

Legends of the Verse:

The Aimless Expedition

by Leland Brown

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Prologue

Since the discovery of fire, mankind has never quite been able to quench its endless thirst for exotic knowledge; insights that could be gleaned only from adventures in strange far-away lands. By pressing forward into the unknown, each era was a little more aware of the finer aspects of the universe around them than the one that preceded it. The brave few who chose to make this time-honored quest their calling aimed to push past the edges of the map, beyond 'here be dragons', to redefine the known world itself for those who would follow in their footsteps.

Once we had conquered our own little blue marble in the cosmos, and there wasn't a corner of that map left to explore, we turned our wonder toward the heavens. We eventually set our minds to that lofty goal, and humanity moved quickly to spread throughout our solar system to populate its wide frontier. The sons and daughters of mankind were, for the first time, able to walk across the surface of those little points of light that their ancestors had faithfully observed for a millennia as they traced their predictable arcs across the night sky.

Even that great accomplishment wasn't enough to satisfy humanity, for they still gazed out to the infinite universe with longing in their hearts. That torment was swept away, however, by the actions of Nick Croshaw during his fateful journey through the very first jump point to the self-named Croshaw system in 2271. The floodgates had opened and a new era of exploration had finally dawned for humanity.

If there is one thing that's true about the universe and how we see it, it's that there's always going to be more of it out there for us to discover; always more secrets to learn. Nearly seven-hundred years after Croshaw had stumbled across our new age, men and women are still braving the dangers of the unknown to expand humanity's kingdom in the cosmos.

That is exactly why ships like Anvil Aerospace's Carrack were built. Designed originally for UEE service as an armored vanguard force that could thrive for long periods in the loneliness of unpopulated space, the exploration cruisers were jam packed with all the sensors and sensitive scientific equipment required to properly catalog a wide range of celestial discoveries. The sophisticated vessels were impressive, stretching to over 120 meters in length, and featured a military-grade armor reinforced hull.

Ships such as the Carrack, with their unique and unrivaled capabilities, generally came with an equally unrivaled price tag, so large scale expeditions with them were often funded by mining companies or other industrial interests looking to stake a claim in an undiscovered system. That is precisely what Captain Jack Burgundy and his crew aboard the Carrack cruiser *Aimless* were hired to do. Their vessel had been contracted by the Bladrin mining company out of Kabal to survey the nearby Leir system for any undiscovered jump-points and the riches that lay beyond them. This is their story. A tale that has survived the onslaught of time on the lips of

fellow inspired adventurers, whispered across bartops with hushed enthusiasm in every corner of the empire; The Legend of the Aimless Expedition...

Chapter 1

Jack sat there, silently chewing his rehydrated ready-meal, and looked out across the table of his mess deck at the increasingly familiar faces filling its seats. As Captain of the Aimless, it was Jack's privilege to assemble the four souls aboard to man his brand new ship for her maiden voyage, and so far he felt that he had done well.

First, off to Jack's immediate left, was Anne Burgundy. In addition to her role as the Captain's wife, she was the ship's Science officer and sensor tech. Ann's position on the Aimless was not secured due to any form of nepotism, however, because the woman held seven doctorates from major Terran universities, ranging from xenolinguistics to cold hard physics, and was widely renown by her peers in the industry for her groundbreaking work at the Ark. She was, quite literally, the very best qualified human alive for the job.

To her left was the Aimless' tall and spindly medical officer, Ravi Misra. Ravi had served a short career with the UEE Navy, spending most of his time as a surgical technician aboard an Idris that was patrolling the battered Vega system. During his stint in the service, the young medical officer had seen the horrors of a Vanduul invasion and had witnessed first-hand the kind of extraordinary displays violence they were capable of. The way Jack figured it; if Misra could successfully stitch someone back together after a run-in with the Duul, then the man should have no problem operating the Aimless' impressive collection of medical devices.

Sitting at the end of the table, engaged in his second long-winded tirade of the evening regarding Banu players in the professional Sata-Ball leagues, was the stocky bearded form of William Cavas, who was the Aimless' pilot and navigator. Jack didn't know him directly before launching the mission, but the man came forward with some solid folks, people that the Captain trusted, vouching for him. So far he had done his job well and hadn't caused any problems, aside from swiping an extra ration from time to time.

Engrossed in the pilot's belligerent tirade was a young man of about twenty-four with shaggy blonde hair and a nearly permanent smirk. Anthony Volkov was his name, and he was one of the most talented engineers that Jack had ever met. The Captain didn't know much about the kid beyond the fact that he had been approached by the young man in a bar while he was waiting for the transportation company to sign his new ship over to him. Volkov claimed he could improve the Aimless' reactor efficiency by thirty percent right out of the box, and all he required was a ride out of the system in exchange. Jack took him up on his offer and extended it to include a spot on his crew if he could pull it off. Four hours later, the Aimless was purring 38% quieter and the Captain had found himself an Engineering officer.

Then, from the rear of the compact mess deck, came the whoosh of an automated bulkhead sliding open. Stepping through it was a heavily muscled frame that sat in odd juxtaposition below a time-worn face that showed its long history with a patchwork of scars across brow, cheek, and lip. The features belonged to the Aimless' stoic security officer, Tyson Miller.

Like the Captain, Miller was an ex-Marine who had turned to contract work after leaving the service. The difference, however, was that Jack had served his stint, then moved on with his life. Miller, on the other hand, had renewed his service and preferenced front line assignments all the way up until he aged out for combat duty at fifty-five. Rather than accept assignment with the rear echelon, he chose to bow out and seek his own action in the civilian world.

“Hey Miller,” called Volkov, breaking his attention from Cavas’ closing arguments, “What do you think about Banu playing in the human sata-ball leagues? You figure that their physiology gives them an unfair advantage, or no?”

Miller continued dishing his plate and, without bothering to even look up, replied; “No such thing as an unfair advantage. Competition has always been simply a brain versus a brain, and each mind must use its available resources to prevail. Nothing more, nothing less. Banu may be strong and have reach, but their peripheral vision is dogshit and their strategy in the arena is rarely aggressive enough. The ‘verse will always grant balance, if you know where to look.”

There was a thoughtful silence following the security officer’s nugget of wisdom until Anne looked up with a hopeful expression and said; “Why don’t you come on down and join us, Tyson? We’ve got a spot set out for you here, and we’d lov-”

Her sentence was cut short by another whoosh of the bulkhead door as the solitary security officer wordlessly stepped back through to return to his cabin. “Don’t take it personally, love,” Soothed Jack with a gentle hand on her knee, “it’s not you. Miller’s a work horse. He’s just the type of guy that shows up to his job every day primarily as a means to give himself purpose, with profit remaining a secondary concern. Living life as a Marine, especially for as long as he did, can be tough, but the routine of it all becomes comforting after a while if it’s all you know. Dinner with us simply didn’t fit into his personal schedule today, and that’s alright. I had a hard time with that for my first few months out of the service too, so let’s give him some space to find his civvy legs before we force him into our little family dinners, shall we?”

“I dunno, Cap.” Huffed Volkov with a snort of amusement, “I think he’s just pissy because he hasn’t gotten to kill anything for almost three weeks. And he must really miss the battlefield, too, because he’s already logged a couple hundred hours of Star Marine in his VR pod. That dude is chomping at the bit to ventilate some folks, and I just hope it doesn’t end up being us.”

“Perhaps I should tell him what you’ve been saying about him.” Teased Ravi, “Maybe then, he’ll just put YOU out the airlock and it’ll scratch that murder-itch of his to keep the rest of us safe.”

“Say what you will now,” interrupted the Captain with strained patience, “But you little snowflakes are going to be glad you have a guy like Miller on your side if pirates ever decide to board us, because guys like him don’t *play* Star Marine like you kiddies do; they utilize it as a tool to help them stay sharp on the real-world battlefield. He hasn’t been wasting his time in that sim pod, he’s doing what he’s paid to do. So lay off him about it, alright?”

“Sorry, Captain,” Said Volkov with a sigh, “I didn’t mean to offend or anything. My dad always used to tell me that boredom tended to turn me into a bit of a smart-ass, and I gotta tell you; I’m feeling pretty bored out here. I can’t believe we haven’t even had so much as a ping on

our scanners for almost three freakin' weeks. Space is big, man. How in the hell do you handle it? All the waiting, I mean."

Jack chuckled as he stood with his dinner tray and replied; "One coffee at a time, Tony. And it always helps to remember that we get paid whether we find something or not. The truth of the matter is that this work just isn't meant for everyone. If you feel that way when we make port after this, you will be free to cash out and move on. No hard feelings will be involved from my end."

"Trust me," added Cavas with a snort, "working the Aimless is a damn sight better than a lot that's out there. I spent the large part of a year flying a starfarer for an outfit out of Terra that refused to pay us for time that we spent asleep in our racks between shifts. You'll see that kind of nickel and diming bullshit pretty much everywhere. And sure, it's boring on an exploration boat, but at least you don't have to crawl your way through bore-holes in a tumbling asteroid to hand pick all the ore that the big-ass Orions had missed. That's how I spent **my** twenties, young blood."

The engineer looked as if he was going to reply with something snarky, but thought better of it. Volkov then stood and followed the Captain with his tray to deposit his dinner items into the dish washer, feeling a warm rush of steam as the device's deposit slot opened for him.

Before leaving, the young engineering officer spun to address Cavas and the Captain; "I haven't made up my mind on this whole *explorers of the unknown* thing yet, but who knows...maybe we'll find something exciting out here that'll keep me busy. Until then, I'll be in my rack trying to ascertain the identity of the criminally negligent psychopath who had the balls to design those rock-hard mattress inserts and market them for human consumption."

Jack nodded understandingly with a smirk, then watched his crew file through the hatchway to their bunk rooms. Once they had left, he spun to flash a warm smile at his wife. "Scanners are on passive and the bridge is on standby." he said as he offered his hand to Anne, "Shall we retire to my quarters?"

"**Your** quarters?" challenged Anne with a raised brow, "Need I remind you, **Captain**, that my name is on the title of this vessel *right* next to yours..."

Jack shrugged playfully as he helped his wife to her feet and retorted; "True, but **I'm** the Captain and it says '*Captain*' right on the door. Bing, bang, boom; I'd say that makes it an open and shut case. Plus I signed my name on the title larger than you did, so it's pretty much a technicality that there was even room left for you to sig-"

Jack's teasing remark was cut off by a sharp elbow to the gut from his smirking wife. "I'll be sure to keep your supreme ownership in mind the next time tax season rolls around, *Captain*." She teased in return, "And I'll let you do all the fun depreciation math and earnings calculations yourself. With your numbers knowhow, I bet the Advocacy would be after you for tax evasion within an hour."

The Captain eyed her with a wounded expression and said; "And why would I ever go about fudging up my finances like that when I have such a beautiful and stunningly intelligent better half to take care of them for me? I'd be out here in an Aurora with nothing but an old pair of underwear to keep me company if I didn't have you around to crunch my numbers for me."

You've always been the brains of this operation. I'm just the good looks."

"That's what I thought..." acknowledged Anne with a jesting side-eyed glance. She smiled happily, then turned to face her husband and reached up to run her fingers through the twin shocks of grey coming in amid the short brown hair at his temples. "You aren't off the hook, you know." She warned, wagging a finger at him, "You still have to answer for your ridiculously oversized and *poorly written* signature. We can discuss your reparations in **our** quarters."

"Sounds ominous..." Quipped Jack, making a show of suspiciously looking around the otherwise empty mess deck as Anne left. "Could be fun." He concluded to himself with a shrug as he moved to follow his wife through the door.

Chapter 2

Jack was slowly awakened by an incessant beeping that nagged at the edges of his awareness until an open-palmed slap to the chest jerked him alert. “Jack, wake up.” Urged Anne with excitement in her voice, “Passive scanners caught a ping last night, so I issued the hands on deck warning to the crew. Hurry up and grab some pants. I’ll meet you down on the bridge.”

The Captain shook the haze from his tired mind and sat up, rubbing his temples as the room’s lighting slowly intensified to full illumination. He took a few moments to slip into a jumpsuit and boots, then poured himself a steaming cup of coffee before stepping out the door toward the bridge. When he strode onto the lower half of the two-tiered command deck of the Aimless, his crew was already manning their stations.

Designed with ultimate visibility in mind, the Carrack featured a trio of flight seats on a rail system that would move its occupant out to dangle over the glass of a sweeping front canopy that made up the entire nose of the vessel. From his central pilot’s seat, Cavas had an unobstructed view of the outside world in every direction except aft, and could even lower an armored blast shield over the broad window if danger approached.

Flanking Cavas to the left and right were Miller and Ravi in their suspended support seats, each dutifully tapping at their consoles to bring their workstations online. Behind them, standing on the lower deck of the bridge, was Volkov at his intricate Engineering station, tracking power and component outputs as the vessel began to warm up from standby.

Jack ascended the small stairwell at the rear of the bridge and shot a smile toward Anne as she manned her console that was tucked into the lefthand wall at the top. He brushed past her with a gentle squeeze to her shoulder, then continued toward his waiting Captain’s chair that sat perched in the center of the upper floor at the front edge to look out over the breathtaking canopy below. “Alright, ladies and gentlemen,” began the Captain as he lowered himself into his seat, “What do we have?”

Anne sent her readings over to Jack’s screen and explained; “Last night the passive scanners caught the scent of a mid-sized metallic object about 12,000 kilometers out. When I ran a sensor focus on it first thing this morning, I picked up an EM reading coming off of it. Nothing that would signify an operational ship by any means, but enough to suggest the possibility of survivors holed up inside using personal electronics.”

Jack examined the data as he chewed his lip in concentration, then concluded; “We have a responsibility to check it out. Cavas, bring us about and take us in.”

The pilot complied, swinging the bow of the Aimless toward the marker on his HUD that signified the detected object, then eased the throttle forward. Coming to life with a throaty roar that could be felt through the deckplate, the cruiser’s powerful thrusters lurched the craft into

motion. As the *Aimless* approached the object, it slowly became visible to the naked eye in the form of a lumpy silhouette set against the dark backdrop of starlight.

“The craft appears to be an RSI Constellation series.” remarked Anne as her detailed scanners came into range, “I’m reading no reactor activity or comms chatter. Looks like they are *completely* dead in the water. The signal we picked up must indeed be coming from a personal device inside the ship, too, because everything else is absolutely, *uncharacteristically*, dark. Doesn’t even look like they popped an SOS at any point. Maybe their reactor died on them?”

Jack examined the derelict in his zoomed display and made note of the odd lack of debris floating around it. “Something definitely happened here, and I would love to find out what it was.” Replied the Captain as he stood from his command chair, “Miller, we’re going EVA, so zip up and grab your favorite toy to bring along. I don’t know who or what we’re going to find on the other side of that airlock, but I want to make damn sure that we’re the ones carrying the superior fire power.”

The Captain then descended to the lower command deck and found his engineering officer. “Volkov,” he prompted as he stepped up to the younger man, “I need you to hop on the tractor and stabilize that Constellation for us. Don’t pull it any closer, though. If that ship is rigged to blow, I don’t want the *Aimless* within the blast radius. Capiche?” Volkov nodded, then spun his chair to get to work as Jack left the bridge.

Miller was already waiting at the airlock with a Devastator shotgun resting easily in the crook of his elbow by the time Jack suited up and met him. Together, they stepped into the tight air-exchange room and cycled its mechanism. As the oxygen was pumped out of the small space, the ambient sounds around the two men slowly began fading to silence. The status light above the exit door then blinked from red to green and the hatchway slid open to reveal an infinite expanse of starlight.

Stepping out and away from the influence of his ship’s artificial gravity, the Captain’s unarmored pressure suit left his silhouette in stark contrast to the bulky outline of his security officer’s set of Achilles heavy armor. The unlit ship in the distance had slowed its tumble to a stop and now just sat there, 300 meters off to the *Aimless*’ port side, silently awaiting their approach. Miller took the lead, engaging his EVA thrusters to slowly accelerate himself toward the derelict.

After floating across the empty void, both men came to a gentle stop just outside the unpowered vessel’s starboard side airlock. Miller reached for the outer hatch’s release lever and jerked it, resulting in the heavy metal door swinging out to reveal the tiny airlock exchange cavity behind it. Jack squeezed in first, followed by the security officer’s oversized frame that barely left enough room for them to close the outer hatch behind them.

Jack located the airlock’s control panel and jabbed at the button that would cycle the lock and pressurize their small chamber. The panel remained unlit and there was no reaction at all from the ship. “Capacitors must be completely drained” remarked the Captain as he inspected the control panel, “Looks like we’ll have to crack the door manually, so brace yourself and get ready.”

The security officer nodded then leaned back to press his shoulders and helmet firmly against the outer hatch, with his legs braced against the inner doorframe. Jack imitated Miller's positioning then reached for the airlock's manual release lever. Taking a deep breath to ready himself, the Captain yanked on the lever and was punched forcefully into the bulkhead behind him as the crushing pressure of the ship's internal atmosphere rushed through the widening gap in the inner doorway.

Following the invisible gut-punch of air pressure, both men were left staring into the total darkness of the Constellation's cargo hold. When Jack stepped out of the airlock, he had to duck in surprise as a dark shape tumbled by inches in front of his faceplate. The quick action lost the Captain his footing and he started to float off in the null gravity of the cargo hold until Miller's powerful gauntleted hand grabbed his suit by the collar and set him to the floor.

Feeling a tad red in the face from his rookie mistake, Jack activated the magnetic treads on his boots and turned on his suit's helmet-mounted flashlight. The flood of illumination from the Captain's light revealed a churning chaos of broken pallets and loose equipment floating about the cargo hold. With no crew in sight, Jack activated his suit's PA system and announced their presence; "I am Captain Jack Burgundy from the exploration vessel Aimless. We are here to offer emergency assistance. Is anyone still aboard?"

After being met with only silence, Miller activated the flashlight mounted to his shotgun and took the lead, cautiously creeping up to the closed door that separated the Constellation's living quarters from the cargo hold. Jack followed close behind and took up a position on the opposite side of the door from his security officer. The Captain held up a hand and silently counted down from three on his fingers before yanking on the door's manual release lever.

As the door slid open, a foul and familiar odor wafted out to reach through the filters built into Jack's suit and assault his nose. The scent tickled a primal corner of the Captain's brain, causing him to reflexively retrieve his pistol from its thigh rig. They inched forward through the doorway and swept the darkness beyond with the piercing illumination of their flashlights. After three steps into the Constellation's common area, Jack's bleak suspicion was confirmed.

Lying face down on the dinner table, coated in dark dried blood, was the motionless form of a balding man in a blue jump suit. Miller saw something poking out from under the dead man's chest, so he stepped forward and pushed the body aside with an audible crackling as the gory red adhesive pinning the man to the table was peeled away. When the security officer saw what had been concealed underneath the corpse, he couldn't help but chuckle.

"Looks like Hoss here got capped in the face while eating his breakfast." Reported Miller as he leaned in for a closer inspection, "Real eggs, too. Must'a been celebrating something. Based on how he's looking now, I'd say he took his last bite a little over a month ago. Killing someone at the breakfast table is one thing, but the guy that shot him shoulda' at least let him finish eating first. It's a damn shame to see food like that go to waste."

"Your grief is touching." Said Jack, sarcastically, "Now let's see what else this creepy-ass ship has in store for us." The Captain continued forward, toward the sealed door to the bridge, and gestured for his security officer to follow. Jack stopped at the center of the door and stood at the ready, waiting for Miller to pull the hatchway's release mechanism.

With a click of mechanical action, the door slid open to leave Jack staring directly into a decomposing face, wreathed in weightless swirls of blonde hair. The Captain recoiled, automatically shoving the floating body as he took a step back. The inert woman slowly rotated away, revealing a group of red stains walking their way up the back of her jumpsuit to illustrate the cause of her demise.

“Just a floater, Captain.” teased Miller as he stepped through the doorway onto the bridge. Jack followed to his right, sweeping his light across the room until his beam stopped on a blue-sleeved arm that was clutching the flight stick of the Constellation’s central flight seat. His view of the seat’s occupant was obscured, so the Captain quickly stepped forward with his pistol at the ready and rounded the front of the chair.

What Jack found was the bearded and blood-soaked face of a pilot, dutifully manning his post long beyond his own demise; the man’s hands still clutching their controls tightly, despite the single neat hole that had been punched through his temple. “Someone definitely caught the pilot off guard and popped him one in the forehead.” Concluded Jack with a shudder at the cold-bloodedness of it all.

“I’ve got another floater down here, too.” Called Miller from the turret entry tube. The security officer’s arm disappeared down the hole to the lower turret, then returned with the fabric from a blue jumpsuit’s pantleg clutched in his grasp. Filling the jumpsuit was a middle aged man with black hair and a face that looked like it had been swollen and broken badly before his death.

“Doesn’t look like there are any holes in this one.” Remarked the Captain as he stepped closer, “You think a couple pirates beat some information out of him or something?”

“Difficult to say,” replied Miller with a heavy-shouldered shrug, “but if anyone boarded to do all this, they came aboard as friendlies. No way a breach happened on this ship, not with how spotless all the airlocks were looking. I doubt they’ve ever even docked her hard, let alone having her forcibly hitched.”

“You’re probably right,” Agreed Jack, “but there’s only one way to be sure. I’m going to get some DNA off the crew so we can at least make a few credits getting these folks identified and their families informed. While I’m handling that, go ahead and pull the data core and make sure to skim the avionics blades as well. I saw a pretty sophisticated sensor rig set up on this puppy on our way in, so I want to see where it’s been if possible. I bet they were out here doing the same thing that we were hired to do.”

“Frankly, Captain, it wouldn’t surprise me if these poor bastards share the same employer that we do.” Huffed Miller with a hint of disgust tugging at the edge of his lip, “Big companies like that tend to leave safety related details such as pirate activity out of their briefing packages to keep contract costs low. I’ll pull their logs and whatever else I can find.”

Jack nodded, then stepped past his security officer to head aft. Once returning to the snowglobe of shattered crates and debris that was the cargo hold, the Captain had to make his way by slowly pushing the floating objects aside as he moved along the walkway. When he got to the component cabinet for the avionics equipment, he stopped with a sudden gasp.

The door of the compartment was flung open, and the racks inside had been smashed into oblivion by what appeared to be a frenzy of bare fists. Blood was streaked along the inner walls of the cabinet in several places, and all the twisted electronics heaped within were covered in patches of red. Whoever had caused the damage, had sacrificed the functionality of their hands to do it. Feeling a new sense of eeriness tugging at the base of his neck, Jack pushed forward into the darkness.

At the rear of the hold sat a pair of doors that the Captain approached with caution. Before he could reach out for the hatchway's manual release, the doors automatically began to sluggishly part until they stalled at three-quarters of the way open. The sudden unexpected movement startled the Captain, but the distraction was only momentary.

Jack stepped forward through the doorway with his pistol at the ready to see the distinct shape of a helmet behind the canopy of the Constellation's attached Merlin fighter. The Captain sucked himself to the wall and sank to a knee before activating his suit's PA to yell; "Pilot! Raise the canopy of your ship and place your hands, palms down, on the deck beside you."

The inert shape behind the canopy remained still, offering not even a twitch in response to the Captain's demands. After three breaths with no reaction from the silent pilot, Jack pressed forward. As he approached, he noticed for the first time a dark streak running across the roof of the canopy, obscuring his view to the inside. Once he got close enough to see into the cockpit itself, however, Jack's tension dropped; along with the muzzle of his weapon. Sitting on the motionless pilot's lap was a pistol that had its slide locked back into the weapon's empty position. The top of the man's flight helmet had shattered, allowing his self-inflicted gunshot wound to coat the canopy of the craft with a red splatter.

