the jaws of every person in the room suddenly become unhinged?

A voice carried into the Admiral's mind. It said, simply, "Do not attack."

Daniel raised an eyebrow. Under the circumstances, it seemed to be excellent advice.

Anastasia's face reappeared on the viewscreen. "What do we do, Admiral? My power reserves are drained. There's just no way ..." Her voice trailed off.

The Lucani Ibron spoke to them again. "You have proven to be worthy adversaries, humans. The time has come to reevaluate the situation."

"And who are you?" asked the Admiral.

"I am The Unity."

Anastasia looked perplexed. "How did your ships get here so quickly?"

"The ships are not here," the voice replied. "They are merely a projection." It paused for a moment. "You are in no danger."

"You refer to yourself as The Unity," Daniel said. "What does that mean?"

"The Unity is the repository of knowledge and experience for our race. It is The Unity who leads, and The Unity who pronounces judgement."

With those words, Daniel stiffened. "So you are responsible for the attempted genocide of our race?"

The voice did not hesitate, did not show any hint of emotion. "The Unity is responsible for the judgement entered against you."

"A judgement that condemns an entire race to death for the reprehensible actions of a handful of its members."

"The primitive and warlike tendencies of your race led to the creation of several more forbidden weapons. And these same tendencies led us to believe that their repeated use was inevitable."

"So we were all guilty, merely because the Omega Cannon existed?" asked the Admiral.

"The weapons needed to be removed, for the safety and stability of the Universe."

Daniel fought to keep his emotions in check. "But you butchered whole planets!"

"The original plan was to destroy all forbidden weapons, and to completely eliminate the possibility that more would be produced. To that end, we set out to destroy all individuals and facilities capable of producing such weapons."

Anastasia's head perked up. "The original plan?" she interjected.

"The Unity has reassessed the situation. Your actions have shown a respect for innocent life, and a predilection to avoid the use of forbidden weapons, even when you have access to them. Daniel Atgard, you once refused to use your ship's forbidden weapon in an inhabited system. Anastasia Mason, you have repeatedly declined to use your cascade-matrix weapon against enemies, instead relying on less-effective but unforbidden conventional weapons. The Unity sees hope for the future of your species."

Admiral Atgard inhaled deeply. "Do you propose a truce?"

"Under the condition that no more forbidden weapons are to be produced," countered the voice of The Unity. "Your punishment will be commuted."

Daniel bit his lip, and laughed a hollow laugh. "Now that all of our Omega Cannons have been destroyed, and over nine billion people killed, now you decide to commute our punishment?" Daniel snorted. "Your present absolution does nothing to bring back my son."

The voice continued without emotion. "Do you reject our agreement?"

Anastasia interrupted. "No, Unity. We accept your terms. We just wish this could have happened earlier. We wish the bloodshed could have been averted."

There was a lengthy pause. "The Unity, too, would have preferred that the Korgians had never been annihilated. Then the punishment of your species would not have been necessary."

"Very well," Daniel acquiesced. "You have a deal."

Suddenly, the viewscreen reverted to show the foursome of Lucani Ibron ships. Without another word, they abruptly shimmered and disappeared.

Daniel slumped into Dex's command chair, a great weight lifted from his shoulders. The victory this time would be a lasting one. He would no longer need to fear the eventual return of the Lucani Ibron.

Dex slid into a chair to the Admiral's right. He looked as fatigued as Daniel himself.

"Dex," asked the Admiral. "Can we go home now?"

EPILOGUE

1 DEC 3050

Daniel held a datapad in his gaunt hands, but stared out the room's small window as the *Cerberus* coasted toward Earth. He slumped in his chair, tired. More than tired—wary. Drained. Spent. Not just from his recent adventures, but from ten years of fearing and fighting the Lucani Ibron, ten years of fearing for his life and for the lives of those he loved.

Ten long years of mourning his son.

He sighed and rubbed his eyes, tossing the datapad onto the bed. He momentarily focused on a number embedded within the text of the article: 9.22 billion. That was the toll of the last ten years. Nine billion, two hundred and twenty million human lives exacted as revenge for the Korgian Annihilation, an atrocity now 43 years in the past. The *Indomitable*, *Landus*, the *Brigadier*—they had all added to the total.

Alexis. Ryan. His son.

Atgard stifled a curse. He was, of course, thankful it was over, but must it have played out that way? Could he have saved any of those lives? He had done all he could. But 9.22 billion was a staggering number of lives to lose. It was nearly the number—

Every muscle in Daniel's body abruptly seized at once. A pained half-gasp escaped his lips and his breath caught painfully in his throat. He closed his eyes hard, instantly remembering why the number sounded so hauntingly familiar. He was a fool for not having recognized it earlier.

He fumbled for the datapad, but stopped. He did not need confirmation from the display. He knew that the Lucani Ibron had won. He did not need to see the figures.

Daniel Atgard knew all too well what he would find: that the human casualty count exacted by the Lucani Ibron over the past ten years would correspond precisely—if they were accurate enough, to the man—with the number of Korgians humanity itself had butchered that horrible June morning, 43 years ago.

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Thank you for reading *Declination*—I hope you enjoyed it.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David Derrico was born just north of Miami, Florida, and developed his appreciation for complex moral issues while receiving a degree in philosophy from the University of Florida in Gainesville. He wrote his first novel, *Right Ascension*, before attending law school at the University of California, Berkeley School of Law (Boalt Hall). *Right Ascension* was first published by Bookbooters Press in 2000, and garnered its inaugural eBook of the Year Award.

Derrico wrote his second novel, *Declination*, during law school, while he was probably supposed to be studying. Nonetheless, he graduated, passed the California Bar Exam, and worked as an attorney at a large, international law firm in Los Angeles for several years. While practicing law (all that practice actually made him pretty good at it), he managed to write some short stories and a novella, *The Twiller*, while always yearning for more time to write his next novel.

Recently, Derrico retired from his “day job” as a big-firm attorney and has moved back to South Florida, where he is working on that next novel, *Face Value*, a story about a genetically-perfect Utopia where society’s perfection is only skin deep. Derrico maintains a website with reviews, excerpts, current news, and purchasing information for all of his novels and other works at www.rightascension.com.