Jack hit the canopy's external release latch with his foot and stepped back as the glass bubble swang open. When the canopy unsealed, it released another overwhelming rush of that same deathly scent that had washed over the Captain earlier. Fighting through a gag, Jack deactivated his external air filters and switched his suit over to stored O² only. The rotten air was then quickly purged from his helmet and he took a deep breath of fresh oxygen to clear his revulsed mind.

His focus restored, Jack returned his attention to the cockpit of the fighter. While inspecting the pilot's flight harness for identification, he spotted a glow emanating from underneath the flight seat, so the Captain reached in past the pilot's severely battered and bloody hands to retrieve the mobiGlas that was concealed there.

"Heard you yelling, Captain." Came Miller's calm voice over the radio, "Everything good back there?"

"Yeah, we're clear." Replied Jack as he stood and shoved the recovered mobiGlas into his equipment pouch, "Found a pilot who had been holed up in the Merlin back here. Looks like he offed himself quite a while ago. I'm headed back up your way. Are you ready to head out?"

"I'm finishing up now," Said the security officer through a grunt of physical exertion, "but somebody did a real number on this console. Almost looks like some wacky som'bitch was straight-up throwing punches at the display screen. It's bloodier than hell up here."

“I had the pleasure of meeting Mr. Hamburger hands in the Merlin.” Remarked the Captain as he stepped into the airlock, “And there was more of his handiwork in the cargo hold, too. This ship gives me the goddamn heebie-jeebies, so hurry it the hell up and we can get out of here.”

Jack’s wish was granted right as his radio clicked off, when the light from Miller’s shotgun began to pour into the cargo bay. It wasn’t long before that light was followed by the security officer’s imposing figure, casting long shadows across the darkness. Awkwardly slung over Miller’s massive shoulder was an expandable bag containing various bits of gadgetry and data recording equipment that he had salvaged from the bridge. He passed the bag off to Jack and stepped to join him in the airlock.

The Captain slung the bag over his own shoulder, then tugged on the manual lever for the Constellation’s inner airlock door. After making sure the inside hatch was properly sealed, Jack utilized a manual pressure release valve that was built into the outer airlock door to slowly vent the cramped space. Once his external pressure sensors read next to null, he pulled on the outer hatch’s release lever and pushed the thick metal door open.

Both men then deactivated their mag-boots and surrendered themselves to the weightlessness of space. Nursing the micro thrusters built into their EVA harnesses, the Captain and his security officer carefully drifted back across the void to the Aimless’ dorsal airlock. Once inside, Miller cycled the lock and the cruiser’s ambient sounds slowly swelled in their ears as the small room filled with oxygen.

When the airlock’s inner door opened, Anne was already standing there gesturing for her husband to hand off the bag of salvaged computer equipment. Jack obliged, dropping the now-heavy sack of electronics on the floor at her feet as he stepped past her into the ready room. While working his way out of his pressure suit, the Captain pulled out the mobiGlas that he had retrieved from under the suicidal Merlin pilot and set it on the bench next to him.

“These drives look pretty damaged,” Commented Anne doubtfully as she inspected a recovered piece of equipment, “But I’ll see what I can pull. It will probably require some fancy footwork to scrape any leftover data, so feel free to take your time getting changed and heading to the bridge. Basically what I’m saying is; I don’t need you mouth-breathing over my shoulder while I’m trying to work, so go make yourself a sandwich or something and I’ll call you when I have some new information.”

After standing to hang his discarded pressure suit, Jack turned and grabbed his wife by the shoulders to reel her in and kiss her forehead. “Thank you for helping me with the smart person stuff.” Said the Captain with a warm smile, “Have Volkov give you a hand with that, too. The kid is sharp and I’ve got a feeling that he may have a few useful tricks up his sleeve to help you out.”

Anne nodded, then shouldered the heavy bag of equipment to head back down to the command deck with Miller. Left sitting alone in the ready room, Jack picked up the recovered mobiGlas from the bench next to him and switched it on. The device’s home page showed a picture of a grinning infant wearing a tiny Sata-Ball jersey featuring the logo of a prominent team based out of the Elysium system. The image drew an unbidden sad smile to the Captain’s face as

he opened the mobiGlas's access logs.

The device's date of last access was recorded 43 days prior and there were only two messages sent out on that day. Curious, he opened the first of the recorded messages and watched the attached video; *"Hi honey!"* beamed an excited looking man that Jack instantly recognized as his suicidal Merlin pilot, *"I hope all is well with you and the little one. I just wanted to let you know that I may actually be bringing home some good credits this time! Don't hit Casaba outlet quite yet, but we might have found a stable jump point! We're going to have to jump through and drop a probe this afternoon to confirm our claim, but everything looks good so far! So by the time you get this, I could be a rich man! I love you, Sarah, and tell Andrew that daddy's coming home soon!"*

Jack closed the video with a pang of sorrow twisting his gut. Knowing how everything ended, and mentally tracing the implications of that outcome, made the cheery tone of the message hard to stomach. The Captain steeled his empathy and pressed on to the final file that had been saved to the device just over eight weeks prior. It was a shakily filmed self-shot video from the cockpit of the Merlin.

The man was distraught, spending almost half a minute sobbing silently before he began to speak; *"I...I had to. The Captain wanted to go through with the jump, even after everything we saw on the other side. He didn't care about the stupidity of the risk that he was going to force us all to face. But, NOOoo!"*

He slammed his fist against a surface off camera, anger now tinging his distraught features; *"Captain Zachs just wanted to recover his precious probe to reap its data to sell to the highest bidder on the black market. Crooked son of a bitch. I've seen his type at work; Close minded and in it for the short term gains. It was as if he was oblivious to the danger."*

With his tone falling somber, the pilot looked to his lap in an involuntary display of shame; *"Arrogant dickheaddary aside, Bobbie simply hadn't seen what **they** can do. Not like I have. So he just couldn't be made to understand that it wasn't worth the risk. Idiot! The prick just cared about his own glory, the consequences be damned! Stupid asshole just wanted his name on a map."*

The pilot paused for a long moment, as if considering his words carefully. Then, putting effort into steadying his voice, he continued; *"I Never thought I'd shoot a man while he ate his breakfast, but he really left me no other choice. I tried to explain to the others what I had done and why, but they all refused to listen to me...God, I...I thought for sure that Amber would understand."*

Again, the pilot paused. His face was now a stony mask of inexpression, his jaw set firm and unyielding against a whimper that desperately wanted to escape. Despite his best efforts, hot tears began to roll down his cheeks to betray the man's internal struggle; *"She was just so hysterical at the time, there was no reasoning with her. It was the hardest thing I've ever had to do, but I couldn't let her light that beacon."*

The pilot's eyes hardened again and he straightened with renewed sureness; *"There was no way I was going to let her put your safety at risk, not with Andrew in the picture. The best thing to do now is make sure that the universe forgets this ship ever existed. That jump tunnel is nothing but bad news, and I'm not about to let it out of the bag so close to my only son. I cherish*

*you more than life itself, Sarah. That's why I did the terrible things that I did, and it's why I have to do what I'm about to. I love you both **so** much...I'm sorry..."* The camera view then shifted away from the distraught man's face, followed shortly by the crack of a single gunshot; Punctuating a depressing end to the man's frantic manifesto.

Chapter 3

Even though he knew how the video was destined to end, the gunshot still caught Jack off guard. He set the recovered mobiGlas on the bench next to him and leaned back to rest his head against the wall for a few moments to collect his thoughts. Aside from the chilling content of the message, there were also nuggets of good information buried in the video. Whoever the crew of that ship was, they had found themselves a jump point.

“Jack,” came Anne’s voice over the ship’s intercom, “You may want to get down here. We weren’t able to skim much from these drives, but what we *did* find was a bit...eh...weird.”

“Headed down.” Replied Jack as he pulled himself to his feet and started for the door, “I have something to show you as well.” It was then just a matter of a short stroll before the Captain stepped through the doors onto his bridge. His crew was all clumped around the large display screen built into Volkov’s workstation, enthralled with whatever it was showing.

Jack inched up behind them and saw that they were all gripped by a static security camera view, shot from the front left-hand side of the constellation’s cargo bay, as it played out a silent sequence of events that told the tale of the doomed vessel; *The suicidal Merlin pilot was throwing his fists and elbows, full force, into the avionics rack built into the Constellation’s cargo bay. The deranged man’s whirlwind of flailing punches continued despite the blood that was dripping from his hands, and came to a stop only when another member of the crew tackled him to the ground. Still possessed with the inhuman strength of panic and madness, the merlin pilot was able to spin from his crewmate’s grip and kick free to stand himself back up.*

There was no audio to the security camera footage, but it appeared as if the crewmember was trying to calm the panicked and deranged man. The ploy was apparently fruitless and the merlin pilot lunged at his foe. Unable to match his attacker’s mad ferocity, the crewmember was quickly overpowered and his head was slammed repeatedly into the railing of the walkway. The merlin pilot then released his opponent, allowing him to fall to the floor. He looked down for a moment, as if he were saying something to the helpless man laying at his feet, then grabbed the railing to steady himself and proceeded to stomp his heavy heel into the side of the man’s head over and over until he was out of breath.

Whether it were from exhaustion or revulsion wasn’t clear, but the merlin pilot finally stepped away and fell to his knees to vomit. Once that had run its course, the man stood and resolutely stormed his way toward the front of the ship. The camera view shifted to a feed from inside the common area, showing the Captain of the vessel already lying face down on the blood-soaked dining table, just as the merlin pilot walked into the room from the cargo hold.

The pilot made a bee line for a locker, seemingly unaffected by the grisly sight to his left, and retrieved a pistol from inside a concealed shelf within. After loading the weapon and deactivating its safety, he held it firm to his thigh and strolled onto the command deck. Another quick change in camera views revealed the bridge from the front-left hand side of the canopy, looking aft. A woman was busy working on her console that was situated off to the right of the

doorway and she didn't even look up to acknowledge the newcomer.

The deranged man just breezed right past her and came to a stop behind the Constellation's central pilot's chair. He stood there silently studying its occupant for a brief moment, his subject unaware of his presence, then raised his pistol and fired a single shot into the seated man's forehead. The report of the gunshot startled the woman at the rear of the bridge and she turned to run, only to be struck in the back with five rapidly delivered bolts of sizzling energy.

The Merlin pilot watched her fall to the deck, then dropped his weapon and sank to his knees to sob uncontrollably. His grieving was interrupted, however, when the man from the cargo hold, his face a twisted and swollen mess, stumbled back onto the bridge. As if sight of the other man had deeply offended him in his private moment of mourning, the Merlin pilot sprang at the trespasser and seized him by the neck in a tight grip.

The deranged man squeezed with all his might, firmly maintaining his iron grasp until his rage-contorted face changed to a shade of red that complimented the darkening purple of his opponent's features. To punctuate the strangulation, the Merlin pilot angrily threw his crewmate down the tube to the lower turret and lobbed some spit down after him. As if in a daze, the deranged man stumbled backward until his heels hit the control console at the rear of the bridge. It blinked some sort of message in response to his presence and he spun on it in a rage and began throwing his fists at the screen until the image paused.

"And from here, he basically proceeds to take the ship apart with his bare hands." Concluded Anne as she closed the video.

"Dude must have been coming down from some crazy shit to throw a fit like that." Commented Volkov with awe, "I bet it was one of those messed up Xi'An drugs that melt your brain or something."

"It wasn't narcotics that drove this man mad." said Jack to announce his presence as he stepped forward to place the man's recovered mobiGlas on the console in front of them. He powered the device on, revealing its home screen featuring a smiling infant and continued; "This is what pushed him to do what he did, misguided as it was. He's got a kid in a nearby system, and I think that's what kicked this all off. The crew of that ship found a jump point around here sometime within the last forty-five days, and Mr. Nutzo here didn't like what they saw on the other side of it. Long story short, he figured that the jump point was nothing but bad news and tried to get his Captain to reconsider mapping it. Captain was apparently more interested in glory than caution, so our friend shot him in the face at breakfast. After that, he was locked in the cargo hold by the rest of the crew. Then...well...you saw what happened next."

"I think you're both right," sighed Miller, "I've seen pilots get paranoid as hell like this after using too many stims to stay in the air. I was on a Javelin once that had one of its patrol craft go squirrely and attempt a strafing run at the bridge. Evidently the pilot was covering his third shift in 72 hours, and slowly became convinced that his mothership had been taken over by an unnamed enemy force. Apparently he thought the Javelin's comm operator had laughed oddly at a comment he had made at one point and the delusion grew from there. The loony som'bitch managed to blow off a turret, killing its gunner and a maintenance worker in the hallway behind

it, before his hornet was vaporized. It was all so senseless and avoidable. That's why I stick to my natural stimulants."

"Natural stimulants?" asked Cavas with a raised brow.

"Whiskey, sex, and violence." Listed the security officer as he tallied on his fingers. "And preferably all at the same time, if possible." He finished with a self-appreciating chuckle.

"That was a whole lot more than I would've liked to know." Commented Anne with a shudder, "And, if you don't mind, I'd like to steer our conversation back on track here. Did I hear that the crew of that ship found a jump point nearby? Where did this information come from? Because all of the navigation data aboard was purged. I've checked; thoroughly."

"It's what the crazy guy said in his suicide note." Explained Jack with a shrug, "I know it's not an *awesome* source for evidence, but, given the circumstances, I'd say it's enough to warrant a look around."

"Isn't that what we have been doing for the past three weeks anyways?" retorted the Captain's wife with frustration, "The data was scrubbed clean, so that jump point could be anywhere at this point. That leaves us back where we started; Wandering around looking for something to find. This recovery, though intriguing and extraordinarily creepy, is a bust."

"I wouldn't be so sure of that." Countered Jack with a smirk, "In the video there, we saw our friend going ham on the avionics cabinet. Now I can personally attest to the fact that those racks are still broken into a trillion pieces today. So even if he wanted to fly as far away from the jump point as he could before wrecking everything else up, he wouldn't have been able to because there would be no power to the drives. No avionics; no flight. And we can be reasonably certain that they were at the jump point when he was going wacko, because in that video I saw the woman on the bridge working on live anomaly readings at her station. That's what she was so absorbed in. THAT is why she let the killer walk on by her. We should be able to review our sensor data to get the Constellation's initial heading and velocity when we came up to it. Then you can extrapolate that trajectory back to the date when the video we watched was shot. From there, we should have a pretty good idea of where to look. Mr. Hammerfist can scrub all the data he wants, but he's never going to be able to sweep a goddamn space-time anomaly under the rug."

Anne began to open her mouth for a riposte, but closed it again to consider what he had said. "That's...that's actually a pretty good idea." She admitted finally.

"You hear that, Miller?" said the Captain with jested enthusiasm, "Remind me to pull the bridge's security footage of her saying that. That clip is going on this year's holiday card for sure."

"Well if you're quite finished with your hearty self-congratulations, *Captain*, I have run those calculations." Fumed Anne with swelling annoyance, "Looks like they were about two thousand kilometers away when that video was shot. Calculated point of origin is on-map now."

"Alright, Cavas," ordered the Captain as he eased into his practiced tone of command, "Saddle up and take us over to our pay day. Miller; it sounded like we could possibly be dealing with an armed threat, so I want you to get to a turret and start bringing our auto-defenses online. Ravi; you're on shields. Bring 'em up to full strength and pump 70% of their juice up to the forward capacitors. Volkov, I'm mainly interested in shield strength and sensor power at the

moment. Do what you can to make them play nicely together. Anne, I want you focusing on just looking for enemy ships and other immediate threats for now. We can run our field scans when we're all clear. Let's move it!"

The crew all jumped to their individual tasks, each smoothly and expertly undertaking their assignments with practiced ease. It was then only a matter of a few minutes before Cavas announced that they were nearing their destination, and the ship began to decelerate. Dropping from the sub-light speeds of quantum drive, the universe outside the broad canopy snapped back into focus.

"Sensors clear." called Anne from her workstation, "No contacts or objects detected within range. We're the only ones home."

"Excellent." Replied Jack, spinning his chair to face his wife, "Go ahead and kick on our field scanners and let's look for that Jump gate. Now if my math is correct, and it always is because I run it past you first, I'll bet you five credits that we find it within ten minutes."

Anne obliged, rolling her eyes heavily as she activated the Exploration cruiser's impressive suite of advanced sensors. She watched her display screen intently for just over a minute before she let out a huff of amused laughter. "We have a winner." she said with a broad smile, "I'm picking up massive spikes of interspace energy that are originating from a point that's sitting about 166 kilometers out on our port side. I think we're looking at something here that could easily be classified as a large Jump tunnel."

"Hot damn!" exclaimed the Captain, "Now that's what I like to hear! Cavas, bring us up to the marked anomaly. Maintain a two kilometer distance and hold her steady for our scan-work. Volkov, head back and prep me a probe. I want you to ditch its standard sensor package and see what you can do to get as much range and clarity out of its EM scanners as possible. Our friend in the Merlin was freaking out about *something*, so if anything is waiting for us on the other side of that tunnel, I want to know about it."

This drew an excited "Aye aye, Captain!" from the young engineering officer before he scampered off the command deck to begin his task. It was then not long before the lumbering Carrack was slowing to a stop near the detected anomaly. At first, Jack could see nothing but the static glow of starfield outside the canopy. Then the sensor arm perched on the chin of the exploration cruiser began to project a green laser into the empty space in front of the vessel's nose.

The emerald beam of light stretched out in a straight line for a kilometer or so, then abruptly hooked upward into a distorted swirl that dissipated as the laser passed through the area of turbulent physics that made up the jump point. The sight drew a smile that tugged on the corner of the Captain's lip while he paired it with the promising data that was streaming in from Anne's station.

"Energy fluctuations from the anomaly are within acceptable parameters," reported the Captain's wife, "and it should be able to support a stable bridge. Calculating required power to establish a tunnel now."

"Excellent." Acknowledged the Captain, "Cavas, spool up our jump drive and get ready to

establish a bridge.” Jack then activated the ship’s intercom and asked; “Volkov, how’s my probe coming?”

“Two minutes out.” Replied the young engineer over the bridge’s speakers, “I’ve swapped out the internals and I’m putting her skirt back on now. We won’t have much to work with along the lines of Infrared, but I shoehorned enough EM boosters in this baby to more than make up for it. If someone is so much as reheating a burrito within a hundred-thousand Klicks, you’re gonna know about it.”

“Exactly what I was looking for, thank you.” Praised Jack with excitement growing in his gut, “How are we looking with those calculations? Do we have enough juice to open the gate?”

“More than enough.” Answered Anne from her console, “Output values have been locked in, and we are ready to activate the interspace bridge at your convenience.”

Jack then checked his display and saw a green status indicator wink to life over the icon depicting the craft’s starboard-side drone launcher. With everything in-place and ready to go, the Captain spoke to address his pilot; “Mr. Cavas, please engage the jump generator and crack the door for us.”

After receiving a vocal confirmation from his pilot below, Jack felt static starting to crawl its way across the surface of his skin while the low hum of the ship’s jump drive rose to life. The tone of the vibration continued to intensify until it abruptly changed in pitch. In response, the space outside the canopy began to crackle with blue veins of sizzling energy that danced across the surface of a rapidly materializing pseudo-visible sphere in the darkness before them.

Then, like a flower blooming to reveal its delicate array of chromatic petals, the anomaly seemed to unfold from the center, allowing a twisting maelstrom of shifting colors to spill from within. A thump could be felt through the deckplate and Jack watched as their launched probe dove for the spectacular glowing gateway ahead. The man-sized device seemed to be pulled in and was quickly swallowed by the pulsating maw of light. Once the probe had disappeared from sight, the Captain’s focused attention shifted from the canopy over to his wife’s station.

“Tunnel is stable, and the probe’s auto-guidance is holding up.” Reported Anne from her console, “Deploying drag transmitter now. Breaking through in 4-3-2-1. Data-burst received. Downloading survey report now.” She checked over the information that was streaming across her screen, then continued; “Exit point is registering low temperature and negligible radiation. No active EM sources were detected within range either, so I don’t think anybody’s home. We are good to jump on your command, Captain.”

Jack felt a tug of excitement rise once more from the pit of his stomach as he listened to his wife’s promising report. Once she had finished delivering the good news, the Captain stood to take in the view with his hands clasped comfortably behind his back. He eyed the beautiful storm of color suspended in the dark before them, allowing himself a private prideful smile.

Activating the ship’s intercom, Jack slipped his voice back into a tone of command to say; “Ladies and gentlemen, today we find ourselves standing at a great precipice with an opportunity to participate in a truly unique moment in history; to venture where no human crew has gone before. For us to attain the riches of undiscovered knowledge, we must first dive into the depths

of the unknown and submit ourselves to her mercy. Whether we'll find heaven or hell on the other side, I do not know; but through that breach, we shall boldly go. Engage jump!"

With that command, the space around the canopy began to stretch and distort as the anomaly appeared to swell around them, enveloping the craft in a shroud of twirling color until the world outside snapped back into focus; leaving them barreling through a twisting tunnel of prismatic shifting hues. The visual chaos of it all set Jack off-balance and he had to sit down to calm his confused equilibrium.

Cavas piloted the massive Carrack with expert ease, bobbing and weaving his way through the winding passage, skirting the edges of the tunnel by mere meters on several occasions. A sharp turn then morphed into a steep dive that caused the Captain to reflexively dig his fingernails into his armrests as a faint sphere of darkness up ahead rapidly began to balloon in his view. The leading edge of the stark void soon overtook the nose of the vessel and, as if all at once, the Aimless snapped back into the star-filled blackness of real space.

"Jump transition complete." Reported Anne from her station, "Tunnel has been successfully analyzed and the central computer is mapping it now. Probe is still active and I have initiated its auto-return. We are green across the board."

"That was some top-notch flying there, Cavas. Well done." Praised the Captain as he rose from his chair. He then turned to his wife and prompted; "Please begin a full-spectrum scan of the system. Let's get the lay of the land here and see what the Verse has in store for us today."

"Sir," called Ravi from his suspended flight seat, "The front shields registered a kinetic impact during our transition back to real space. I think we hit something."

Jack considered the astronomical odds of such a thing for a moment, then pulled up the radar on his console. Sure enough, there was a small unpowered metallic object tumbling through the dark under the Aimless' belly. "Miller," ordered the Captain, "we got some sort of debris out there. Go ahead and depressurize the rover bay for me so I can suck our roadkill in with the tractor. I wanna know what we hit."

It was then a matter of a few minutes before the loading ramp of the rover bay, located on the lower deck just aft of the bridge, began to drop open. Jack found the unidentified object using the tractor beam interface on his console and gently snatched it in the device's invisible grip before slowly reeling it in. He then proceeded to guide it into the awaiting rover bay until the ship's artificial gravity seized the object and yanked it to the deck. "Got it." Reported the Captain to his security officer over the intercom, "You're good to zip up the rover bay and repressurize."

"Jack, get over here." Gaspd Anne from behind her console. When the Captain obliged and stepped over to his wife's station, he saw a rough map of their newly discovered star system on her display. Her finger rose to point out the figures on the screen and she began to explain; "We have a type G star along with four planets and what appears to be a mostly-metallic asteroid belt around the outer edges of the system. One of the planets is a gas giant, and the other three are rocky worlds; including one that is well within the projected green band. It has the potential of being terraformable, but we'd need to get closer for more detailed scans to be sure."

"That sounds like a mighty fine plan, my love." Replied Jack with an excited smile, "Mr.

Cavas, please fire up the main drives and take us into orbit around planetary body number two. Meanwhile, I need you, Volkov, to follow me downstairs. You're going to help me figure out what it is that we flattened with the bow of my ship on our way in-system."

By the time the Captain and his Engineer had made their way down to the rover bay, Miller was already standing crouched over a heat-scorched lump of metal. The large security officer had his hand buried up to the wrist in the device and looked as if he were frustratedly struggling to grasp something from inside. When his annoyance with the inanimate object finally rose past its boiling point, Miller slammed it into the ground and rose to give it a stiff kick that sent it sliding across the deck.

"Stop!" shouted Volkov as he rushed into the rover bay, "What the hell are you doing? Don't you think that hitting the goddamn thing with the ship did *enough* damage?! Please step away from the probe before you do something that I can't un-do!"

"So that's what you think it is?" asked Jack while he knelt for a closer look, "The probe from that spooky Connie? Looks pretty busted up. You suppose you'll be able to pull any data off of it? I would be very curious to see what it was that set commander Whack-Job off on his crewmates."

"I'm not sure, Captain," answered the young engineer with a shrug, "It depends on what internal damage that dick-thumbs over here caused with his ham-fisted 'tinkering'. But I can tell you that it's going to take a good deal of love and attention to get anything from it in this state. Do you mind helping me get it back to my workbench?"

Jack nodded then gestured for Miller to step over and join them. All three men gathered around the semi-flattened sphere and its twisted collection of trailing sensor appendages, then lifted the device together and slowly walked it to the wide workbench at the rear of the rover bay. Once the probe had been securely fastened to the table, Volkov broke out a multi-tool from his workbelt and used it to pry open a bent access panel.

"Shit." Hissed Volkov once he finally shone his light into the compartment of charred and tangled wires beyond the probe's dented paneling, "Wiring harness is toast, and I think the CPU got baked along with it. Depending on the physical damage to the internal circuitry of the memory core itself, I may be able to salvage some data; it isn't going to be plug & play though. I'll need...considerable time to dig into this."

"Understood." Replied the Captain with a nod, "We're on our way to the inner planets now, which Cavas is saying will take a little over half an hour, so why don't you get started on it and let me know if I can do anything to help out. I'll let you know when we're about to begin our deceleration into orbit so you don't miss the view."

"The view?" repeated Volkov with a raised eyebrow.

"Precisely." Replied Jack with a smile, "You gotta remember that you're an explorer now, kid. That planet out there is **ours**, and you have a right to be one of the first humans to lay eyes on it. It's literally the single best part of the job. Well that, and the feeling of pissing your name into the sand to claim dominion over an entire planet. That feels pretty freakin' alright, too. So drink up, Tony. We've got a planet or two to claim this afternoon."

Chapter 4

After 38 minutes in the dull blur of quantum drive, the Aimless finally began its deceleration into orbit around the green band world. Instead of the lush Eden that its positioning would suggest, the planet they came upon was choked by a swirling blanket of thick dark clouds. A rusty orange surface, dusted by scattered dunes of snow, could be momentarily glimpsed through fleeting gaps in the cloud-cover, with odd speckles of color shimmering randomly through the haze.

“What the hell was that?” asked the Captain with surprise after seeing one of the intermittent shimmers of color piercing the planet’s sheet of thick clouds.

“By the way the colors are shifting, I’d say it were something natural.” Remarked Anne with a distracted dismissal, her attention absorbed by her workstation’s screen, “William, can you bring us into a geosynchronous orbit, please?”

“Can do,” replied the pilot, “but feel free to call me Bill, or just Cavas; Hell, even Princess Bubbles is fine. Anything but *William*. I feel like I’m gettin’ in trouble for not eating my friggin’ vegetables over here.”

“Duly noted,..uh..Bill,” stammered Anne with awkward effort, “Anyways, somewhere in the northern hemisphere on the day side would be a great place to start.”

The pilot obliged, nosing their vessel for the planet’s terminator line, and engaged the main drives. They lurched forward and the darkened world below began to rotate before them, with the bright glow of the day side rapidly approaching their view.

“Here should be sufficient.” said Anne once the Aimless had traveled well into the lit half of the world, “Keep us steady and I will begin my detailed survey of the planet.”

After nearly ten minutes of staring at her screen, Anne let out a frustrated sigh. “Well, the stratosphere is about 98% Nitrogen,” she remarked with a neutral shrug, “but it looks like the concentration of Methane builds pretty rapidly as you head for the surface. It has a strong magnetosphere and shows signs of volcanic activity as well. Beyond that, I can’t tell you much. The atmosphere seems to be generating some form of interference within the cloud layer that I can’t pierce with any of our instruments.”

“Well I guess that means we all get to go on a field trip.” Said Jack with a playful grin as he shot a wink toward his concerned wife, “Mr. Bubbles, please take us in-atmo.”

Cavas complied, muttering something unpleasant under his breath as he dipped into the planet’s gravity well. Upon kissing the upper atmosphere, licks of flame began to curl off of the surface of the front canopy. The orange glow grew in intensity until the effects of atmospheric flight began to buck and jerk the exploration cruiser as it tore through the countless violent jet streams that laced the stratosphere.

When nearing the upper surface of the planet’s endless shell of churning clouds, Cavas

pulled up on his flight stick and leveled them out to skirt along above them. “We’ve got dead-heads below.” Commented the pilot in explanation, “I’ve seen quite a few formations of some kind poking out of the clouds. If we want to get through them in one piece, we’ll need to take it slow.”

“Take whatever pace you need, Bill.” Remarked the Captain, “She’s a new ship, so I’d like to see her have a chance at getting her feet a little dirty before we start busting her up with any hot-shot flying. Might as well lower the blast shield as well, while we’re playing it safe.”

“Good thought.” Agreed Cavas as he jabbed the control to lower the bridge’s protective armor shielding. In response, heavy plates of steel began to slide out, one over the other, on a rail system along the vessel’s canopy supports. The metal shell then locked into place, leaving only a small patch of canopy at the nose to view the outside world through.

Once his shielding was in position, Cavas let off on his throttle and dipped the craft into a controlled shallow descent. It was then a matter of moments before the Aimless was swallowed by the thick clouds, their view all but revoked by choking mist. After only a handful of seconds in the fog, the pilot was forced to bank hard to port in order to avoid a thirty meter wide pillar of *something* that had materialized out of the haze ahead of them. That bank then morphed into a falling roll as yet another column rose at them through the suffocating smog.

“Damnit!” spat Cavas with frustration, “I can’t see a friggin’ thing in this shit! Every single one of my instruments are either dead or jammed. What the hell even is this?!”

“The clouds are packed with silicate particulates,” Explained Anne, “which are scattering our IR and Radar feeds like crazy. To top that off, you can also see we’re EM blind too. Now I’m not certain if this is global or just a localized phenomenon, but I’m guessing that all of this suspended matter in these clouds is generating enough of a static charge to make our baseline electromagnetic readings too loud to return any sensible data.”

“And how in the hell do you expect me to fly this damn thing if I can’t see?” fumed Cavas as he had to make yet another white-knuckled maneuver.

“I expect you to fly it carefully.” Retorted Jack easily, “This isn’t a starliner you’re piloting here. I’ve got no flight plan for you, so stretch your legs a bit, my man, and operate outside your comfort zone. You may even surprise yourself...or, ya know,...kill us all in a horrible fiery wreck. Your call, I guess; but the lack of fire clinging to my face and clothing must mean you’re doing a pretty great job so far, so keep it up.”

“Well, sir,” began Cavas with a stress-worn voice, “I’m definitely not exactly comfortable with what I’m attempting at the moment, so I must be doing something right. I’m trying to take it easy, but these winds are still a bit rough. If I go much slower, we’ll stall out.”

“You need to find a point of reference to follow.” Offered Jack helpfully, “Flying along a surface gives your brain a way to conceptualize your surroundings. Avoiding things and judging their distances becomes easier when you can frame them as objects along a path.”

“Gee, Cap,” spat the pilot sarcastically as he stared out the narrow canopy at nothing but swirling fog, “and which of these numerous lit and immaculately paved roadways should I take? Can you point me to one? Because I’m pretty sure it would lead us all the way to candyland-...”

Then, as if on cue, a soft illumination appeared in the clouds ahead. As the Aimless continued its approach, the light grew from a diffuse glow into a solid tangible tower of incandescent crystal. The column was much thicker than those surrounding it, at about eighty meters across, and it stretched at a sixty degree angle up through the ceiling of haze to soak in the sunlight and spill it across the sky along its length to the unseen ground below.

"If you need a better sign than that," remarked Ravi with slack-jawed awe, "Then somebody's about to get immaculately conceived up in here."

"Shut yer face, Misra." Warned Cavas with wounded pride as he began to swing around the dazzling pillar of radiance, it's glow burning away the haze that choked the world around it.

"It really makes you wonder." Began Volkov ponderously as the Aimless nosed forward to follow the crystal's wide lit surface, "...You think Candy Land has cupcakes? Or would that count as more of a baked good? Trying to decide for when we get there."

The pilot flared his nostrils and allowed a frustrated puff escape them, but he held his tongue. Their way may have been lit, but Cavas was still flying with a paranoid grip. His tension did not drop, in fact, until the Aimless had burst its way from the underside of the planet's deadly clouds.

Once the exploration cruiser had emerged from out of the blinding haze, the armored sheath over the broad canopy began to withdraw. As the steel plates slid away, they left in their place a breathtaking view of a beautiful alien landscape, painted to the horizon in dark blues purples and pinks. The endless ceiling of clouds had reduced the bright daylight above to a diffuse illumination, but the dull landscape was punctuated by scattered columns of crystal that reached high enough through the clouds to capture that sunlight and pour its refracted remains across the surface of the dim world in splashes of vibrant color.

"It...it's stunning!" stammered Anne, her expression matching the equally slack-jawed stares on the rest of the crew's faces.

"Sure beats the hell out of a new mobi and some roses for an anniversary gift, don't it?" laughed Jack with genuine mirth at the sight.

"All I'm seeing is credits." marveled Volkov, "The crystal out there is the optically stable kind. That's why it has so much color running through it. Tech companies will pay major moolah to get their hands on that stuff, and here there appears to be...well, the term 'abundance' seems to under-sell it a bit, doesn't it? To me, useful is far better than pretty."

"You're the classic engineer, Tony," snorted Ravi as he shook his head with mock disappointment, "Always looking at what something can *become*, and never appreciating it for what it already *is*. When I look down there, I see a gorgeous new Cassel for tourists to flock to in the millions. *'The world of endless color'* is what I'd market it as. Why would you ever want to ruin such natural beauty with a mining operation?"

This drew dry laughter from Miller as the old Marine looked to the medic, suspended in the seat next to his own, with a sour expression, saying; "I agree with the goofy kid. We need this

resource for the fight. Natural beauty wouldn't mean much if we were all dead or fleeing from a Vanduul infestation, would it? Those Navy pricks do a good job assuring everyone that everything is fine, and they've got nothing to worry about. All the while, monsters continue to come out of the goddamn sky and senselessly murder entire human settlements. The UEEN likes to strut big and talk tough, but the truth is they're struggling to keep up with the 'Duul. Hell, I heard they may even be having a hard time on the supply side of things too. Apparently they seem to be hoarding all their ore and materials on MacArthur in Killian lately. The not-so-fuzz truth is that we've got the enemy at our gates, and the UEE are hurtin' for this world we've found."

"Wow..." retorted Jack flatly, "Way to take a dump in the punch bowl there, Miller." The heavily scarred war vet simply shrugged in response, evidently disinterested in any commentary on his thoughts. "Anyhoo," continued the Captain, "Are you able to scoop more meaningful data with our sensors now, Anne?"

"Atmospheric sensors are returning good information." Reported Anne distractedly as she attempted to split her focus from her console, "Like I had suspected, the air down here is pretty thick with methane. Beyond that, I have been able to determine that the large crystal formations everywhere are comprised mainly of silicates, while the terrain is returning mostly iron and other ferrous metals."

"Picking up any signs of settlements or technology within range?" asked Jack, his eyes glued to the color-drenched horizon.

Anne tapped at her screen for a moment, then replied; "Negative. But the residual electromagnetic energy in the atmosphere is still raising hell with our scanners, so we could be seeing a false negative."

Jack stroked his chin in thought for a moment before deciding their next course of action; "Alrighty, we'll just have to rely on our other senses. Cavas, keep our altitude steady here and push us to 500 meters per second. Anne, I want you to start taking some focused IR and Radar sweeps of the landscape directly below, looking for points of interest. I'll leave defining what's interesting and worth investigating up to you. You're the scientist on this boat; I just work here."

Chapter 5

After a relatively uneventful hour and a half, Anne finally perked up at something on her display. "Anomaly!" she exclaimed to the silent and lulling bridge.

At first, Jack was startled from his light snooze by the sudden outburst. Then, as his mind stirred and pushed the haze of exhaustion aside, he became acutely aware of the implications of that excitement. "What did you find?" he asked finally, his words cutting straight through a budding yawn.

"A pocket of way unusual heat." Explained Anne enthusiastically, "There's a break in the ice sheet back there, and something beneath the surface is heating the water quite substantially. This could be an excellent opportunity to gather some data on the planet's tectonic activity, if we're lucky."

"Good enough for me." Replied the Captain as he locked his chair back into forward position, "Cavas, Anne will provide you with her point of interest on your HUD. Please find us a suitable landing site nearby. I want rock under our skids when we set down, not ice."

The pilot complied by wordlessly banking the ship to port as he dipped the nose to shed altitude. He fell closer and closer to the landscape, until the slivers of intermittently shimmering crystal grew to the size of whole starships, with a peppering of formations that bested the size of the most impressive of humanity's sky scrapers rising from the surface like static-clung hair.

Among the forest of crystal, there lay a flat area devoid of the tall silicate structures. Cavas aimed for the opening and gently set the ship down at its center amid a rushing plume of fine dust. The suspension on the Aimless' landing gear then creaked as the main thrusters were powered down, surrendering the ship's full weight to its skids.

When the dust finally cleared, the crew found themselves looking out over an endless landscape of ice and crystal that stretched past the horizon in every color-soaked direction. Jack stood from his seat and descended to the bridge's control deck amid the near total silence. As he scanned the room, the Captain could visibly detect a shift in his crew's overall mood. The nearly unfamiliar faces that were now manning his bridge, excitedly looking to him for direction, lacked the bored expressions that he had grown accustomed to over the duration of their long mission. He even saw Miller cracking a smile *without* a hint of malice swirling at its edges, which Jack was almost certain meant the apocalypse was upon them.

Suddenly realizing with a start that they were all waiting for *him* to speak, Jack drew in a deep breath and obliged; "I don't really have a speech for this one, to be honest...and that whole thing before the jump point was something I'd practiced in the mirror since I was six, so I feel I've set an unrealistic precedent for myself here."

The Captain paused and glanced around the room to his crew's continued silence. He then cleared his throat and attempted to pick up where he left off; "That being said, if we want

to make any money off of *finding* this rock, we'll need to collect our proof. Ravi and Miller, I want you to accompany Anne and I for a little trip in the rover to gather said proof. The wind may be throwing some nasty debris, as well, so Can up if you've got it."

"Can up?" asked Ravi apprehensively, "W-What's that?"

"You know," insisted Jack as he started for the rear of the bridge, "as in hop in your can...your armor, my man. Weren't you a corpsman? How have you never heard that expression?"

"I was never really a field guy." Admitted Ravi with a shrug, "I served my entire tour as a surgical technician, well behind friendly lines. I'm not sure what you were expecting, but I'm no combat medic. I've never even *worn* a set of armor in my life."

"Well then today is a special day for you, my friend." Retorted the Captain, "You can find your very first set of light armor waiting for you in the upper airlock. Rack number 3. Get yourself fitted up and meet us in the rover bay in fifteen minutes." Jack then patted the nervous man on the shoulder and walked through the door at the rear of the bridge.

As he was brushing past the raddled medical officer to follow the Captain out, Miller leaned in and somberly whispered; "Welcome to the deep end, Doc." while handing his sidearm to the Aimless' newly crowned *Medic*.

Ten minutes later, Ravi strolled into the rover bay while still tugging at his new chestplate's awkward fit. Jack and Miller were just finishing their pre-deployment equipment checks on the vehicle itself when he appeared, so the young Medic was instructed to join the Captain's wife inside the rover.

She was wearing the standard RSI explorer Light armor, composed of a clean white vac-suit covered with shiny plates of low profile composite armor. Perched atop her shoulder was a head-tracking camera with built in thermal imaging, as well as a grab bag of other devices and sensors to aid in data gathering. On her right shoulder sat a small patch that made up the only adornment on the starkwhite outfit. Poised over a circular background of black, speckled with pinpoints of white starlight, was the bulbous green shape of a cartoon alien head.

It was a fictionalized being with large eyes and a tiny mouth, burned into humanity's popular culture long before mankind ever met their first real alien. The patch was her team's official seal for their expedition to the ruins of Nogo in Gliese. She kept it with her as a reminder of her academic achievement, which was only ironic because she had mounted it to the shoulder of her suit upside-down.

The interior of the vehicle was sealed and contained a breathable atmosphere, but the away team would sit enveloped within their personal pressure suits nonetheless. Once he was strapped in, Anne took the time to show him how to operate the vehicle's remote turret and where to find the stored emergency medical supplies.

By the time that Jack was fastened into the rover's driver position, Ravi was still shaking with enough nervous vigor to cause his suit's wrist joint to clack incessantly. "Dude, you gotta chill out." Urged the Captain as he twisted in his seat to face the Medic, "We're just headed to collect some rocks and do other boring science junk. Nobody is asking you to face an army of Duul today, alright? So just relax and enjoy the novelty of being one of the first humans to put boot prints on this beautiful world of ours."

Ravi smiled and his shoulders seemed to relax slightly, but fear was still flickering in his eyes. Jack noticed this, of course, but mentioned nothing of it. The mild medical officer wasn't a warrior by any stretch of the imagination, but he made no effort to leave his seat as the front ramp of the rover bay began to descend, which the Captain took as a sign of the other man's underlying aptitude for bravery. Always a good attribute to have in a member of your crew, especially one that may hold your life in their hands somewhere down the road.

Once the rover bay's exit ramp had struck the world's dusty and windswept surface, the Aimless' armored rover began to roll forward. The six-wheeled personnel carrier served as somewhat of a relic from the Captain's military past, and was purchased from an old friend who was still in the service. The rover was bought under the table, before it could be processed and stripped down for surplus, so it still contained military-grade armor plating and targeting systems that would be hard to find elsewhere on the civilian market.

As the heavy vehicle proceeded onto the dirt, it left behind deep and intricate impressions of its tire tread through the fine orange-white dust that seemed to coat the ground without end. With the rover finally free from under the chin of the Aimless, Jack pulled up the pilot seat display screen and flipped it to the navigation page. "Nav marker is up." Reported the Captain over the radio, "Proceeding to indicated location now. Keep the Aimless' passive sensors online, and let me know if anything creeps onto the scopes while we're away. If anyone is out there, I'd like to know about them before I'm sitting in their bomb sights."

"Copy that, Captain." Acknowledged Volkov through the rover's internal speakers, "I'll keep working at this busted probe for ya. Command channel is set to issue an automatic warning if any new contacts are detected, so nothing should sneak up on you."

Jack nodded with satisfaction to his wife, fastened into the seat next to his own, then shoved the throttle forward to jolt their vehicle into motion. The occupants of the rover momentarily felt the acceleration, until the craft's inertial dampeners and elaborate suspension system stepped in to sufficiently swallow the sensation. Their journey was to be short, a mere 15 kilometers as the crow flies, but the terrain was rough and littered with bushels of clear crystal that forced the rover to weave its way through narrow paths.

While circling one of these great formations, Jack spotted a 10 meter wide stalk of crystal that appeared as if it had been snapped in half, with its upper portion completely missing from the ground anywhere nearby. "What happened to that one, you figure?" he asked, leaning forward for a better view of the towering structure.

“Hard to know for sure, but I can take a look.” replied Anne with idle curiosity as she pulled up the camera feed on the remote turret perched atop the rover, “I don’t see the removed bit of crystal anywhere, but it would be safe to assume that this formation once stood considerably taller than it does today. The lack of rounded edges along the broken end would suggest that the damage was done relatively recently, geologically speaking, since the planet’s rather effective mode of wind erosion has barely seemed to touch it.”

“You thinking it could have been a meteorite strike or something that broke it off?” Persisted the Captain. He was unsure why it mattered, but something in his gut was irked by the seemingly natural occurrence.

“Unlikely.” Said Anne with a dismissive wave, “A meteorite strike would have been coming in with enough speed to shatter the crystal, not snap it off. Whatever did this was going considerably slower. Perhaps it was just knocked loose by debris thrown in the wind? I don’t know.”

While not wholly satisfied with that answer, Jack figured it was the best he was going to get, so he retightened his grip on the rover’s steering wheel and pressed forward. The terrain had slowly morphed into a sea of gently rolling hills, offering the occupants of the rover fleeting glances of the landscape ahead as they crested each crystal-peppered rise. By the time the vehicle was making its way up the final hill that would lead to the expansive frozen flatlands that lie beyond, the odometer had clocked just over 53 kilometers.

Once the rover came into full view of Anne’s hole in the ice, everyone onboard fell deathly silent. The hole itself was a nearly three kilometer long gash through the ice, with its edges melted smooth, and the whole area featured scattered bits of charred debris as far as the eye could see.

“Well, I think we can rule out a meteorite impact.” Offered Anne flatly.

“What do you think it was that went down here?” marveled Jack with hushed awe, “What would even be capable of punching a hole that big? It’s almost like a station fell out of orbit or something. Just *look* at all that debris!”

Man-sized chunks of heat-blackened metal were strewn about like confetti around the dark and placid water, accompanied by twisted pieces of superstructure sticking out of the ice that easily dwarfed the Aimless in sheer mass. As the rover continued toward the ragged edge of the water, the impressive scale of the scene was thrust into focus. Jack came to a stop next to a 30 meter long sliver of charred metal and began to unstrap himself.

Anne reached over and placed a concerned hand on her husband’s arm. “Jack, where are you going?” she asked with worry coating her words, “Isn’t it dangerous out there? I can get my samples elsewhere.”

“Sorry, love,” soothed Jack with a sad smile, “this trip has gone from a scientific endeavor to a rescue operation, I’m afraid. We have an obligation to check for survivors and figure out what happened here.”

She nodded apprehensively then released her grip on the sleeve of his pressure suit. The Captain then nodded in return and stood to make his way for the rear of the rover. He pushed past the nervous gaze of his medic and the silently inquisitive stare of his security officer before arriving to the rear hatch.

Jack then slapped the control panel at his shoulder and the wide ramp that encompassed the entire rear wall of the rover began to fall. The thick slab of metal didn’t stop moving until its leading edge had bit into half an inch of orange-white sand. The dusting of sediment was anything but static, however. Instead, the fine dunes of dust seemed to migrate across the landscape, dancing along the ice in wind-whipped ribbons.

Jack hesitated in the open doorway then turned to face the occupants of the rover, saying; “Anne, you can focus on gathering the samples you need to catalog. Miller, I want you to head out and look for signs of activity nearby. Maybe some survivors managed to walk away from this. Ravi, you stay in the rover and keep an eye on the radio. You can help Anne as well, if she needs it.”

The Captain met no protest from his crew, so he turned and continued down the rover’s rear ramp. He paused at the end of the metal walkway and took a deep breath, making note to mentally log and savor every detail of his next action. With great significance, Jack stepped forward and planted a boot in the soft dust. As he looked down, watching the wind rush over his foot, he caught sight of a twisted fragment of metal emerging from the sand. The object deflated his spirits, serving as a reminder that, alive or dead, someone had beat him to the surface of *his* world.

Jack frowned at the thought, then lifted his boot to watch the wind sweep his print away; Illustrating perfectly, the insignificance of it ever being there in the first place. With his newly soured mood in tow, the Captain continued out onto the ice. Twenty meters on, he found a sizable lump of wreckage sticking out of the ice that whistled a low hum as the wind sliced past it.

Approaching curiously, Jack pulled the knife from his Medium armor’s chest harness. Once directly in front of the debris, he leaned in close, almost touching the glass bubble of his visor to the object, and scraped at the metal with the edge of his blade. The scorched outer coating scratched off readily, leaving behind the faintest shavings of a dull grey.

What struck the Captain as odd was that the metal seemed exceptionally dense as he wrapped his knuckles across it, but upon investigation it was found to be quite unexpectedly lightweight. His brow furrowed in concentration, Jack activated his radio and said; “Anne, can

you please grab Ravi and have him help you set up the aquatic probes? Bring out all three, because I have a feeling we're going to have a lot of geometry to map down there."

"Alrighty." Chirped his wife's voice through his helmet speakers, "We'll have them set up and ready to swim in about five minutes."

Jack then closed the radio channel and returned his attention to the odd metal before him, that strange feeling of significance tugging once more at his gut as he eyed the dull alloy. He tried to pinpoint the vague impression it was making on him, but he simply couldn't connect the dots; as if trying to remember inconsequential details of a nightmare. All he knew was that some buried part of his mind recognized what he was looking at, and it didn't like what it saw.

The Captain was jerked from his quiet internal debate by the sound of his security officer's voice pouring out of his helmet speakers; "Captain, do you mind coming over to take a look at something really quick? I have a feeling that it's relevant."

With effort, Jack tore his gaze from the wreckage he had been studying and scanned the area until he saw the bulky form of Miller waving him over from 200 meters further out onto the ice. The Captain forced down the swelling sense of dread that had been lingering at the back of his mind, then started toward his comrade.

By the time he had arrived to his security officer's position, Jack saw Miller on his hands and knees with his arm plunged past the elbow in a deep divot that marred the surface of the frozen lake. "Looking for gophers or what?" asked the Captain as he crouched near the prone man.

Just as he said that, Miller's face registered an expression that suggested he had discovered the answer he sought. He pushed himself away from the hole and lifted his bulk to sit on his heels, saying; "This chunk taken out of the ice here wasn't made by any sort of falling wreckage. No way. Not with how smooth and uniform the inner walls of the depression feel. There's also no sign of any shrapnel or other fragments of material inside. This here was made by an energy weapon of some sort, and it wasn't of the hand-held variety, if you catch my drift."

"You thinking a fight went down here?" asked Jack as he inspected the half-meter wide hole for himself.

"Isn't that normally what happens before shit starts falling out of the sky?" retorted the security officer flatly with a raised brow.

The Captain took a moment to stand and scan the landscape in a slow sweeping arc. He turned to his security officer and replied mysteriously; "Maybe...but then again, weapons don't necessarily require a fight before they can be found useful."

Miller eyed his Captain warily, saying; "I'm not sure I follow."

Jack performed a sweeping gesture, showcasing the landscape's pockmarked expanse, then remarked; "I'm sure you've noticed by now the other innumerable holes that are just like the one you found here. Haven't you stopped yet to ask yourself, '*why so much firepower?*' And furthermore, *why did so much of that firepower miss so thoroughly?*"

Miller just shrugged his huge armored shoulders and said; "Dunno. Figured that enough volume of fire alone would account for the overspray. Why does it even matter?"

"Have you ever heard of a man by the name of Eli Dassard?" inquired Jack with a pause, "No? Well I bet you 50 credits that whoever crashed here did."

The security officer's eyes narrowed to slits that regarded Jack with the weight of suspicion. Miller never liked feeling out of the loop, as if he were the only one in the room who couldn't see the elephant at the breakfast table. He squirmed under the expectant silence until he released a resigned sigh that shattered it. "...*because?*" he said with exasperated impatience.

"Eli was the commander aboard a UEE Retaliator bomber that was fighting in a campaign against a local uprising in an outer unclaimed system a decade or so ago." Explained Jack, "He and his crew were on a sortie above an ice world when their engines became disabled through a catastrophic mechanical failure. They began to de-orbit and had no way whatsoever to intervene with their trajectory in any way. Instead of resigning himself and his crew to their fate, good ole Eli came up with a plan instead."

"Goddamn it, Captain!" fumed Miller with urgency, "Can you hurry it up and get to the freakin' point already? I'm freezing my ass off out here!"

"Fair enough." Said Jack with a placating gesture, "Long story short, he sent ahead his entire torpedo payload to bust up the ice at their point of impact. Then he ordered his gunners to blast the shit out of the water for as long as they could on their way down. Turns out that the barrage was enough to superheat the top layer of water enough to create a cushion of steam that sufficiently slowed their ship to survivable speeds before it hit. We learned about it in flight school. They called it the Dassard maneuver and it became a bit of a joke, as in *at least we always have the Dassard maneuver*. Desperate times calling for desperate measures and such."

Miller surveyed the field of twisted wreckage and scoffed; "If you think some bullshit action movie stunt saved *anyone* here, then I suggest you have another look around."

In that moment, as the Captain was drawing in breath for his riposte, Anne's voice poured over the group radio channel; "Jack, I have your probes ready. Where do you want them?"

"Anywhere wet will do." Replied Jack over the radio as he gestured for his security officer to follow him toward the rover. "What we're looking for," he continued over a private channel to Miller, "is down there, not up here. It's likely that nothing survived this, that is true, but it isn't an

impossibility that someone is down there waiting to be rescued. It's our duty to look. I'm sure you can understand that."

By the time they reached the rover, Anne and Ravi were lowering the final aquatic probe into the water. The little devices consisted of a simple sphere with four equidistant sweeping metallic fins and a pair of manipulator arms perched in front of a cluster of cameras and sensors. The probe exhibited no obvious external thrusters or other modes of propulsion, because it was pulled through the water using the magnetohydrodynamic properties of its fins, making for a quick and agile remote assistant.

Jack thanked his wife and the medic, then stepped to the edge of the water with his mobiGlas out. He found the signals of the probes and synced them to his suit, watching with satisfaction as the three icons that signified the devices winked green on his display. The Captain then took control of one of the probes, watching its camera feed on his mobiGlas as it dove deeper and deeper into the darkening waters below.

The image on his screen was that of nothing but blackness, save the errant speck of floating sediment that occasionally passed in front of the lens to momentarily be lit by the probe's powerful spotlight. As the remote machine dove deeper and deeper, the darkness subtly began to give way to a faint crimson glow emanating from the depths. At the twelve-hundred meter mark, the drone found itself amid a churning curtain of bubbles that swirled about the camera in intricate flurries.

Once it had pushed past the occluding sheet of bubbles, the device's temperature warning began to wail. The sound was merely intended as informative, however, as the drone was designed to study the scalding waters around thermal vents, which were much hotter than the seven-hundred degrees that it was currently passing through. The sound never even registered in the Captain's mind though, because the image on the screen had stolen the entirety of his attention.

Rising out of the seabed, half buried in its soft soil, was an angular monstrosity whose silhouette was torn straight from Jack's darkest nightmares. Every detail of what he saw, every line, drew a perfect picture in his mind of what he was looking at; yet his very soul resisted the recognition. Even as the camera view tracked along the wicked looking blade-like structure at the nose of the vessel and down past its gigantic external ribcage, Jack still refused the truth that his eyes provided.

He remained steadfast in his denial up until the moment that the craft let out a pulse of red light that slowly walked its way across the hull in a terrifyingly familiar fashion. His mental resistance to the idea crumbled in a sudden heap at the sight and the true weight of what he was looking at came crashing down around him.

“Anne, radio the Aimless and have Cavas prepare for liftoff.” Ordered Jack urgently, “Miller, I’ll need you to give me a hand with the portable signal relay. The case for it should be stored above the rear driver-side wheel well.”

“Jack, what’s going on?” asked Anne with quick concern, “We just got here, and I don’t have even a third of the samples I need-”

“Damn it, woman!” shouted Jack with broken patience, “We can get your samples somewhere else, for god’s sake! Right now, I need you to focus on doing what I asked, okay?”

Anne wilted at the outburst at first. But, soon enough, her confidence had returned sufficiently for the mousy woman to emit an indignant huff at her husband that was accompanied by an equally ireful hand gesture before she spun on her heel and headed for the rover in silence.

“We got Duul at the bottom of the lake, don’t we?” said the security officer with a sigh, “I *knew* that metal felt familiar.”

“It’s not *just* Vanduul. We are standing directly above the bow of a mostly-intact KingShip...and it’s still alive down there.”

Mention of the word *Kingship* registered a minute flash of fear in the security officer’s eyes, instantly melting away his carefully maintained façade of macho nonchalance. Through suddenly stiff and dry lips, Miller nodded and said; “Well you don’t have to tell me something like *that* twice. Let’s get the hell out of here before the ugly bastards learn to swim.”

The two men did just that, heading for the rover as the wind tore at their backs. Instead of walking up the ramp into the vehicle, Jack swung around to its far side and opened a compartment above the rear wheel well. Inside sat a large black box with a metal handle. He yanked at it, dragging its considerable bulk off of its shelf to plop onto the ice with a heavy thud. The Captain drug the hefty container a few meters away from his rover, then dropped to a knee before it.

Jack unlatched a locking mechanism on the box’s front edge then carefully lifted its lid. Inside was a shrink-wrapped compartment that showcased a single faintly lit button. Jack pressed it and the box hummed to life, emitting a warning beep instructing its operator to stand back. The self-deploying device then shot through the shrink-wrap, unfurling a telescoping stem that sprouted a meter-wide satellite dish at its end.

The Captain once again consulted his MobiGlas and synced the portable signal relay to his suit’s network. As a test of its ability to transmit, Jack reached out through the little dish to contact the Aimless; “Volkov, you still around?” he said as he made his way for the rear hatch of the rover, “I need you to unpack and send out the M.U.L.E. We’re headed back your way.”

The Mobile Utility and Laboratory Equipment drone was designed to work alongside explorers and scientists to conduct intricate field analysis of materials and to assist its human

counterparts with hazardous tasks. It could also be programmed with a set of instructions and let loose in an area of interest to go gather data for itself. It would be able to self-navigate to the crash site from the Aimless and begin its survey without any human guidance after being programmed.

As Jack finished setting up the drone's intended area of operations on his MobiGlas, he nearly bumped faceplates with his wife who was staring daggers at him from the hatchway of the rover. When he lifted his eyes to meet her furious gaze, he realized that she had no intention of stepping aside to let him through.

"Nuh-uh." She fumed shortly, "You aren't headed anywhere until you tell me what's going on here. Why are we leaving in such a hurry? Your ex-wife down there or something?"

Jack placed a reassuring hand on Anne's shoulder, saying easily; "Thankfully we aren't dealing with a Sharon here, as I'm sure she's still safely manning her throne in hell. That just leaves us the Kingship at the bottom of the lake and its few thousand, or so, snarling murder-machines to worry about."

The Captain punctuated his alarming statement with a friendly double-pat on his wife's arm before gliding smoothly past her shock-frozen form that was now firmly rooted to the deck of the rover. Jack was already fastening himself into the vehicle's pilot seat, in fact, by the time Anne was able to regain her wits about her.

"You actually physically saw Vanduul down there?" pressed Anne urgently, her hand clamping tightly around her husband's forearm.

"Not as such," Shrugged Jack, "but I couldn't help but notice that their ship was still intact and, at the very least, partially operational. That can't be a good sign, right?"

"What makes you think the ship was operational?" inquired the science officer with a healthy dose of skepticism.

The Captain sighed and lifted his forearm to address his MobiGlas. He tapped at it for a moment, then found the video clip that he had been searching for. With a curt nod, he sent the file to his wife's own wrist mounted device, saying; "Here, once the drone passes through the layer of bubbles, you'll see that the maneuvering thrusters on the KingShip, all of them, are firing non-stop and boiling up the water around it. That's where those IR readings of yours were coming from. Now can you look me in the eye and tell me that it's impossible for any Vanduul to be alive down there after seeing that? If so, I will go back outside in nothing but my underwear and we can stick around for a whole year, if you'd like. Otherwise, I'd like to think that it is my prerogative as Captain of this expedition to keep my ship and her crew out of unnecessary danger."

"Can you not see how the danger would be worth it in this case?" pleaded Anne with frustration as she watched Jack powering up the rover, "We need to stick around to study this,

Jack! Who knows when we will get another opportunity like we have here? It is imperative that we collect as much data as possible for the UEE.”

“I fully intend on studying the craft,” retorted the Captain calmly without tearing his attention from the readouts in front of him, “But I’m going to do so remotely with the probe whilst safely in orbit aboard the *Aimless*. We simply have no idea whether that ship is full of dead Duul or if it’s ready to burst with a couple thousand warriors that are just itching to swim up here and rip our spines out. The most important aspect of my job as Captain is to keep my crew alive, so this approach is non-negotiable.”

“W-Why would we even stick around in-system?” stammered Ravi between quick breaths, “We are hopelessly outmatched and I just don’t see what we have to gain from lingering here. We have the location of the ship, so why not just get out of here and sell the data to the UEE? Have *their* scientists risk their necks on this one.”

“What’s the matter, Misra?” teased Miller with a cruel grin, “Afraid the water is going to cause your make-up to run? I’m sure we can find some floaties around here for you somewhere...”

“Hey, man, shut up!” spat the Medic, “It’s not my fault that I chose to serve the Empire with my brain and not my biceps. You really think I’m a wuss for wanting to get away from an enemy capital ship? Because I’d call that urge a smart one.”

“No need to worry, Ravi.” soothed Anne understandingly, “While we may lose radio contact while inside the crystal fields, it will be a matter of moments until we are back to the *Aimless*. Once there, we will be quite safe in orbit, I assure you. If anything heads our way, we would have ample time to detect them and QD away. Besides; the more information we bring back with us, the more profit we’ll stand to make.” With that, the Medical officer fell silent; save for the resurging clack emanating from the nervous fidgeting of his armored gauntlets.

The drive back to the *Aimless* took just over twenty minutes and was coated by a thick contemplative silence; a silence earned only when Miller put a stop to Ravi’s anxious squirming by threatening to make him ride on the roof. On the average day, Jack would be against that sort of intimidation, but it just so happened that his security officer merely beat him to making the threat by moments.

Everyone sat soaked in the quiet with one privately shared thought; *What if the Aimless is destroyed when we get there?* The Captain’s mind was then torn from its introspection to the world outside the canopy as his brain registered a flicker of movement ahead. “Miller, get on the turret.” ordered Jack with composed focus, “We have something moving around out there. Seventy meters front.”

“On it.” Returned the security officer, automatically reaching for the turret remote built into his command seat. He pulled up its camera feed and began scanning the area with methodical practiced skill. It wasn’t until a callout on his HUD winked to life that Miller saw what

he was looking for. Little blue letters spelling *MULE* began to shakily make their way across his screen as the little tracked drone crawled into view.

“We have a Friend-Or-Foe tag on-scope.” reported Miller with a sigh, “Looks like we’ve stumbled across our *MULE*.”

“Thanks for not shooting it.” Said Jack with a relieved chuckle, “That must mean we’re getting close to the *Aimless*.” Then, as if his curious thought had brought it into being, a new and very large contact appeared on his radar.

“Captain, are you there?” came Volkov’s voice over the comm, “I found something on that probe that I think you’re going to want to see.”

“We are now within visual range of the *Aimless*.” replied Jack as he peered through the clearing’s swirling dust storm at the flashing landing lights of his beloved ship, “Make sure the front ramp is down and I will meet you on the bridge in eight minutes.”

The Captain was acknowledged wordlessly as the ramp under his cruiser’s chin slowly lowered into the dust. It was then a matter of moments before the rover was being aligned for its trip up the narrow driveway into the *Aimless*’ vehicle hangar. With the magnetic parking locks in place and the door sealed up behind them, Jack powered the rover down and dropped its rear ramp.

“Ravi,” called Anne while everyone was standing to disembark, “Could you please help me carry my crystal sample to the lab? It’s a tad heavy for me.”

The medical officer nodded amicably, his mood measurably brightening, and followed her out of the rover. Jack watched them leave, his thoughts lingering heavily on the situation under the ice and how he could best keep it from killing them all. He removed his helmet and took a deep breath of the non-claustrophobic atmosphere around him. Something about the smell of the air aboard the *Aimless* had a relaxing effect on him, allowing focus to return to his troubled mind.

After shedding his armored pressure suit, the Captain made his way for the bridge. When he arrived, Volkov was impatiently tapping his foot at his console. “There you are!” exclaimed the engineering officer with exasperation, “I would suppose it is my fault for not impressing upon you the urgency of this issue at hand.”

“Alright,” answered the Captain levelly, “I’m here. So what did you find that’s got you so spooked? I’ll bet I’ve got spookier news for you.”

“Two KingShips.” Returned the engineer matter-of-factly, his hands clasped behind his back, with the utmost air of professional pride.

“Two?” gasped Jack, “Well where’s the other?”

“Other?” replied Volkov with surprise, “You mean you already found one?”

“That’s what I’ve been waiting to tell you.” explained the Captain as he gestured for the other man to join him on the lift to the bridge’s second deck, “We found a crashed Kingship under the ice, and it is still partially operational.”

“Wait, *what?*” scoffed the engineer in disbelief, “And you waited to share this important information with me, why exactly?”

Jack shrugged and said with a sigh; “Well can you blame me for being worried that you and Cavas might not absorb the news with much enthusiasm? I don’t really know you all that well, so how was I to know that you weren’t going to roll the hell out of dodge as soon as I told you?”

“Fair enough.” conceded Volkov, stepping off the lift onto the upper deck of the bridge. He then made his way for the holo-table perched in the center of the room and synced his MobiGlas to it, saying; “The probe we flattened was mostly toast, but I was able to reconstruct a few bits of data. It was relatively easy to pull the registered owner and ship of origin, but the main data storage drives were torn to shreds. The only thing of consequence I could scoop was the last transmission it sent, because it was still stored in the transmitter’s cache.”

The young engineer then produced an image on the holo-table and Jack watched in fascinated horror as the blotchy video resolved into the distinct shape of two kingships. They were pictured in the colorful shades of infrared and appeared to have been in orbit around the world upon which they sat now. The behemoths in the clip were intermittently drowned out by repetitive flares of white heat, which made making sense of the scene that much more difficult.

Jack reached for the control panel on the holo-viewer and adjusted the display properties to showcase a greater differentiation in higher heat readings. This had the effect of shifting the deep blue of the kingships’ hulls to a near-black outline. With the adjustment came a sharpness in what they were looking at. The Captain watched in astonishment as the white-hot flares of discharging weapons emplacements emanated only from one ship, splashing in red swaths of destruction across the hull of the other.

“Are...are they *fighting* each other?” asked Volkov with astonishment, “Why do you suppose they would be doing that?”

“Who the hell cares.” Commented Miller lightheartedly as he strolled onto the upper bridge with Anne in tow, “We just need to figure out how to get the ugly bastards to shoot at each other more often. It would make the lives of our Navy boys a whole lot easier. They could sit back and relax while their enemies kill one another off, just like the advocacy does.”

“That doesn’t make any sense.” Argued Anne with a deeply furrowed brow as she studied the image on the holo-viewer, “Kingships are known to be separate entities from one-another,

which is appropriate for the nomadic Vanduul, but there have never been confirmed reports of any direct conflicts between them before. This is unheard of.”

“There’s a first time for everything.” Interjected the Captain pointedly, “Our scientific knowledge of their species can only be derived from what we’ve been able to record *so far*, and it wouldn’t be too crazy to think that two opposing entities such as KingShip communities would go to blows over something like the resources we’ve found here. Besides, the Vanduul are ferociously loyal to their own clan, but there is no evidence that would suggest they hold any reverence for the rest of their species beyond a bit of loose, religiously centered, mutual-cooperation here and there for the sake of breeding and whatnot. Civil war isn’t inherently a human invention, ya know...”

“Point well made.” Allowed Anne with a slight bow of her head, “And to think I had always assumed that you were just napping through all my lectures.”

“Not all of them, love,” replied Jack with a chuckle, “Just the ninety-five or so percent of them that managed to beat my consciousness into submission.”

“I get that it’s weird that they’re shooting to begin with,” said the engineer as he scratched his head in thought, “but would you really call this a *fight*? One of the Kingships there hasn’t fired a single shot. Seems to me it’s content to keep taking it on the chin without returning the favor.”

The Captain shrugged, studying the short looped video for himself, then replied; “Instead of stumbling upon the galaxy’s only pacifist Vanduul clan, I think it’s more likely that their ship was disabled in some way. A fate which I intend to avoid, if at all possible. On that note, let’s get ready to dust off. Where’s Cavas?”

“Down here, boss.” Came the pilot’s gruff response from the bridge’s lower deck, “I’ve been running the spool-up on the engines for the past five minutes trying to clear out all the accumulated dust from around the intakes. We are burnin’ hot across the board and should be spaceworthy in a moment.”

“Most excellent.” Acknowledged the Captain as he powered down the holo-viewer, “Alright, folks, let’s strap in and prep for departure. Anne, I want you to sync the Aimless with our relay on the ice. Since the cloud layer is little shifty, electrostatically speaking, have the control signal switch over to tight-beam as soon as line-of-sight can be established. Cavas, please bring us into a geosync orbit above the hole in the ice at your earliest convenience.”

As the Captain was fastening himself into his seat atop the bridge, the Aimless hummed to life beneath him with a swelling rumble. Swirls of dust then began to dance about the canopy in intricate flurries that blotted out the world around them. The gentle hum reverberating through the deck plate then evolved into a throaty roar and by the time the occlusion outside had cleared, the exploration cruiser was already a hundred meters off the ground.

Jack felt the usual uneasiness rise in the pit of his stomach as Cavas banked hard to starboard, with the ground shifting to appear out the window to his right. What turned his gut was not the inertia of the maneuver, but the complete lack of it. The ship's gravity could keep him comfortably in his seat while the world outside spun like a top, which was well and good in space where there's nothing to really orient yourself to, but watching the ground shift outside with no feedback from your equilibrium tends to mess with your brain a bit.

This queasiness was a phenomenon that commercial shuttle pilots referred to as 'landlock'; a term that was adopted after seeing so many of their passengers vomit while making for orbit. It was something that Jack had always struggled with, and the Captain's wife never missed a chance to poke fun at him for it.

Mercifully, Jack's stomach settled and his unease passed before his wife got a chance to notice. It then wasn't long before they plunged nose-first into the thick ceiling of clouds to push hard for space. To further separate his mind from the vertigo-inducing scene outside, the Captain watched the rear camera feed in his display screen as the Aimless pulled away from the windy little world of ice and dust. With one final shudder underfoot, the exploration cruiser broke through the swirling jet streams that laced the planet's stratosphere and the sky outside the canopy gradually darkened until it gave way to the comforting blackness of space.

Chapter 6

The Aimless sat in orbit, seemingly affixed to the broken ice of the crash site one-hundred kilometers below by an invisible thread that tugged it along in-sync with the gentle spin of the planet. From this distance, the world framed in the canopy looked lightyears different than it had on their initial approach. Experience cast the image before the Captain in a new, harsher, light that seemed to illustrate more clearly the wind-whipped violence that was taking place just below the planet's sleepy layer of billowy cloudcover.

"Alright, Cavas," began Jack in a commanding tone, "keep us in geosync here and cut the main drive. While you're at it, kill the shields and zip up all of our non-passive scanners as well. If we're going to be sticking around while another kingship is in the neighborhood, we're going to do it while making ourselves as dark and quiet as possible."

"No shields?" yelled Ravi in dismay, "Why would we make ourselves so defenseless on purpose? What tactics are these? Are you mad?!"

The Captain sighed heavily, plastering a palm to his face as he explained; "Misra, what effect do you suppose our shields would have against the focused firepower of a Vanduul KingShip? We would be gone faster than a fart out the airlock, I guarantee it. Why advertise our position on both the EM and IR spectrums in a rather magnificent fashion for the sake of gaining a few scant seconds before our certain and inevitable death? Better to avoid detection altogether, yeah? Why don't you leave the tactical decisions up to me from this point on. And the next time you disrupt my bridge with an outburst like that, I'm gonna drag your lanky ass out to Cathcart and drop you on Spider with a badge in your back pocket. We'll see how you appreciate the *tactics* of the pirate lords. Understood?"

When he replied, the Captain could hear the Military forged rigidity, never forgotten by any recruit, in his Medic's voice as he said; "Yes sir. Sorry, sir. It will not happen again."

"First of all," began the Captain in a huff, "cool it with the *sir* shit, alright? It's irkin' me the hell out. Second of all, I don't exactly run military regs, but that doesn't mean I'm not going to kick your ass off my bridge for undermining my command. Choose yourself a turret and keep a watch out for approaching ships. Since we don't have our radar or other sensors going, you'll be our best bet at finding anyone sneaking up on us. Have fun."

"Yes, si-" stumbled the Medic, "Yes, Captain." He corrected as he silently withdrew his suspended seat and dismounted it to head aft. The door slid closed behind him amid total silence; a silence that was broken as soon as the bulkhead hissed sealed, with Miller letting out a boisterous boom of laughter.

"Careful, Miller," warned the Captain with mock scorn, "there's another turret back there with your name on it..."

“Send me wherever you want, Captain,” grinned the security officer, “every job on this boat at the moment consists of me polishing a seat with my ass in some form or another. THAT is something I can do in my sleep, so do your worst.”

“Come to think of it,” said Jack as he stroked his chin in thought, “The cargo bay could use some rearranging, maybe even some old fashion alphabetization, but I can have you do that later. Right now, I think your expertise will be needed elsewhere. Volkov, how are the aquatic probes doing?”

“Swimmers are 14% done mapping the Kingship’s hull.” replied the engineer from his console, “Geometry is streaming in as expected and we should have the crash site fully modeled within the hour.”

“Alright, Miller,” began the Captain with a nod, “I want you watching that geometry data as it streams in. On account of you apparently killing so many of them in your time, you are our resident Vanduul expert, so I’d like you to keep your eyes peeled for any points of entry or signs of recent activity along the hull. I want to know if anyone is home.”

“Jack, I think I have something over here.” called Anne from behind her workstation, “something is pinging the UEE emergency channel, and it didn’t start up until our probes began mapping the rear quarters of the KingShip.”

The Captain furrowed his brow to consider this for a moment before asking; “Is there a way for you to ping in reply without giving away our position? It could be a lure to get us back down there.”

“Technically, due to our tight-beam connection,” explained Anne patiently, “the actual broadcast of our reply will originate from our relay on the ice, not the Aimless. So if anyone were to follow the signal, they’d be lead to our equipment and nothing more. We’re safe.”

“Alrighty then,” replied Jack with a light sigh, “let’s reply with the standard UEE Friend or Foe challenge. We’ll see if our mystery guests pass the test.”

The Captain’s wife complied, sending a short 6-note tune across the E-band that any member of the armed services should immediately recognize. The action was followed by a significant pause, then a set of three sharp tones returned to finish off the melody. “We have contact!” exclaimed Anne as she fumbled with her control board, “We should now be able to establish a data network with...whoever is down there.”

“Not so fast.” Cautioned Jack as he studied the signal for himself, “That alone still isn’t proof that we have a real honest-to-goodness human being on the other end. Vanduul have been known to use our beacons against us in the past. Any way you can set up a voice connection without establishing a data-link? I’d like to keep this at arm’s length until I know exactly what we’re dealing with here.”

Anne looked up from her screen with a sober expression on her face and said; “I don’t think that’s going to be a problem, because *they* are calling *us*. Patching it through now...”

A faint static began to pour from the bridge’s speakers with pops and clicks indicative of a weak carrier signal populating the background. After a moment’s silence, a voice rose from the static: “Hello? Is anyone there? This is Lieutenant Martin DeCappa, UEE Marines, requesting emergency assistance. I have injured down here and we are running out of medical supplies. Do you read?”

“Is there anything that you can do to pinpoint the survivor’s location?” asked the Captain as he shot an inquisitive glance toward his wife.

“All I can tell from here is that their transmission is originating through probe number three, which was scanning near the stern.” Replied Anne, her expression frozen in deep concentration, “I could run a data pulse from the probe itself to get a rough distance from the originating transmitter, but that won’t necessarily point us in the right direction.”

Jack stroked his chin, silently in thought, until the engineering officer spoke up from behind his console; “We could re-task our other two probes to ping the rogue transmitter and use that feedback to triangulate the signal’s point of origin.” suggested Volkov helpfully.

“Do it.” Ordered the Captain, “and try your best to keep those pings within the bandwidth that the original distress message is being broadcast on. No need to be noisier than absolutely necessary with our signal traffic.”

A few short moments later, the research probes had maneuvered into position, floating in a semicircle around the rear of the alien craft. The three remote devices then chirped simultaneously with a high frequency pulse that flooded the UEE emergency band. An automatic reply came almost immediately, and the *Aimless’* computer was quickly able to pinpoint the location of the human survivor’s transmitter.

“Miller,” prompted Jack, “Pull up the coordinates of that signal’s origin on our scan-model of the vessel and see if you can visually identify the transmitter itself. Look for anything that appears out of place or human manufactured. I need to be sure that I won’t be chatting up some ‘Duulie with voice acting lessons when I answer this call.”

The security officer quickly went to work, scouring the indicated section of the alien ship’s hull. It wasn’t long before he found what he was looking for. “No freakin’ way...” marveled Miller with an impressed chuckle, “I think I found the source of the signal, Captain.”

“What are you seeing?” asked Jack as he pulled his security officer’s workstation screen up on his own console, “We got some human tech on-scene?”

“Damn right, sir,” answered the scarred old Marine with a smirk, “and by the looks of it, our survivor down there must have a *gigantic* set of balls on him.”

The security officer then proceeded to send an image to the bridge's main displays for everyone else to examine. What it featured appeared to be a dull grey cylinder, around two meters in diameter and four meters long, that was embedded into the outer hull of the Kingship near the stern. Its front end dug deeply into the alien metal and was held in place by a trio of sturdy legs that sprouted from the device's tail end. Readings of the device came back positive for human-made alloys, and the design sparked a long-buried memory in Jack's mind.

"Is...is that some kinda Nail?" asked the Captain, surprised, as he zoomed in for a better look.

"A what?" squeaked Anne from behind her console, her attention momentarily torn from the signal data continuously dancing across her screen.

"A nail." explained Miller, "It's an orbital troop deployment pod used in UEE strike missions. Had to get certified with them a couple decades ago. They make for a hell of an entrance, but I wouldn't recommend it. Hitting the dirt inside one was bad enough, so I can't imagine what plowing into a hull felt like. Hence our survivor's massive cajones."

"Lieutenant DeCappa mentioned that he had friendlies with him," recalled Jack thoughtfully, "and I know that no more than a single soul can fit inside one of those Nails, so can we have the computer scour our scanned model looking for similar geometry? I'd like to know how many madmen that our friend DeCappa brought along with him."

"Already ahead of you." Answered Volkov, "I have been able to locate twenty-three additional Nails of a variant that I am unfamiliar with. Some are in worse shape than others, but four of them are still giving off a power reading. By the looks of it, they're all embedded into a single side of the Kingship, so their points of origin are likely all from the same launch platform. It also appears that velocity wasn't the Nails' primary mode of penetration, either."

The engineer brought up an enlarged model of one of the more intact pods near the stern, then began to explain his hypothesis; "Do you see on this one how it has three arms coming from the tail end that have folded out and clamped down onto the hull? I believe these were used to secure the nails to the exterior armor plating while a drilling device of some sort bore through to the inside. You can tell they used a plasma drill by how the hull-edges around the nail itself are melted away, not folded in like an impact would usually create. I am one hundred percent confident in declaring this a genuine distress call, Captain."

"Good enough for me." Concluded Jack, "It sounds like we really do have some Marines down there that could use a hand. Anne, please get me on the horn with Lieutenant DeCappa."

The bridge speakers came to life once more, emitting a low repeating tone that signified an outgoing connection request. A quick double beep informed the Captain that connection had been established, so he began to speak; "This is Captain Jack Burgundy aboard the Carrack cruiser *Aimless*. I gotta say, Lieutenant, I'm surprised to be hearing from you all the way out

here. I'm even more surprised at where I found you. Do you mind filling me in a bit on how exactly you got here?"

Static cut in for a moment, but it was soon followed by the stranded Lieutenant's desperate voice; "Thank god you're still there! I can't believe you found us! Did command send you? I *knew* they wouldn't forget about us!"

"Sorry, Lieutenant," replied Jack, "but your command did not send us. We are a civilian exploration craft on an unrelated survey mission. That being said, I'm afraid I must stress my original question. How is it that you found yourself aboard an enemy capital ship at the bottom of an undiscovered world's ocean?"

DeCappa sighed and said; "I am not at liberty to discuss the particulars of my mission with you, Captain."

Jack emitted his own sigh and retorted; "In that case, *I'm* afraid that I cannot put my crew at risk by sending them into a situation that I do not fully understand. Cut the moto bullshit, Lieutenant. I got my stripes on Corin too, likewise with my security officer. You are among your own kind here, my friend, so unclench your sphincter for a minute and let's talk. How and why are you aboard that KingShip? Help me understand, DeCappa, and I can come down there to save your ass."

There was a long stretch of silence, then the apprehensive voice of the Lieutenant returned; "Fine. Whatever will get me the hell out of here. An exploration vessel similar to yourselves, the Icarus, reported seeing a Kingship in this unclaimed system. We tried to interface with them to get a recon report, but we never heard back from em. That piqued command's interest, so they decided to send us out. The UEE had some egghead on the payroll from Esperia that claimed he created a device that could hack one of the Duulie capitol ships to scrape some data. Long story short, they sent us out here to beta test it.."

At this point, the Captain's reply was cut off by an urgent accusation from his engineering officer; "Hack it? Ridiculous! That would require an intimate understanding of their computer systems before one could even begin to attempt to break their encryption. If what you say is the truth, then someone surely sent you to die."

"That was the voice of my engineering officer." added Jack quickly, "and I gotta say that I have to follow his logic on this one. So what happened?"

DeCappa, clearly irritated at this point, came over the channel to explain; "The Esperia scientist said that we would have to make physical contact with a terminal in order to utilize the 'toolbox' thing he gave us, which meant we'd have to board. Boarding is my unit's specialty, so that's why I'm here. Satisfied?"

"Not quite." said the Captain smoothly, "Did you ever get the device plugged in? Did it work?"

“Kinda.” came the Lieutenant’s reply with the verbal equivalence of a shrug, “Apparently the Vanduul don’t bother with any sort of computer-based security system on the inside their ships due to the fact that they always have a tendency to self-destruct when boarded or captured anyways.”

“And I’m assuming this device of yours prevents that then?” pressed Jack with the infinite patience of an imperial Senator.

“Well I’m aboard, aren’t I?” fumed the increasingly frustrated Marine, “There’s still a ship TO find, isn’t there? Yes. It worked, but not elegantly.”

“Not elegantly?” repeated the Captain, “Care to elaborate? I’m sorry for all the questions, Lieutenant, but you need to trust me on this. Every detail is significant when it comes to the lives of not only *my* crew, but *yours* as well.”

There was another sizable pause before DeCappa’s voice returned, this time with a calmer, more level-headed, tone; “I understand, Captain, I do. It’s just that I’ve got injured down here and we don’t exactly have a never-ending supply of O². To answer your question, the device did indeed successfully interface with the KingShip’s computer systems, but its control over them was ham-fisted at best. Essentially, it would scour the ship’s system for specific keywords known to be associated with certain commands. Then, because it had no method of differentiating which command tied to which operation, it proceed to activate those commands all at once. For example, we learned this the hard way when we tried to use the toolkit to open a bulkhead that was in our path. The device went ahead and searched for the Vanduul equivalent of ‘open door’ and triggered the command. All of them. At once. The whole boat was in hard vacuum after less than a minute.”

“So that’s how you took the Kingship down then?” asked Jack, “You vented the atmo and it fell from orbit?”

“We didn’t take down shit.” Spat the Lieutenant, “The original plan was to capture and study the vessel, not swat it out of the goddamn sky. But, when the Duul aboard discovered us humans in their midst, they immediately tried the scuttle the ship. And get this; the keyword that triggers self-detonation is the Vanduul equivalent of ‘Glory’. Well, once they realized that their *glory* wasn’t coming, they called for help. That’s when KingShip number two showed up.”

The Captain nodded in slow understanding, saying; “And the Vanduul idea of helping was to eradicate the fellow KingShip and its shameful *infection*. We picked up a peculiar probe by the jump gate and were able to grab a chunk of video from it showing that battle. Did you know the second one was around when you went in?”

“No, we weren’t.” returned DeCappa sourly, “Our briefing mentioned only a single Kingship in orbit that appeared to be collecting resources. We didn’t have the opportunity to verify that, however, because our entire plan of attack relied on a surprise strike spearheaded by ecli-.er..*stealth* bombers. It was too risky to send a terrapin up ahead for a look because if they

were spotted, the KingShip would've brought up their shields and that would be the end of it. Had no choice but to go in blind."

"Well where's your backup?" asked Jack, confused, "Surely there was some backup nearby for you."

"The tactical risk of the situation necessitated a minimal commitment of resources." Parroted the Lieutenant with a sigh that bordered on a groan, "That's what command told us, anyways. I've always taken that to mean that the Navy sees the mission as a bit of a hail mary, and they don't want to needlessly waste any of their perfectly functional equipment on some loon's odd fancy. Lucky for us, we were expendable enough to make the cut."

The Captain paused and took a moment to shoot a glance toward his wife. He held her gaze with his unspoken request until she, after a small hesitation, nodded with her silent blessing. Resolute, Jack activated the comm and replied; "In that case, Lieutenant, it sounds like I'm the only one around that's going to be able to get you home. Do you have any thoughts or ideas on the matter?"

"Well we have a few boarding pods," began the Lieutenant, "but they won't float worth a damn. Plus, who knows if they'll even be in good enough shape to push off from the hull to begin with."

"Well let's start with those fancy pods of yours then." Offered Jack cheerfully, "Our survey has already identified over twenty of them that are still attached to the Kingship's hull. I will have my engineer take a closer look at what's available to see which among them will be viable for your recovery. Is there anything in particular that we should exclude from the list? Any areas that are unreachable?"

"The further forward you want us to go, the harder it's going to be to get there." Warned DeCappa, "When we realized that the main drives had gone out and we were falling from orbit, I decided to zip the ship back up and repressurize. Now that the central computer is toast, all the bulkheads are sealed and locked down for good. We will have to cut our way through, but there's a lot of flooding to worry about. So we will have to be careful."

"Good point." Replied the Captain as he stroked his chin in thought, "First things first; where are you located within the vessel now?"

"I'm assuming you've pinpointed the pod that has been transmitting our conversation, yes?" asked the Lieutenant, "We are holed up in the room that it pierced. Looks like some type of storage area, as far as I can tell."

"We see it, Lieutenant." Answered Jack as he pulled up the indicated section of the alien ship's hull on his display, "To what degree is your freedom of movement? Since you're still alive down there, it'd be foolish to assume some Vanduul didn't survive as well. Run into any of them lately?"

“Our current zone of operations consists of only this room and the hallway beyond it.” Explained the Marine, “As far as enemy contact goes, we heard scratching at one of the hallway doors while the ship was first taking on water. Scratching went dead a few hours later and haven’t heard anything else since. We’ve been down here for over two weeks, Captain, and I am prepared to do anything necessary to get my people out of here, but I must consider my mission first and foremost. Can we establish a data-link so I can offload my mission report to you? If something goes wrong and we don’t make it, it is imperative that you get this data to the UEE. I can’t stand the thought of all these lives lost for nothing.”

“Can we get it done, Volkov?” asked the Captain

“Possibly,” returned the engineering officer, “But our bandwidth through a single transmitter will create a bit of a bottleneck for us on the upload. However, if we could use DeCappa’s pod to wake and network the other remaining pods, we may be able to widen that data pipe a bit.”

Jack reactivated the comm and said; “DeCappa, do you think you can use the pod in your room to wake the other pods and establish a closed network? We’re going to need more horsepower pumping through that transmitter if you don’t want to spend another couple days waiting around for your upload to complete.”

“Yes,” Answered DeCappa, “but I’m apprehensive to touch the pod’s control panel because I have its onboard breather unit working overtime on scrubbing the air in the room for us. It’s doing a piss-poor job of it, but I still don’t wanna go dicking around with it too much if I don’t have to.”

“I’m sorry, Lieutenant,” interjected Volkov, “But I’m afraid that you’re going to have to. The E-band has built in data streaming capability, so I just need you to locate your rescue beacon and activate its discovery mode. Once you do that, I can take it from there.”

There was then a thoughtful pause before DeCappa’s voice came back over the speakers; “But won’t lighting up my beacon tell everyone in the neighborhood that we’re still home? There’s a second bigass kingship out there, in case you didn’t know...”

“You’ll be fine.” Assured the Aimless’ engineer, “I have my end set up to kill the SOS as soon as a handshake with your transmitter is established. We’re talking a span of milliseconds here. No way that short of a burst could be interpreted as anything other than background noise to the casual listener.”

Wordlessly, the Lieutenant complied with the request by switching on his beacon. The action was then followed by a nearly instantaneous confirmation chirp, signifying an open data connection. DeCappa let out a sigh of relief and raised his comm to speak; “I am now sending you my mission data. It has the Kingship’s layout, design schematics, electronic architecture, defenses, and more. It is absolutely imperative, above all else, that you get this data to the UEE. Help me make sure that all this death will end up *meaning* something. Can you do that?”

“Understood,” replied a solemn Captain Burgundy, “But I’m going to get you home, Lieutenant, so categorize it in your mind as the backup plan. I am going to do everything in my power to make sure it’s your ass sitting through a marathon debriefing at the end of this, not me. So just sit tight and standby for further instructions, we gotta crunch some numbers up here. Aimless Out.”

“What did you have in mind, Jack?” asked Anne with her hand locked to her hip in challenge, “Because if you think that I’m going to let you swim down there to play hero, then you are seriously underestimating my wifely veto powers.”

“No worries, my love.” Soothed Jack, “I promise that I don’t even intend on getting my boots wet. On that note; Volkov, our aquatic probes are designed to recover samples and bring them to the surface, yes? What’s their lifting capacity?”

The engineer consulted something on his console, then answered; “Yeah, they got mag-clamps, but their payload limit isn’t much. About two-hundred and fifty Kilos each, at best.”

The Aimless’ Captain took a silent moment to perform some quick mental math before speaking again; “I’m thinking that if we use all three probes at once, lifting them one at a time, we should be able to tuck our survivors back into their nails for a trip to the surface. We’ll have to *find* a way to make it work.”

“Lifting the pods could work,” agreed Volkov hesitantly, “But only if the Nails can unseat themselves from the kingship’s Hull on their own. Our probes move through the water using magnetohydrodynamic fins, so they won’t have near the muscle necessary to yank the boarding pods out without help.”

“Good point,” Conceded the Captain with a sigh, “Can we use our newly established data connection to reach out through DeCappa’s nail to retrieve a diagnostics report from the other pods? If they have power, they may have enough juice to push themselves free with their stabilization arms. IF the arms are intact and still functional, that is.”

Volkov nodded and got to work on what he was asked. After a minute or so of staring intently at his workstation, the engineer peered up soberly from his screen with an answer; “Two live pods appear to have minimally damaged stabilization legs, but the next best one only has partial use of a single leg. It won’t be enough to push the nail free.”

“Damn.” Cursed Jack, quietly to himself, “And unless our Marines down there are of the obscenely dainty variety, there’s no chance in hell that we’re going to be able to double up in one of the Nails. Even if we could, we’re already pushing our probes’ weight limit with a single occupant as it is...”

“What about explosives?” offered the security officer helpfully, “No need to nerd-up some complicated solution when a bit of good ole’ fashion boom-boom will do the trick.”

Volkov let out an offended huff, saying; “Doing that would have just as much potential of killing the pod’s occupant as it would at freeing them. Not everything can be solved with brute force, Miller.”

The Captain held a hand up to silence Miller’s rising response before it managed to spill out. “You both have a point.” Said Jack calmly, “Volkov, you were saying that the damaged pod still had some use of a single stabilization arm, yes?”

Volkov nodded; “That is correct, sir. But like I cautioned before, it won’t be enough to dislodge the pod. We could try, but I’m afraid the effort would be wasted.”

“Would a single leg be sufficient to at least break the Nail’s seal with the outer hull?” pressed Jack with rising enthusiasm, “Because if DeCappa can set a remote-triggered explosive charge and flood the room that the Nail is sticking into, the water will contain the shrapnel from the blast and amplify the explosion’s pressure wave to pop the pod out like a champagne cork.”

“It’s still risky, Captain,” warned the engineer, “But beggars can’t be choosy. We won’t need much, but we won’t get a second attempt. It’s important that we don’t undercalculate our bomb’s blast str-”

“Two un-capped breaching charges should do it.” Interrupted Miller confidently, “They’re standard issue gear for Marine loadouts, so DeCappa should have a few lying around. The charges pack a hell of a punch, but they’re directional in nature and don’t have a built in shrapnel mechanism. All push, no pierce. It’s our best bet.”

“Fair enough.” Concluded Jack, “I’ll talk to DeCappa and clue him in on what we’re thinking. Volkov, please get to work making sure that you’re going to be able to remotely control those pods when the time comes.”

Chapter 7

After twenty minutes of carefully explaining the plan, Jack set DeCappa to work cutting his way through bulkhead after bulkhead on a mission to reach the three chosen pods. The process was slow and painstaking, requiring the Lieutenant to first drill a small hole in each door he wished to cut through to determine whether or not the room that lay beyond was flooded. As he pushed forward through a seemingly endless set of hallways, he found nothing but asphyxiated Vanduul warriors and flooded compartments to contend with.

The Lieutenant was at this for the better part of two hours before he finally reached the third and final Nail. Exhausted as he was from the strenuous activity, he immediately got to work helping his injured comrades down the confused patchwork of hallways to their pods. After reporting in, through a thick distortion of his own labored breathing, that he had successfully strapped himself into the final capsule, DeCappa settled in to wait for his rescue.

After receiving word that the Lieutenant was waiting on standby, Jack deactivated the comm and spun to address his expectant crew; “Anne, I want you to keep an eye on DeCappa’s incoming data and make sure to create a few backups. Cavas, I would like you to build us a failsafe. Program a probe to head for the jump point and put a copy of DeCappa’s mission data onboard. If we find ourselves in a pinch, we’ll pop that sucker out there as our message in a bottle. We logged our jump point with the ICC, so they’ll send a team to check on us if they don’t hear from me soon.”

“Mr. Misra,” continued the Captain over the ship’s PA system, “please ensure that the medbay is prepared to receive patients. Prioritize your treatment for cerebral and pulmonary injuries. They’ve been down there breathing bad air for quite a while now, so they may need a fair amount of neural regeneration as well. Miller, hop into your favorite eveningwear then get to the shuttle, and make sure you’re equipped to put up a fight when you get there. DeCappa’s mission data is too valuable for us to risk the Aimless as a whole, so we’ll take *Curiosity* down to fish the Marines out of the water and facilitate their evac. Alright, folks. Let’s move it!”

As Jack was brushing past Anne on his way off the bridge’s upper deck, his wife seized his arm. “No hero stuff, okay?” she pleaded with worry drowning her gaze, “I want you to act like a *Civilian* Captain down there. *Major* Burgandy hung his hat up years ago. Got that?!”

Jack smiled sadly, saying; “You know I’ve laid my rank to rest, my love, but I’ll always be a Marine. It is my sworn duty, whether I’m 18 or 80, to aid my brothers in arms at any opportunity that presents itself. I do it because they’d do the same for me. Don’t worry though, because I’ll be back before you know it!” He then pinched her chin affectionately and leaned in to kiss her forehead before spinning on his heel to leave the bridge.

When the Captain caught up to his security officer in the ready room, the aged Marine was already fitting the final articulating joints onto his Achilles heavy armor. The bulky ballistic plating made for formidable protection, but the security officer’s speed and dexterity would be

greatly reduced by the added weight. Jack, on the other hand, chose to don his old Marine issue medium armor, which was much less bulky while still offering decent ballistic protection.

After Miller retrieved a Devastator shotgun and his delightfully overpowered Scourge anti-vehicle railgun from the weapons locker, the two armored men made their way to the *Aimless*' shuttle. The small parasite ship, lovingly dubbed *Curiosity* by the Captain's wife, was a four-seater craft designed to ferry crew to and from locations in close proximity to its mothership. Without an onboard quantum drive, the shuttle was built small, light, and incredibly agile.

Jack took his position behind the yoke and began the craft's intricate startup procedure. Meanwhile, Miller had managed to awkwardly shoehorn his considerable bulk into one of the rear passenger seats; Passing up the co-pilot spot due to its lack of sufficient knee room. As the Captain was reaching to deactivate the docking collar, he heard his wife's urgent voice rise in his ear; "Jack," she breathed with alarm, "We've just lost communication with the probes and I can't raise DeCappa. I think our relay went down!"

"Alright, hang tight," answered Jack calmly, "Once we punch through the cloud cover, I should be able to pick up on those control signals and you can use the shuttle as a relay to reestablish connection."

The Captain then proceeded to punch in the required commands to undock from the *Aimless* and gently used the maneuvering thrusters to pull away from its berth. He decoupled and allowed his small shuttle to drift freely, silently stretching the distance between himself and his beloved Carrack. Once the *Aimless* had shrunk to a fist-sized lump on his HUD, Jack reclaimed the stick and dove toward the windswept planet below.

From orbit, the dusty little world still managed to look quiet and unthreatening, with its whimsical twinkles of refracted color peeking out through transitory gaps in the swirling cloud cover. Soon after beginning his descent toward the surface, the familiar kiss of flame began to glow across Jack's canopy as his craft tore through the ever-thickening atmosphere; its fatal build-up of heat held at bay by the shuttle's sturdy energy shield. Violent jet streams then began to rock the small craft hard as it plunged deeper and deeper into the wind-whipped alien sky, causing the ever-steel Miller to let out an uncharacteristically frightened gasp with each turbulent jolt.

They were soon plunging into the planet's perpetual shell of thick clouds and the security officer's discomfort while peering out the front canopy was clear to see. Luckily for Miller, Jack had a much easier time avoiding the hidden obstacles waiting for them within the haze while piloting his small shuttle than Cavas had had with the much larger exploration cruiser under him. This fact was lost on the security officer, however, because his anxious grip, augmented by the added strength of his powered armor, was still slowly crushing the metal armrest of his seat.

Just as suddenly as it had enveloped them, the mist around the shuttle had dissolved and they broke through the thick ceiling of clouds. Jack then had to consult his altimeter with confusion because, instead of the rust colored soil he had expected to see whipping by beneath him, he saw only another layer of cloud cover below. He switched his MFD screen to an IR camera feed and witnessed through its grainy black and white image the ground he had expected to see, concealed beneath a frothy blanket of churning fog.

Within seconds of pulling clear of the electrostatic storm raging in the atmosphere above, Jack's control board chirped with a notification signifying that it had picked up the faint presence of their dispatched drone's control signals. This prompted the Captain to unbuckle his restraints and lean over the center console, awkwardly reaching for the co-pilot's control board to activate the shuttle's relay. As he flew closer and closer to the crash site, the signal continued to strengthen until it was tangible enough for the shuttle to adequately absorb and relay.

Once fully within range, Jack heard a chirp that signified the Aimless had reestablished its connection to the drone network. The confirmation was then followed by a long stretch of silence from the exploration cruiser, with no acknowledgement from the vessel regarding the relayed carrier signal at all. As the silent seconds stretched into silent minutes, the Captain began to get nervous. Succumbing to his concern, Jack finally activated his comm and asked; "Hey, did you guys make connection or what? Is DeCappa ready?"

After a moment of continued silence, Volkov's voice apprehensively came to life over the shuttle's speakers; "Yeah," assured the engineer hesitantly, "DeCappa said he was good to go, but there's something else, Captain. We lost not only our relay, but the MULE on the surface as well. From what I can tell, it looks like the relay dish went down first. So when the surface rover lost connection with the Aimless, it latched onto the nearest carrier signal it could find to dump its data onto. The memory banks on DeCappa's pod collected this before the MULE stopped broadcasting. Take a look for yourself..."

Once the comm clicked closed, a screen built into the shuttle's center console glowed to life. The image flickered faintly for a moment, then began playing a chunk of footage captured from the Aimless' MULE. The unmanned drone had been investigating some gashes that were burned into the ice when a loud noise of some kind piqued the automated machine's interest. The sound had oddly coincided with a loss of signal from the nearby relay and, by extension, severed the rover from the Aimless' incoming commands; A fact that was displayed for the video's viewers as a warning icon on the drone's HUD.

In the absence of an active control signal, the MULE was programmed to conduct various data-gathering tasks to monitor its assigned area on its own until connection could be reestablished. One of the primary tasks of this mode is to investigate the equipment failure to determine if automated repair would be possible. Halting its inquiries into the deformed ice that had preoccupied it for the past forty minutes, the drone chose instead to follow its programming and redirect its efforts toward seeking out the broken relay.

The camera angle was low to the ground and made few considerations for its viewer as it bounced across the frozen surface of the lake. Headlights mounted to the control arm shone forward, clawing away with little effect at the thick fog that had settled over the ice. Fully enraptured at this point by the drone's fish-eyed perspective, Jack was beginning to feel a bit claustrophobic from the oppressive haze filling the view on his screen.

As the MULE advanced, approaching the relay's last known position, a sudden eruption of cascading sparks leapt into the air twenty meters ahead. As the sparkles of illumination spilled to the ice and danced along its frozen surface, the silhouette of a tall figure briefly flashed within the mist beyond. The Captain heard an involuntary gasp of surprise from Miller and felt his own pulse quicken out of concern for the automated machine, the situation made all the more frustrating by the fact that they could only watch as the nerve-racking past-tense events unfolded.

Ignorant to the very concept of fear, the dutiful little drone proceeded toward the observed light anomaly with renewed curiosity. Slowly, as if fading in from an ethereal plane, the ravaged remains of Jack's portable relay came into view through the thick fog. The device wasn't riddled with bullet holes or vaporized in some kind of explosion, but hacked apart violently by the powerful blows of what could only have been an expertly wielded blade. Neat slices were cut clean through the collapsible relay dish, and its control box was nearly cleaved in half with a continual shower of blinding sparks spilling wildly from within.

The steadily increasing rate of Miller's breathing betrayed the security officer's rising anxiety as the camera view closely inspected the shredded equipment. Jack considered suggesting that a primitive of some local species may have happened across the relay, but he knew, just as well as Miller did, that there was only one creature in the known galaxy capable of such elegant destruction.

A brief flicker of movement was then registered by the drone's forward sensor array, originating from several meters beyond the destroyed satellite dish. Halting its attempts at gingerly poking through the destroyed relay's exposed internals, the drone turned its attention to investigate the detection. The grainy camera view panned slowly, with an infuriating lack of urgency, until the frame froze on a disembodied orange glow, pulsing dimly as it hung suspended in the gloom. Then, without warning, a dark figure materialized around the illumination as it lashed forth from the fog, abruptly ending the recording in a terrifying flash of violence.

"Holy freakin' hell!" shouted Miller in surprise as the shotgun cradled in his lap spilled to the floor. The video's abrupt ending had rattled the Captain as well, and his hand trembled slightly, despite his best efforts, as he reached for his control board to contact the Aimless.

"Aimless, I need you to listen carefully;" began Jack with a carefully measured tone, "We obviously have some hostiles waiting for us on the ground down there, so we're going to be checking in with you every fifteen minutes. If we miss three check-ins in a row, I want you to fire

up the ship and get out of here. Deliver DeCappa's data to the UEE and buy my ghost a shot with all that reward money. Understood?"

There was a long pause before Anne's incredulous voice returned to fill the channel; "Are you kidding me?! There's no way in hell that I would leave you down there. Data be damned! If you thi-"

"Cavas," prompted the Captain over his wife's protests, "The Lieutenant and his men spent a lot of lives getting that data to us, so it would be irresponsible to jeopardize its delivery to the UEE in any way. If we bite the dust down here, I'm counting on you to get the *Aimless* home in one piece. Do you understand your orders?"

"Affirmative, Captain. Mission first." replied the pilot, an ex-military man himself, with an unspoken understanding. Jack nodded, satisfied, and then closed his voice connection with the *Aimless* before his wife could hop back on the line again to deliver him another fresh heap of hell over the exchange. The Captain had always adhered himself to a rigid sense of honor, which was an instinct that had been engrained into his character by his father long before he ever suffered under the watchful eyes of Corin's drill instructors.

Having come from a long lineage of soldiers who've fought for their empire, Jack was used to the idea of 'serving the greater good', which was a lofty concept that his wife, and most other civilians for that matter, had a hard time understanding. Jack's ceaseless compulsion to help had even actually become a frequent friction point in their relationship at first. But, over the years, Anne gradually learned to appreciate her husband's rare spark of selflessness and had begun to view his open heart as a lonely beacon of the human spirit, adrift in a self-centered galaxy. Again, she found that she could only watch as the love of her life dove once more into danger for the sake of a complete stranger.

Chapter 8

“Does this boat even have any guns?” asked Miller sourly, “Because Vanduul ground teams will *always* have air cover of some kind nearby. You can count on it.” As he said this, he was leaning forward, struggling against the bulk of his massive chestplate to squeeze close enough to the cockpit window for him to look out the side of the narrow canopy. The security officer’s expression was tense, but it didn’t appear to Jack like the man was nervous or afraid in the slightest. He looked intensely focused, similar to the way an elite sataball player would run complex strategy through his mind before a match; A professional preparing to go to work.

“Curiosity is toothless, I’m afraid.” answered Jack with an apologetic shrug, “But, if we’re lucky, the Duulie fliers are all sitting at the bottom of that lake along with DeCappa. If we do end up running into enemy fighters, then we’ll just have to rely on speed and maneuverability to get us through.”

“Great.” replied Miller, rather unenthusiastically. The discomfort that the security officer displayed as he fidgeted in his ill-fitting passenger seat wasn’t an unexpected response coming from a roughneck Marine such as himself. The old fashion door-kickers of his time generally had a fixation with heavy armament and tended to consider anything without ballistic plating strapped to it next to useless. Jack could only imagine how Miller’s skin was crawling beneath his undersuit, forced to sit quietly and surrender his fate to the paper mache shuttle beneath him.

“We’re coming up on the landing zone now,” announced the Captain somberly, “and it looks like the fog that gummed up the MULE footage is still hangin’ around. Damn, it’s thicker than hell down there. Well, on the plus side; at least our shuttle will have a little bit of visual concealment from the air while we’re landed. So we got that going for us, which is nice...”

Their small craft decelerated, looping in a wide arc above the broken ice as it shed altitude. Jack slowly brought the shuttle to a stop, hovering ten meters above the surface of the lake for a moment before dipping into the fog to gently set down near the destroyed relay. After completing his landing sequence, the Captain radioed the Aimless to inform his crew of their arrival. As he stood from the pilot’s seat, the first thing that Jack noticed before putting on his armor’s pressurized helmet was an eerie lack of the planet’s characteristic howling wind that had swept so violently across the area mere hours before.

While sealing his visor, Jack’s earpiece came to life with the confident voice of his engineering officer; “Captain, we’re sending the first pod up now. The probes are handling their payload well, so far, and we have encountered no Vanduul resistance yet. The capsule should reach the surface in about two minutes. Keep in mind that its occupant has a broken leg and limited mobility. He’s not going to be able to swim over to you, so you’ll have to snag him out of the water yourselves.”

Jack nodded then gestured to Miller to inquire if his helmet had been sealed. Upon seeing his security officer’s nonverbal confirmation, the Captain proceeded to open the shuttle’s

rear ramp and step outside amid a rush of escaping atmosphere with his rifle poised at the ready. Beyond the doorway, Jack found himself in a world of suffocating fog that seemed to cling to his faceplate, obscuring even his own outstretched hand from view.

To fight back the haze, Miller used a control panel by the shuttle's exit ramp to activate Curiosity's landing-area flood lamps. The powerful lights mounted to the roof of the shuttle didn't do much to burn away the fog, but the men could now at least see the ground in front of them enough to locate the gaping hole in the ice. Jack stood at the lake's frozen edge and stomped his boot across its surface experimentally before saying; "I don't think either of us is going to be able to swim well in this, so we'd best grab the wench. Wanna bring it out here and get it set up while I keep a look out for the first pod?"

Miller obliged, utilizing the augmented strength that his armor provided to lift a large tripod mounted device from its storage container that was situated within a hidden compartment built into the shuttle's floor. He hefted it over his shoulder, along with its cumbersome power source, and carried the equipment to the edge of the water. The security officer found a suitably level spot, then unfolded the tri-pod's legs and allowed the device's self-seating spikes to secure itself to the ice.

Perched atop the sturdy base was a unique winch, designed by the bargain minded Drake interplanetary as a low-cost tractor beam alternative for search and rescue operations. It could launch a magnetic plate, trailing high tension cable, over 800 meters to latch onto a target and reel it back in. Jack liked to equate the antiquated gadget to a modern reimagining of the primitive harpoon guns used by the ancient whalers of Earth; and the imagery of that comparison was especially apt, considering its intended use for the day.

The next minute and a half were spent in silence, with both men keeping an uneasy eye on their shrouded surroundings. Jack then spotted movement out on the water that was quickly followed by the pulsing red light of a recovery beacon. "There!" he reported over the comm, gesturing to the metal cylinder that now floated a mere 20 meters away in the slush-topped lake.

Miller stepped up behind the winch and inserted its portable power source into the base. The device chirped as it was powered on, and its bank of capacitors at the rear slowly grew warm to the touch as they charged for a shot. The security officer flipped open the wench's targeting screen and zeroed in on the floating cylinder. With a gentle squeeze of the firing stud, the wench rocketed its dart out over the water. The magnetic plate found its mark with a hollow thud and a rapid double-beep informed its operator that mag-lockdown had been achieved.

As the security Officer was flipping the control switch that would retract the motorized winch line, he felt a powerful blow crash into him from behind. He sank to a knee from the tremendous impact, robbed of his breath like never before, and then abruptly felt himself being roughly jerked backward. His balance was wobbled and it took Miller a few heartbeats to regain his wits about him before he managed to shift his weight sufficiently enough for a look back.

Upon doing so, his eyes slowly rose to meet the ferocious toothy snarl of a Vanduul warrior, towering nearly a half-meter over him in the choking fog.

For a terrifying instant, Miller thought the creature had run him through, and the nigh-indestructible Marine half expected to look down to see the red-stained tip of an alien blade peeking out through his chestplate. That was until he felt another rough tug at his back, which seemed to click a clear understanding of the frantic situation into place for him. With its unmatched strength, the warrior had managed to lodge its bladed staff into the thick shoulder plate of Miller's sturdy armor and was now screaming in rage while struggling to rip it free.

Taking advantage of his foe's mishap, the security officer dipped his shoulder and threw himself as hard as he could into a forward roll. The surprise of his movement, paired with the incredible augmented strength of his Titan armor, propelled Miller with enough force to wrench the weapon from the Vanduul's mighty grasp. As the armored ex-Marine completed his roll, he was already shouldering his shotgun in the direction of his freshly disarmed adversary.

The security officer suffered no hesitation before lashing out with two rushed blasts from his weapon that struck the alien warrior's undefended upper chest and head. The considerable impact from the rounds snapped the creature's skull back violently, but they didn't hit with enough force to deflect the powerful lunge that the warrior had already set into motion. The limp Vanduul continued its forward momentum, despite its gore-soaked torso, and crashed into Miller to drag him to the ground in a heap.

As the commotion of Miller's encounter near the wench grabbed Jack's attention, the sensors in his suit signaled a motion warning at his six o'clock. He then whipped his head around just in time to see the glowing blur of a second Vanduul warrior charging toward him from out of the mist, blade in hand, at a full sprint. Jack had mere seconds to shoulder his assault rifle before his adversary would be on top of him, but he forced himself to take his time.

The Captain dropped to a knee and took aim with composed concentration. He found his mark and squeezed the trigger, sending a tight volley of boiling energy to bite into the warrior's semi-exposed hip and upper thighs. The searing salvo of plasma tore into the creature's soft tissue, burning away several tendons and important muscle groups that were vital to locomotion. As the warrior continued its vicious charge, its stride widened awkwardly for a step before its legs gave out completely. Still moving at a decent clip, the Vanduul fell to the ice and slid across its slick surface, past its intended target to splash mutedly into the water beyond.

Cautiously, Jack rose and stepped gingerly to the edge of the lake. Weapon at the ready, he methodically swept the shoreline with the flashlight mounted to his rifle. Satisfied that his injured opponent had been claimed by the frosty depths, the Captain turned his attention to locating his security officer. He inched forward through the blinding fog, moving in the direction he had last seen his comrade. For the agonizing thirty seconds it took the Captain to cross the open ice, his only view of the outside world came through the small window that his gunsight offered.

He spotted a figure moving through the fog, just beyond the reach of his flashlight, so he quickly killed the light and dashed several meters to his right in an attempt to further obscure his approach. Fingers tightening nervously around his weapon, Jack pressed forward with bated breath. The figure ahead was tall and broad, its silhouette turning slowly to face the approaching Captain.

“Bout time you showed back up.” Sighed Miller with casual disinterest, “We all-clear or what?” As he asked this, the security officer stood straddled over the grisly remains of his own attacker. The Vanduul lay limp at the foot of the wench, its injuries made obvious by the slowly expanding pool of gore whose epicenter lie beneath the alien’s ruined skull.

“We’re clear.” replied Jack, “Well I’m *pretty* sure we’re clear, anyways. You still have that pod on the hook?”

“I do.” Said Miller with a slight nod, his attention absorbed by the control panel mounted at the rear of the archaic recovery device. The wench then began to whirr with mechanical labor and the heavy cable could be heard scraping roughly against the ice as it withdrew. Soon the scraping sound gave way to a loud crack followed by a deeper grinding that could be felt underfoot as the recovered pod was heaved ashore.

The leading edge of the capsule had an obvious hatchway that sat embedded in hardened armor plating. Aside from its trio of sturdy legs, tucked neatly away into sleek fin-like compartments poised at the tail of the craft, the only object that sullied the cylinder’s smooth outline was a 30 centimeter wide ring that sat perched around the craft’s mid-point like a belt. Inset into the forward facing edge of the ring were a series of nine nozzles that were designed to modulate and focus the flow of superheated plasma as the ring itself rotated around the pod at high speeds using a cushion of magnetic energy.

“Well I’ll be damned.” said Miller with a light chuckle, “They got Marines riding hole-saws into battle now. Looks like I got too old at just the right time.”

“Front hatch is locked.” grunted Jack as he heaved at the seal’s inset handles. Then, abandoning his efforts at the hatch, he wrapped his armored knuckles against the pod in a quick rhythm. The light clangs sang out the opening notes of a popular marching cadence that any Marine would recognize as familiarly as they would their own name. Once the Captain stopped, the tune was immediately picked up by muted thumps emanating from within the pod.

Once the short exchange had concluded, the front hatch began to hiss as oxygen rushed out along its outer edges. When the air pressure had equalized, the thick circular door began to swing inward. Jack shined his light into the hole and was met by the smiling face of a man in Marine issue medium armor that was identical to the dull green plates that clung to his own body. Pale faced with a thick red mustache and fierce eyebrows to match, the young Marine appeared outwardly to be in high spirits, but his masked pain was plain to see.

“You need a lift?” asked Jack with good humor, “I’m Captain Jack Burgundy, and the behemoth to my right over here is my security officer, Miller. Need help crawling out of there?”

“I got it, thanks,” replied the Marine with a dismissive wave. He reached into a compartment that Jack could not see and withdrew a heavy equipment bag. The Marine handed it up to the Captain, who then quickly seized it and passed it off to Miller.

“The name’s Simms.” remarked the Marine with a drawling accent as he heaved himself to the open hatchway, “Corporal Alan Simms, Captain, and I never thought the sight of another man could be so goddamn beautiful. Thanks fer comin’ down to get us.”

“Don’t let my wife catch you hitting on me like that, Corporal.” chuckled Jack as he offered his hand to the man, “She’s the jealous type, and a bit of a biter if you get her worked up enough.”

“Lucky you.” laughed Simms as he accepted the Captain’s hand and heaved himself to the opening. Jack couldn’t help but notice how stiffly the young man was carrying his right leg as he struggled out of the hatchway, so he did his best to avoid jarring it as he assisted him down to the ice.

“I see that you’re pretty banged up there.” remarked the Captain neutrally as he helped the injured Marine to his feet, “We have some Med-Pens and a few stronger drug patches for pain in the shuttle if you need them.”

The Corporal supported himself with an arm around Jack’s shoulder while they started to walk and said; “Nah, I’m good. Gotta keep my head clear and my brain workin’. My leg might be a bit of a shitshow, but they ain’t done nothin’ to my trigger finger yet. So prop me up in the shuttle with a good line of sight and I can drill any of the ugly buggars that try to sneak up on ya.”

Jack nodded silently, then heaved the Corporal into motion. His efforts were met with a bark of pain from the injured Marine, but the Captain held him firm in his grasp and started for the open ramp at the rear of the shuttle. While inching their way slowly across the ice, Jack’s ankle was seized from below in an unseen but powerful grip that sent blinding pain flooding through his mind. The vice pinning him in place from below seemed to squeeze tighter and tighter until he felt as if the armor plating around his boot were beginning to crunch under the pressure.

The Captain started to lose his balance, so he roughly pushed Simms in the direction opposite of the mysterious force drawing him into the fog below. Jack was then jerked forcefully from his seized leg and fell flat to his back with the mist rushing in to blind him. He looked down and kicked frantically at large powerful fingers that engulfed his ankle, but his attacking foot was quickly seized by another oversized hand.

That was when an angry set of alien eyes emerged from the fog below, clawing its way up Jack’s legs with ferocious intensity. The Captain reached for the rifle mounted to its attachment

point on his chestplate, only to have it swatted away immediately. The injured warrior trailed ruined legs that twitched uselessly behind it as its hands tore at Jack's chestplate in a frenzy.

Jack brought down his hard armored elbow onto the top of the alien's head repeatedly in a quick flurry of strikes; but they served only to slow the creature, who seemed to shrug them off as if they were the light kiss of droplets in a rainstorm. As the Captain continued to uselessly chip away at his foe, the Vanduul proceeded to claw at the ice, closing in on its prey with a hunger fueled by pure animalistic fury.

The massive warrior then hauled itself up to come face-to-face with the human, staring its victim in the eye with an expression that could be interpreted only as profound hatred, before suddenly springing into a wild attack of flashing fists. The alien's gauntlets came crashing down onto the side of Jack's helmet, burying the edge of his visor deeper into the ice with every blow.

The Captain tried to push his adversary away, but he could feel himself losing the contest of brute strength as the onslaught from above continued. Jack briefly considered yanking the pin out of one of his grenades in a final act of stubborn defiance, but, before he could move to do it, a heavy metal boot came thundering from out of the fog to hammer the creature in the side of the head.

The Vanduul's neck bent to a grotesque and impossible angle, then the creature slumped to the ice with jerking spasms dancing through its extremities. Jack took a moment to catch his breath, then rolled over to thank his colleague; only to be blinded by a bright blue flash that had materialized in the haze above the downed warrior's head. Once the afterimage had faded from his vision and he could adequately see again, Jack identified the source of the flash as the tip of Miller's shotgun, just as it let out another belch of blue energy.

"You gotta keep shootin' 'em till they're dead, Captain." chided the security officer with a light hearted smirk, "And it takes a whole lot of the good stuff to keep 'em down for the count. You were a Marine, right? How in the Verse were you under the impression that an injured Vanduul was any less dangerous than a fresh one?"

"I was a CAS pilot." Shrugged Jack as he accepted the other man's hand and pulled himself to his feet, "I've killed my fair share of Duul, but until today it had always been from behind the stick of a Hornet. Never had cause to deal with them up close before, so I never did. Ornerly little bastards, aren't they?"

"That would be the understatement of the century, Captain." Chuckled the massive security officer while lightly propping the injured Marine against *Curiosity's* rear hatch. Miller then bent down and handed the man his sidearm, saying; "You good to shoot? Can you huck a grenade?"

Simms nodded as he accepted the weapon. Miller then stepped into the shuttle and retrieved a satchel from under one of the passenger seats. Tossing it to Simms, he said; "Here's a big 'ole bag of grenades for you to play with. Just mind your aim, Corporal, because we gotta

stay out there to fish your friends out of the drink. So your job will be to keep the uglies off of my ship while we're busy with that. Rah?"

"Ooh-Rah." Responded the Marine with a curt nod as Miller stepped away. While they were talking, Simms had strategically positioned his limbs then locked his armor's knee and hip joints in both legs to give himself more of a sturdy base to lean on. The action alleviated some of the weight being forced onto his damaged leg, which helped to quiet the fresh misery that accompanied every accidental twitch of the limb. From his protected position, the immobile Marine had a 170 degree field of fire and could more than adequately see enough through the fog with his hand-held spotlight to sufficiently watch his rescuers' flank as they continued their work.

After several tense minutes of waiting, Jack finally received warning from the Aimless that the second pod was about to breach the surface. He was reluctant to peel his nervous gaze away from the shifting fog behind him, but he did so nonetheless; focusing all his attention on the placid, yet foreboding, waters. Hearing nothing but his own labored breathing and the pounding of his heartbeat echoing through the interior of his helmet, his anticipation gnawed at him as the lake remained still. With every unnerving second that ticked away, Jack could feel an almost tangible danger sense pulsing at the base of his neck; urging him to spin and face the threat that was undoubtedly stalking him, unseen, through the mist.

Then, announced with a muted splash, the second Nail breached the surface a dozen meters from the ice's ragged edge. Moments later, a blinking red light began pulsing dimly through the haze, effectively denoting the pod's position as it bobbed gently in the slush. Miller zeroed in on the faint crimson glow and fired the wench's magnetic dart out into the gloom. The projectile struck with a solid clang, followed by a whooping fist-pump of celebration from the Aimless' security officer.

"That's two for two in limited visibility, Captain." boasted Miller, "Care to take the bet that I go three for three? A hundred creds says I do."

"Okay, Miller," agreed the Captain with a sigh, "If that's what you need to motivate yourself to do your job quickly so we can all get the hell out of here sooner, you're on. Just get this pod on the ice and help me carry its unconscious occupant to the shuttle. Your tank-ass isn't going to fit inside, so I'll climb into the pod and pass him out to you."

The Nail was then reeled in and dragged up onto the ice to rest next to the first recovered Pod before Miller proceeded to disconnect the wench's electromagnetic dart and retract the remaining line. Jack approached the capsule and scoured the hull near the hatch for something to unlock it with. He located an inset handle that, when pulled, revealed a shielded control panel beyond. Noticing that it had not been code-locked, Jack struck a command and the thick circular hatch at the nose of the pod began to hiss with escaping atmosphere.

When the whoosh of air subsided, the Captain was able to push the thick armored door inward on its sturdy hinges. Shining his light inside, he was not greeted by a smiling face like he had before. Instead, his beam of illumination revealed an inert form on the floor of the pod that was encased in another set of standard issue Marine armor. Jack scrambled inside and took a knee near the Marine's head to check the suit's vital signs.

Upon gazing into the Marine's faceplate, the Captain discovered the serenely unexpressive features of a young woman. She was attractive, despite masculine short-cropped hair and a jaw that sat a little wide for classical beauty, but Jack knew that the woman, the *Marine*, at his feet would resent the fact that he had noticed anything about her appearance in the first place beyond the rank insignia emblazoned into her shoulder. With a small wince of self-reproach, the Captain went to work preparing the unconscious *Marine* for transport.

He accessed her armor's built-in interface and discovered that DeCappa had already locked it down for medivac. Every joint and flexpoint on the suit was seized up completely, with her fingers carefully laced together over her stomach. Upon checking the suit's logs, he discovered the reason for the lockdown. She had sustained heavy head and neck injuries, so she was placed into a chemical induced coma to combat intracranial swelling and her armor was locked down to prevent further damage while being jostled about. He would have to be careful with her.

Experimentally, Jack reached under the woman's shoulders and lifted. She rose from the floor, stiff as a statue, and he was able to set her shoulders on the ledge of the front hatchway. After propping her in place, he stuck his head out the hole and called for Miller's assistance; "She's froze up for medivac, but be careful because we may have a spinal on our hands here. I'll pass her out, then we can both grab an end and take her to the shuttle. From there, we can drop her off with Simms to keep an eye on while we snag DeCappa."

The security officer nodded and they went to work, delicately guiding the unconscious Marine out of the pod to set her onto the ice. On his way out after her, Jack noticed a large gear bag marked *LCPL Juno* stowed in one of the equipment cubbies below, so he heaved it with him as he climbed from the Nail to follow its owner. After that, it was a fairly simple task for the Aimless' rescue team to carry the lance corporal to the shuttle and place her under the protective care of her squadmate.

By the time they had gotten Lance Corporal Juno squared away, Volkov had already called to inform them of the final Nail's imminent arrival. As Miller was stepping up behind the wench, DeCappa's pod came bobbing to the surface. It was listing slightly to the side as it sat floating fifteen meters from the edge of the ice, and its crimson recovery light glowed dimly. The security officer activated the targeting sight on the dart launcher and carefully zeroed in on the Nail for his final hundred-credit shot.

While squeezing the firing stud, Miller was blinded by an overwhelming glare of red energy that tore from out of the heavens above. The volley of plasma struck, flash-vaporizing a

patch of water that sat mere meters from the edge of the ice where he had been standing. The potent impact split the ice sheet and sent a surge of blistering heat to rush over the security officer, the pressure wave sending him tumbling like a ragdoll as follow-up salvos advanced to consume the wench in a fury of smoke and flame.

The surprise attack was then followed closely by the familiar whine of a Vanduul scythe as it screamed by, concealed in the fog overhead. "Air support's here." Came Miller's strained voice over the comm with a cough, his bulky form still lying in an motionless heap on the ice.

"Simms," barked Jack over the radio, "Kill the lights on the shuttle and shut the reactor down! They're using EM and infrared to target through the fog. The wench was probably the loudest signature here, due to its charging capacitors, so they likely thought it was our ship."

Seconds after issuing his order, Jack watched the lights on the shuttle wink out, leaving him in total isolation amid a suffocating cloud of mist. The Scythe could be heard streaking by above again, but no shots were fired as it swooped past a second time. External audio boosters built into the Captain's suit helped him follow the low whine of the alien engines while the craft moved in a slow arc around the area. As he listened intently, the faint sound suddenly increased in pitch, signifying that the enemy fighter had just dipped into another attack dive.

As Jack had anticipated, red lances of energy once again sprouted from the sky. The shots cut through the fog to consume DeCappa's defenseless pod in a boiling maelstrom of steam and vaporized metal, sending bits of armored steel raining from above. What the Captain had not predicted, however, was the cataclysmic boom of return fire that had emanated from behind him. The chest-rattling overpressure from Miller's Scourge anti-vehicle railgun momentarily seemed to rob Jack of his breath as its hypersonic projectile ripped through the cloud cover overhead.

Miller's rebuttal was followed nearly instantaneously by a dazzling blossom of blue flame that illuminated the clouds above as the devastating round struck its target. The resulting fireball consumed the Scythe's cockpit and blew off its main thruster housing, causing the alien fighter craft to plummet into a crystal pillar and erupt into an amorphous cloud of glowing scrap that tumbled its way across the frozen landscape.

"God damnit!" raged Jack as he kicked a piece of scrap thrown from the destroyed wench, "Did you see if the son of a bitch got DeCappa?"

"You think I'd come all this way just to get vaped in a floating coffin?" came a new voice over the comm channel, "I don't think so."

"How in the hell..." marveled Miller, still shouldering the smoking frame of his massive anti-vehicle weapon.

“Once I heard that Scythe overhead, I decided on a swim instead of a Viking funeral.” chuckled Lieutenant DeCappa over the radio, “Now can someone please help my ass out of this water? I’m not exactly very buoyant over here...”

Jack trotted over to the edge of the lake and, sure enough, found DeCappa clinging to the rim of the ice. He offered his hand to the Lieutenant and heaved the armored man ashore with a grunt of exertion. DeCappa then rose to his knees in an effort to stand, but quickly plopped back to sit on his heels with exhaustion.

Feeling the urgency of the moment tugging at him, Jack insistently offered his hand once more to the worn out Marine at his feet and helped him up. DeCappa then braced himself on his rescuer and they started for the shuttle, it’s still-darkened silhouette barely discernable through the fog. While making their way to the craft, they stumbled upon the corpse of the warrior that had seized Jack earlier, causing the Lieutenant pause.

“Hold on a second.” urged DeCappa, “Let me get a closer look at your friend here.” The Lieutenant then took a knee and leaned down to inspect what was left of the dispatched warrior’s ruined head and chestplate. After a quick examination, DeCappa cursed quietly to himself then rose to offer an explanation; “This guy here isn’t from the clan that populated the kingship at the bottom of the lake. His markings are all different and, by the looks of his lighter armoring, he likely counted himself among the elite warriors of the opposing clan. I think our pals from Kingship number two have finally decided to crash the party.”

Jack, having come to the same conclusion himself minutes earlier, nodded gravely and replied; “I figured. How else would they have been able to launch fighters? I know Scythes are impressive spacecraft, but Duulie ships can’t swim any better than ours can. There’s definitely more where that one came from, so let’s hurry up and get the hell out of here before the mothership figures out that its scouting party has gone missing, shall we?”

DeCappa agreed with the Captain’s assessment and both men rose to rendezvous with the injured Marines aboard the shuttle. After Miller brought up the rear with his railgun resting in the crook of his arm, he sealed up the craft’s rear hatch and wedged himself uncomfortably into a passenger seat. Jack took his position in the pilot’s chair to begin *Curiosity*’s ignition sequence, smiling with satisfaction as the craft’s displays winked on. The humble scientific vessel then hummed to life as DeCappa took his seat in the co-pilot’s chair next to Jack, busying himself immediately with the craft’s intricate suite of sensors and scanners.

A light vibration trembled the deckplate, then the fog outside the canopy began to swirl wildly as the shuttle rose slowly from the ice. Jack ascended rapidly, rocketing out of the ground level haze and into open sky in a matter of seconds. Once he was sure he had pulled clear without pursuit, the Captain reached for the center console and activated the comm to contact the Aimless; “Aimless, this is *Curiosity*. We have a full bus and we’re headed home now. Don’t fire up any systems just yet though, because we have reason to believe that the second Kingship is still skulking around here somewhere nearby. ETA is twelve minutes.”

“Copy that, Curiosity.” replied Anne, awash with relief, “We’ll prep for the injured and pour a few drinks for you. Just get back to me in one piece, okay?”

“Wouldn’t dream of trying anything else, my love.” assured Jack, allowing himself a private smile at the sound of her voice.

“Drinks?” huffed Simms with good humor, “How about a steak or three?”

Miller smiled and clapped a bulky gauntlet on the corporal’s armored shoulder, offering; “When we get back to the Aimless, I’ll share a packet of my favorite Terran beef pasta with ya. It’ll pair quite nicely with some of the Cestulan whiskey that I swiped from the Captian a few weeks ago. I imagine it will taste lightyears better than the recycled piss that you’ve been living off of recently.”

Jack chuckled and called over his shoulder; “Hey, you sneaky little a-hole, that was for my anniversary! You owe me *two* bottles now...of an *older* vintage, got that? Unless, of course, you’d rather take it up with Anne. I wouldn’t advise it though. That woman can make any Marine DI look like a fussy primary school teacher if you piss her off well enough.”

Miller laughed and said; “I believe it, Captain. I was there while she was trying to install the new sensor array that *somehow* ended up getting smashed into a million pieces. Poor Volkov avoided her like the plague for a week after that. If you make *me* break the news about the whiskey to her myself, then there’s no way in hell I’m goin in there without this.” He smiled and wrapped a sturdy knuckle against his chestplate, which drew soft laughter from the shuttle’s other occupants.

Curiosity then reached the planet’s thick shell of clouds and dove into them with confidence. Jack kept his hand on the throttle, pinning the drives to their maximums, as he climbed higher and higher into the turbulent storm that was raging within the veil. Eventually their craft punched its way out of the haze and into a layer of free air, swept clear by one of the hostile world’s many interweaving jet streams.

Almost as soon as they broke free of the sensor dampening fog, DeCappa spoke up from the co-pilots seat; “Two contacts, twenty clicks starboard and they’re coming in fast.” The Lieutenant fiddled with his control board for a moment, then continued; “Looks like a pair of stingers and they will be within firing range in...shit. Missiles inbound!”

Jack then saw two new blips appear on his radar, snaking their way rapidly across the windswept sky toward the shuttle. He dipped the craft’s nose and pulled hard to port, sweeping wide to skirt along the top of the clouds below, but the incoming munitions adjusted their flightpaths with minute precision and continued to close in.

Each time the shuttle was bucked and juked, the missiles would follow *exactly* along its flightpath to steadily whittle away at their trailing distance. This gave Jack an idea, banking the craft starboard into a collision course with a wide stalk of crystal. Eyes darting between his

readouts and the rapidly approaching column, Jack watched with growing discomfort as the blip signifying the first missile crept closer and closer.

At the last possible moment, when the missile icon was nearly overlapping Curiosity's, Jack faded left then jerked his flight stick as hard as he could to the right. The action sent the shuttle into a rolling bank that squeezed its occupants into their seats with nauseating g-force. A split-second later, a flash lit the sky as the missile struck the crystal and the shuttle rocked violently with a loud reverberation through the hull.

The flight stick seemed to shudder in Jack's grip and was slow to respond to his commands. "We're hit!" he growled as he fought to regain control of the unruly craft, "The missiles are set for an air-burst and there is no way in hell that I'm going to be able to dodge another one like that."

The second missile had swung wider than its predecessor, missing the column entirely, and was now looping in a lazy arc to reacquire its target. Jack observed the missile's flight path on his radar, frantically racking his mind for a way to stay alive. His efforts to regain altitude were for not and he barely had command of the vessel's trajectory as it fell rapidly from the sky.

"Miller," he prompted with a calm that sounded alien to even his own ears, "Grab the portable generator out of the survival pack and crank it to full power. GO!"

Visibly confused by his command, the security officer jumped into action nonetheless. He pushed the inert Lance Corporal aside and threw open a hatch in the floor to retrieve the shuttle's bag of survival gear. Miller dove inside and retrieved the kit's portable emergency generator and switched it on, cranking the output dial to its maximum. "Done." he reported with sharp attention, fixing his Captian with an expectant gaze.

"Now drop the rear hatch and toss it outta here! Hurry!" commanded Jack, grinding his teeth as he anxiously watched the second missile closing in on the radar's readout. Miller lunged for the rear of the cabin and slapped the rear ramp's control pad. He held the small generator up to the slowly widening crack as the door lowered and dropped the device out as soon as it would fit through.

The second that the generator slipped free from the shuttle, Jack completely killed the craft's reactor. As power to the ship ceased abruptly, the faint illumination offered by the shuttle's interior lights winked out, followed by a queasy feeling in Jack's stomach when the inertial dampeners deactivated. Their trajectory changed quickly and the shuttle began to fall from the sky, causing the occupants of the craft to begin floating freely within their restraints.

Moments later, a muted thump could be heard outside as the second missile reached the tumbling generator and detonated. The explosion sent a hail of shrapnel pinging off the rear of the shuttle, with a few pieces threading the gap in the partially lowered ramp to embed themselves into the roof above the passenger seats. Upon realizing that they had somehow

survived the detonation, Jack fired up Curiosity's reactor again; manually skipping its automated warm-up cycle to pour all available power into the craft's retro-thrusters.

The inertial dampeners struggled for a few seconds then failed entirely, violently throwing everyone forward into their restraints as they decelerated hard. The ship dipped into the clouds at over 100 meters per second, and Jack struggled to maintain his control over it while scanty seen pillars of unforgiving crystal whipped by them to either side.

Suddenly, their luck ran out and the shuttle clipped something from below, sending the craft into a wild tumble. Jack continued to fight the stick uselessly as the world outside the canopy devolved into a blurred smear of color. He never gave up, even as everything around him faded into the darkness of unconsciousness.

Chapter 9

It started with a gentle ticking. A nebulous sensation that encompassed the entirety of Jack's consciousness for what seemed to stretch on for an eternity. On endless repeat, those asynchronous crackles of life from the outside world slowly coalesced into the familiar sound of metal contracting as it cooled from a high heat. The quiet cacophony was then joined gradually by the incessant presence of an unpleasant new sensation. A foul scent had begun to creep its way into his awareness, souring the restfulness that the oblivion of unconsciousness had provided him. Jack gagged in protest and his body riposted with a flood of pain rushing into his mind that drowned out everything else in his perception.

His eyes shot open with a wave of agony as he felt every molecule of air leap from his lungs in a desperate gasp. He was vaguely aware of a tug pulling him against his fastened restraints and had a tough time shaking his disorientation at first. When Jack's vision restored, however, understanding of his surroundings came into focus as well. The shuttle had flipped during the crash and he found himself hanging upside down, suspended over a crushed front viewport. A cursory investigation of the scene before him revealed a pool of blood that had been steadily collecting on the fractured glass below, and in a fashion that suggested the rhythmic drips of crimson had originated from somewhere on his own body.

Jack's side was ablaze with a throbbing ache that reignited with every fractional twitch of his torso. He struggled against the pain to inspect his body, prodding his armor to feel for damage. When his search had reached the lower half of his right rib plate, the Captain ran into something protruding several centimeters from the protective outer layer of his suit. When he tried to pull at it, a blinding surge of anguish swelled to stop him in his tracks.

In a sudden jolt of realization, the gravity of the Captain's situation came crashing down upon him. The rotten smell that had been assaulting his nose and eyes was in fact methane from the planet's hostile atmosphere. The epiphany jerked Jack out of his daze and thrust his mind into action. He had a leak in his suit and, judging by his light-headedness, had precious little time to seal the breach and flush the deadly gasses that were seeping in to seal his fate.

Then, before his wheels of thought could fully be brought into motion, Jack felt a hand on his shoulder press him firmly into his seat. The action was followed a heartbeat later by an unfathomable rush of anguish that erupted from his chest as the protruding object was torn out of him. Mind still reeling, the Captain felt something seize his arm and a second chirp of pain bit into the inside of his elbow.

Warmth then started to spread from his seized arm, migrating up his shoulder and down his chest, with each beat of his heart dispersing the comforting heat further across his body. As the sensation enveloped his wound, it seemed to quiet his suffering under a wash of instant relief. It then wasn't long before the effects reached his mind and the haze around him began to slip away.

DeCappa was in front of him, kneeled on the upturned ceiling of the shuttle while he closely examined Jack's chest. The lieutenant reached for what looked like a modified DYNAPAK that was fastened to the rear of his belt and brought it forward in his grip. The handheld medical device was pressed against the hole that had been punched into Jack's armor and DeCappa shot him an apologetic nod before activating its white-hot delivery nozzle.

A searing foam rushed forth to sink into Jack's wound, filling the deep laceration with an antibacterial mass of anti-shock meds and stimulants that would stop both his bleeding and his suit's equally deadly oxygen leak. The self-expanding concoction was uncomfortable as it hardened, but his recent med-pen injection was doing an admirable job at helping him ignore it.

"Captain Burgundy, can you hear me?" asked DeCappa with an appraising squint, "It looks like a chunk of crystal may have tickled your liver a tad, but you appear to be in pretty good shape otherwise. Need a hand getting down?"

Jack nodded and reached to release the latch on his restraints. The buckle slipped free and he came crashing down onto the lieutenant's shoulders; who then carefully righted him and set his feet to the floor. The Captain sank to a knee, but allowed himself only a single steadying breath before turning his attention to the wellbeing of his crew; "Where's Miller?" he asked with unintended urgency, "Did we lose anyone?"

DeCappa offered the Captain his hand, saying; "We're all a bit banged up, but nothing that'll take any of us out of the game. Your security officer didn't seem very worse for wear, so he went out to check the perimeter and is keeping a lookout for incoming scouts. Juno is still under and I got Simms checking our gear for damage. I don't know how in the hell we survived that, but I do know that you were the one who made it happen. Regardless of our current situation, I would like to thank you for coming down here to get my Marines, Captain. God knows you didn't have to, but you did it anyway. For what it's worth, I respect that."

Jack accepted the man's hand and pulled himself to his feet. "Just doing my job as I always have." he replied with a shrug, "When a fellow Marine needs a hand, Lieutenant; they get one." The Captain then smiled and patted the younger man on the shoulder as he brushed past to examine what remained of his shuttle.

Lance corporal Juno was still lying motionless on the floor next to an equipment bag, her fingers laced together and resting peacefully on her armor's chestplate. Her face looked serene, as if the shuttle's plummet from the sky hadn't even managed to stir her from her afternoon nap; but closer investigation of her suit's vital signs revealed a different story.

The impact of the crash sent Juno's intracranial swelling into overdrive, kicking off a chain reaction of severe seizures. A quick Check of the armor's med log revealed that DeCappa had been forced to stave off that threat with a dangerously high dose of neural sedatives. She was stable, but her blood oxygen level was low and her heart rate was sluggish. He manipulated her oxygen mix to boost the purity a tad, then rose to leave her be.

Meanwhile, Corporal Simms sat at her feet busying himself with the important task of re-checking the functionality of everyone's weapons since the crash had strewn them about the cabin. He was propped against a wall, gently bobbing his head rhythmically and mouthing something silently to himself as he worked. A stack of P8SC submachineguns stood neatly arrayed to his side, each with its breach locked open and shining with a meticulous sheen that could be brought on only by the idle fidgeting of a soldier with nothing better to do.

The Captain even noticed some serious wear marks on the receiver near the ejection port of the rifles, as if the paint had begun to rub away after days on end of constant polishing. It struck him as odd at first, but, then again; spending three weeks trapped aboard a hostile alien capital ship at the bottom of an undiscovered lake on an undiscovered world, lost in an unknown system, was generally the type of life-altering experience that had a tendency to give folks some weird habits.

Oddly enough, Jack could relate. He remembered his time being stationed on picket duty while in the service himself; Nine months, non-stop, of waiting at full combat readiness. All day, every day, he would perform walk-down after walk-down of his Superhornet, checking every component, weapon, and sensor array for perfection; time and time again. It even devolved into pure superstition after a while, where Jack would completely rerun his component calibrations if the diagnostics returned something trivial like too many eights in a row.

The Captain figured that the Corporal's fixation on his rifle and its cleanliness wasn't only a non-issue, it was a useful non-issue. Simms looked a bit off, but he wasn't likely to turn his weapon on anyone but the enemy. That much was obvious from the way he periodically spat the word '*Vanduul*' under his breath during his odd little mantra, as if it were a curse word. Despite the young Marine's outwardly visible quirks, the man hadn't completely lost his marbles...yet.

Every soldier is susceptible to their own brand of OCD if they're out in the black long enough. At first, it always starts as a desperate attempt to avoid the onslaught of boredom; but it can quickly evolve into a compulsion, an itch that needed to be scratched. Many soldiers fixate on their weapons or equipment, but a few, a *dangerous* few, spend their free time obsessing over the enemy. Simms appeared to be a little of both.

Jack made his way to the back of the craft, studying its open rear hatchway. The flipped shuttle's exit ramp was stuck half open, creating a low hanging awning of sorts that the Captain would have to duck under as he stepped out. Crumbled red rocks, peppered with glints of shattered crystal, then rolled underfoot as he cautiously moved beyond the threshold and into the light. Emerging from beneath the overhanging ramp, Jack's breath caught in his throat as he looked up.

Towering nine hundred meters into the sky above to pierce the underside of roiling clouds, tinged orange by the dying sunlight, stood a massive pillar of luminous crystal. The eclipsing structure was flanked by a pair of similar monoliths that were half its size, fanning out on either side to effectively dominate the skyline. Roughly 80 meters in diameter at its base, the

central pillar leaned with a severe angle that cast a shadow over the scene. The churning froth of clouds above offered life to the low sun's illumination as its rays trickled through to dance across the crystal's pearlescent sheen, twisting the light to splash a dazzling array of shifting hues throughout the clearing below.

Curiosity had come to its final resting place at the base of the trio of pillars, leaving a rough gash through the rust colored dirt leading up to them. Jack found himself in an area, about two-hundred meters in diameter, that was mostly flat and devoid of crystal, save for the sparse clumps of glittering rock dotting the ground randomly within. Surrounding their little clearing was an endless forest of twinkling light, made up of smaller formations of the planet's unique pillars of living color; stretching beyond the horizon in every direction.

Standing atop a small pillar at the far edge of the clearing, staring silently off into the distance through an optical scope pressed tightly to his visor, was Miller with his shoulder-fired railgun resting at his feet. It was only now, in the quiet of the moment, that Jack noticed for the first time the deep gash in the rear of his security officer's right shoulderplate. He took a moment to consider the sheer force that would be required to bite into armor like that using only a blade, and the thought sent a cold shiver down his spine. The creatures that were now undoubtedly hunting for them weren't only amazingly strong and resilient, they were also driven by a fanatical zeal that boosted their already terrifying combat effectiveness to nightmare levels.

As Jack watched the orange glow of the sun dipping lower and lower toward the horizon, he felt the tug of panic starting to settle in at the back of his mind. Their chances of fighting off an attack in full daylight were slim enough, but they would undoubtedly be overwhelmed by the enemy if they were discovered post-nightfall. The notion lingered as a dark storm cloud over his mind, poisoning the Captain's every thought with a knee-jerk urge for self-preservation.

But it was his harsh training on Corin, and the long years he spent in command solidifying it, that demanded he keep a level head on his shoulders. It was his job, now more than ever, to slow down, think with a rational mind, and effectively lead those who were relying on him. While many would despair in the face of inevitable destruction, Jack was surprised to discover that he, himself, found it quite liberating. With no particular objective to speak of that he could fail in any way, he and the Marines were free to focus on what they did best; kill the enemy.

"See anything good, Miller?" asked Jack over the radio as he continued to stroll toward his security officer's perch. Miller's broad form lowered the binoculars from its visor and spun to face the Captain with a wave. He held a finger in the air, using the universal gesture for '*Just a moment*', then abruptly stepped off the column; falling gently to the ground at slightly jarring $\frac{3}{4}$ G.

The hulking security officer's heels struck the dirt with a heavy thud as he grunted; "Well, I dunno, Cap. I guess that would depend on your definition of 'good'. Saw a couple Duulie patrol craft making sweeps a few klicks to our southeast about ten minutes ago, then lost sight of 'em

over the horizon. That means they're looking for the crash site in the correct general area, but at least they haven't found us yet."

Jack nodded as he scanned the sky in the indicated direction, saying; "Well I think it's a foregone conclusion that they'll find us before too long. Any thoughts on how we can bring the pain to them instead of just waiting around for the hammer to drop?"

"I doubt they'll be coming at us via land." replied Miller with a shrug of his massive shoulders, "Since the terrain in the area is so treacherous, they will most likely have to rely on aerial scouts to spearhead the search. Then, when they finally do spot the shuttle, they'll probably send out a landing craft or two to mop up any survivors. I was thinking that I'd wait around for one to show up, then take it out with the Scourge. At the very least, it will put them on the defensive for a bit and bloody their nose. If we can get them reeling hard enough early on, we can press our advantage to greatly cut their numbers or even revoke their numerical superiority altogether. That will depend entirely on the level of concentrated violence we can direct toward the enemy."

"It's a good start, for sure," agreed Jack with a thoughtful nod, "but we also have to think of something to spring on them once they do inevitably get boots on the ground. No matter how much violence we send down the firehose at them, they'll eventually be coming at us on foot. I want to make sure that we are ready when that happens. We may not be able to pull off a win here, but I'll be god damned if those toothy freaks ever forget the monumental beating that I intend to lay on them before the day is out."

That was when DeCappa's voice joined the conversation from over Jack's shoulder; "You want to inflict maximum casualties on our reception committee, eh?" he prompted with a sinister grin, "I think I got just the thing in my gear bag. If we down a landing craft, we may kill a few in the crash, but that thing'll burst with baddies like a piñata chalk full of pissed-off ugly. I say we funnel those 'Duul into taking cover at this end of the courtyard, then blast their hidey-holes to hell with remote charges. We can open fire from the shuttle at first to draw them in, then spring an ambush when their positioning is right. That would make it simple enough to push them where we want them, so I say we bury some det-packs out there and go fishing."

Jack took a moment to consider the nuances of the proposed plan and found himself nodding with impressed approval. "You're pretty sharp, Lieutenant." he mused, "Did ya know that?"

DeCappa chuckled and said; "The sharper the stick, the deadlier the spear. I've had my old man telling me that since I was old enough to work an airlock. It's served me well so far, be it ever at the cost of my social life, but I suppose everything has its limits. Unless you've got a King-Splitter fleet up there that you haven't mentioned yet, we can hope for nothing really beyond being pounded into the dirt."

“True,” shrugged Jack, “I have no fleet up there and, if all is well, the Aimless is almost to the jump point now. It is also true that we will likely be, as you eloquently put it, *pounded into the dirt*; but that doesn’t mean we can’t be pounded into the dirt ***with style.***”

Chapter 10

Once the explosives had been strategically buried, Jack and Lieutenant DeCappa each found themselves a perch atop a pair of pillars on either end of the open courtyard. From their elevated position, they set themselves to work visually scanning the distance for incoming Vanduul ships. As the sun's light continued to dip toward the horizon, the clouds above darkened to a crimson and the colorful twinkles of refraction that were playing off of the planet's endless landscape of crystal started to dwindle.

Just as his mind began to wander, dwelling on thoughts of his soon-to-be widowed wife and the life she would undoubtedly build for herself with her cut of the mission's rewards, Jack saw a flicker of movement in his peripheral vision that snapped him from his reverie. Off to his left, about five kilometers out, he saw the faint glow of a ship's drive as it slowly lumbered across his field of view. With a start, he keyed his radio to warn the others; "Enemy ship spotted. Five clicks southeast, moving west. Simms, you ready with that radio squawk?"

"Affirmative," replied the Corporal from his hiding place within the shuttle, "E-band squawk prepped and ready for execution."

"Send it." Commanded Jack, unconsciously holding his breath as he watched the Vanduul's faint engine trails crawl over the distant landscape.

In response, the corporal activated the shuttle's distress signal for three full seconds then killed it again. The short burst was just enough to get the attention of any ships combing the area, but its duration wouldn't be enough to draw an exact location from. Jack heard the squelch of the E-band in his helmet and watched the distant ship with bated breath, silently willing the craft his way.

As if on command, the alien pilot obliged; swinging wide and low to nose in Jack's direction, skirting the tops of crystalline formations by mere meters as it closed in. The soft distant glow of the ships engines swelled to long blue-white cones of glowing heat, signifying the Vanduul pilot's mounting impatience and illustrating his elation at finally locating his helpless prey.

"Looks like they've heard our invitation," came Miller's voice, dripping with the man's a signature nonchalance, "I'll make sure their door prize is ready when they get here."

"Okay, but take your time and make the first shot count." Urged the Captain as he strained his neck to look up toward his security officer's lofty roost. Miller had scaled the large central overhanging pillar and dug himself into a crevice that was positioned directly over the center of the courtyard, about twenty-five meters from the ground below. If any ships wanted to approach with a good view of the crash site, they would have to come in from beneath the

crystal; Directly underneath the over-armored security officer, lying patiently in ever-building anticipation of his role to come.

The alien ship was close enough now for Jack to determine its variant through the sleek silhouette it left in his binoculars. Closing in from nine-hundred meters out was the sweeping maroon hull of a Vanduul Crawler, which was a boarding craft that could easily deploy more than a dozen warriors to the battlefield at once. Not only was it an effective delivery device with stout shielding to rely on, the Crawler would also offload its deadly cargo under the protection of several recessed turrets that could be brought to devastating bear on any landing zone.

Everybody knew their part in the plan. Everybody was ready and waiting silently for the Crawler to approach, patiently watching it draw nearer as the seconds burned away. Maintaining quiet composure while the superiorly equipped enemy closed in was an immensely difficult task, especially when one's mind was practically screaming at them, with all the urgency that eons of evolution can instill, to either fight or flee.

There is no human-held instinct for waiting idly by as danger comes not only knocking, but stepping through the threshold to make itself at home. It was unnatural and required training of the highest caliber to master. Luckily for Captain Jack Burgundy, he just so happened to be in the company of some very high caliber individuals that day.

Not a single shot was fired from the Marines' collection of scattered hiding places; not even as the alien craft dropped below the overhanging pillar and slowed to a creep, looming menacingly above the crash site. Its forward lights activated and began methodically sweeping from left to right, brushing aside the courtyard's refracted hues to reveal the rusty red reality of the rock's true color with each passing stroke.

A hatchway near the rear of the alien craft then started to slide open as the faint shimmer of energy enveloping the ship began to dissipate. A bulky silhouette filled the doorway momentarily, and Jack's heart sank into his stomach as he watched the towering warrior that had created it step into the light. The Vanduul took a moment to look around with a snarl before leaping out of the suspended craft to fall a full ten meters, landing in a crouch at the center of the courtyard.

After hitting the ground, the agile warrior wasted no time finding his balance before darting to cover within a nearby cluster of rocks. Heartbeats later, a second warrior had just hit the sand and a third was in the middle of stepping out of the Crawler when a loud boom reverberated through the courtyard. In response, the craft yawed hard to port and three unprepared members of the alien landing party came tumbling out of the open doorway.

Miller watched over the bulky frame of his still white-hot railgun as the craft below spat thick gray smoke in churning billows. He stood there, humorlessly observing the Vanduul pilot through the front canopy of the Crawler as it struggled to regain control of the doomed vessel. The alien ship's array of maneuvering jets then seemed to sputter and fail as the tail end began

to spin out of control. With its sweeping dovetail striking hard against a column of crystal, the craft's nose plummeted into the dirt under a plume of red dust.

The Crawler's cockpit struck the ground first, crumpling in on itself like a discarded beverage can as the craft's inertia sent it into a wild roll across the courtyard. Tumbling out of control and flinging wreckage into the air, the ship decimated everything in its path until coming to an abrupt stop against an outcropping of crystal at the extreme edge of the clearing. The newly minted crash site sat inert amid a fine cloud of dust only for a handful of seconds before enraged Vanduul warriors began spilling from the craft's interior.

"Fire!" commanded Jack over the radio as he squeezed the trigger of his own rifle, its scope trained on the exposed neck and collarbone of a warrior who was hurriedly climbing out of the craft's smoking hatchway. The image in the Captain's gunsight showed red streaks of light reach out across the open courtyard, impacting their target as bright splashes of sizzling energy that danced up the Vanduul's shoulder and onto the side of its head.

As Jack's shots took to the air, they were joined by a barrage of accompanying gunfire from the rest of the Marines. With the assault igniting from so many hidden directions at once, it was nearly impossible for the disoriented Vanduul warriors to form a cohesive response to the onslaught. As the alien landing party scrambled to cover under the human's relentless attack, three of the creatures were cut down while crossing the open courtyard.

From his elevated viewpoint, DeCappa watched as the enemy scurried about in their panic. To his grim satisfaction, many of the fifteen warriors that the Lieutenant had identified chose to seek refuge within the very same clusters of crystal that he had prepared for them. He entered a command into his MobiGlas and a new HUD element came to life on his visor, displaying ghostly boxes over the scene to denote the locations of his planted explosives. After quickly selecting the packs that were buried under their entrenched enemy, he smiled as the confirmation window hung in his view. "Thunder." boomed DeCappa into his radio; and the courtyard erupted into a hellscape of dust and flame.

Rocks, dirt, and splinters of crystal blasted outward; peppering the area with a deadly shower of natural shrapnel that shot high and wide. Pebbles of debris fell from the sky to coat the entire area, clinking off of even Jack's distant faceplate as if he were standing beneath a hearty downpour of hail. While the dust slowly began to settle, short burps of gunfire could be heard intermittently as the entrenched Marines expertly finished off a collection of injured and immobile Vanduul left lying helpless in the wake of the earth-rattling detonation.

The silicate dust in the air was partially gumming up the sensors on DeCappa's suit, but as far as he could tell; twelve of the fifteen Vanduul warriors had been consumed in the explosion, with the stragglers either buried under rubble or still dug into rock formations that were not destroyed in the blast. The enemy's ranks were decimated, but, to their credit, the surviving Vanduul warriors didn't take long to shake off the setback and reignite their attack.

The staccato reports of alien weapons discharging soon joined the melee from two separate clusters of crystal, with both groups focusing their fire on a small collection of rocks near the rear of the crashed human shuttle. Their concentrated assault had Simms hunkering low as the incoming streaks of plasma blasted away glowing chunks of his stone refuge. With his cover wearing into ineffectiveness, the Corporal found himself pinned down with nowhere to go.

Realizing his squadmate's rapidly deteriorating situation, DeCappa quite literally leapt into action. The Lieutenant hurled himself from his elevated hiding place, barely slowing his descent with an augmented squeeze of his gauntlet around the safety line fastened to the crystal column. He hit the sand with a practiced roll that flowed smoothly into a sprint, covering forty meters before yanking a grenade from his chest harness and priming it with a steady thumb.

His athletic dash brought him to a waist-high group of rocks that sat just under twenty meters away from the group of warriors who were assaulting the Corporal. DeCappa planted himself behind his newfound cover and heaved the grenade; sending it in a high arc that ended with a satisfying clink into his enemy's cover. The incendiary device detonated with a rush of flame, consuming its immediate surroundings in a cloud of cleansing crimson. The concussive force of the blast wasn't enough to kill any of the entrenched warriors outright, but the flood of searing heat was sufficient to drive the two aliens backpedaling from out of their hiding spot and into the open.

Taking advantage of his newly exposed enemies, Jack squeezed off a series of tightly controlled bursts from his energy rifle; watching through his weapon's magnified scope as the fingers of glowing death reached for his foe, biting into an exposed section of the stumbling creature's neck and jaw. The warrior reeled in response, its arms flailing about limp and unguided as it fell lifeless to the dirt. Witnessing this fresh angle of attack, the dispatched warrior's charred comrade spun to return fire toward the Captain's column of crystal.

The Vanduul's deadly retort forced Jack to hunker low at the rear of his perch while salvos of plasma relentlessly chipped away at the hardened crystal face of the pillar. The Warrior's attack had forced it to step back and stand taller, however, which put the creature within reach of the security officer who lay silently in wait from above.

Miller opened fire with his borrowed submachine gun, using its battered iron sights to ill effect. His rounds struck home with a wide dispersal pattern, sending many shots wide to uselessly spatter the sand. The handful of rounds that did manage to find their target, however, bit into the Vanduul's armored shoulder and stitched him up his left side. With his second controlled burst, the security officer was rewarded with a hail of sparks as the warrior's weapon was struck. The hand-held device belched with green flame then clattered to the ground as it was discarded by its enraged user.

Howling with fury, the injured warrior spun to face DeCappa. As the final rounds from Miller's submachinegun splashed into the dirt at the alien's feet, the creature dashed forward with a terrifying flash of speed. Covering the 20 meter distance to DeCappa's chosen

fortifications in four great bounds, the Vanduul leapt high into the air to soar over the Lieutenant's rock. As the creature landed, it withdrew an ornate blade from a hidden sheath and brandished it menacingly toward the human.

DeCappa rose his weapon to fire, but it was wrenched from his grip by a powerful blow from the blunt edge of the Vanduul knife. As soon as his submachinegun went flying, the lieutenant was forced to duck under the sharp tip of the blade that had rebounded immediately from the initial strike. While still bent at the waist from his narrow dodge, DeCappa felt the alien's foot lash out to connect with his gut in a crushing blow.

The kick sent the Lieutenant to the ground in a heap. He tried to scurry away, but found only solid rock at his back as the Vanduul approached to loom over him. The warrior then snarled and raised its blade above its head for the killing blow, only to shudder suddenly and drop its weapon as a spark danced off it. The Vanduul knife fell to the sand and sank into it, blade first, less than a meter from where the Lieutenant was laying.

Momentarily distracted by the rounds of submachinegun fire now pouring in from the shuttle's direction, the Vanduul did not notice the human at its feet lunge for the dropped blade. With one smooth motion, the Lieutenant seized the knife and swept it as hard as he could against his adversary's right ankle. To DeCappa's surprise, the impossibly sharp blade passed straight through armor, muscle, and bone to lop the limb off completely.

The Vanduul shrieked with pain, reflexively hopping into the air to clutch at the bloody mass of its new stump. The alien then lost its balance and fell to the ground, writhing in agony as DeCappa rose to a knee. The lieutenant reversed the oversized knife in his grip, then plunged its cruel tip into the warrior's chest. His attack did not have the intended effect, however, because the alien proceeded to grab him roughly by the throat and jerk him closer.

DeCappa could feel the slats of metal that formed a protective shell around his neck beginning to deform under the immense pressure. He tried grabbing the knife and wrenching it around in his foe's chest, but the alien only squeezed harder in response. Seizing his pistol from its thigh holster, the lieutenant pressed its muzzle firmly to the warrior's stomach and pulled the trigger wildly. The shots rang out dully, muffled by the alien's thick body, until the pistol's slide locked back into its empty position.

With the warrior's grip loosened by the point-blank attack, DeCappa was able to wrench himself free. He grabbed the hilt of the knife and tore it from the creature's chest, eliciting an unnatural howl of anguish that was abruptly cut short as the lieutenant brought the blade back down in a rough stroke across the alien's neck. The Vanduul's head rolled away smoothly, ending their desperate struggle for survival in a brutal instant.

As DeCappa was finishing off his foe, Jack and Miller were kept busy by the precisely placed volleys of tightly controlled plasma coming from their final entrenched enemy's position. By now, the warrior had developed a pretty good understanding of where the humans were

hiding, so it made simple work of bouncing between the Captain and his security officer to keep their heads down. Using narrow gaps within its protective cluster of crystal to shoot out from, the creature was next to impossible to hit while it remained within its natural bunker.

After two full minutes of this pointless exchange, the Captain grew frustrated and activated his radio; “We don’t have time for this hide-n-seek bullshit. We need to flush him out NOW, so hold back and prep for some cover-fire on my mark. Once we have his head down, lieutenant, I want you to close your distance with him. I need you to get close enough to put another one of those incendiary grenades of yours at his doorstep. Then it will be up to our Duulie friend as to whether he would prefer to burn to death or step out and take a bow. Makes no difference to me.”

Jack heard confirmation clicks over the radio from all of his comrades, then gritted his teeth with anticipation as he gave the signal to open fire. All at once, the courtyard erupted into a hellish echo chamber of gunfire; flooding the air with the staccato pops of submachinegun fire and the all-too-familiar whizz of ricocheting rounds. The Vanduul warrior did his best to return fire at first, but the onslaught was too great. Forced to hunker low within his protective cover, the alien’s weapon fell silent.

As soon as the warrior’s head had dropped from view, DeCappa lunged over his own cover and began to sprint across the courtyard. His dash took him through an area littered with blasted crystal, but the lieutenant was able to effortlessly weave through and vault over the shattered pillars that were strewn about before him. He finally reached a fallen column that sat ten meters from his enemy’s position and dropped into a hip-slide that took him behind its protective bulk. The Lieutenant lifted the final grenade from his chest rig and primed it, keeping his thumb firmly over the activation toggle.

He snuck a peek to judge distance, then lightly lobbed his explosive device in a gentle arc that sent it rolling directly up to his enemy’s hiding spot. Two heartbeats later, the cluster of faintly glowing crystal erupted with a red flare of blinding flame that burned for a full three seconds. There was then a fifteen second long span of absolute silence before a towering form came stumbling from out of the crystal, loosely clutching a blade and aimlessly placing one huge foot in front of the other. After walking clear of its cover, a misstep sent the creature and its weapon falling to the dirt in a heap.

The Lieutenant stood there eyeing the crumpled Vanduul with caution while it shook weakly in short jerking spasms. Laboriously rasping through every breath, the warrior watched the human approach with defiance carved into its alien face. DeCappa met its gaze levelly and tried to read its foreign features, attempting to understand why its eyes were burning with so much hate. It was only then the Lieutenant realized that the warrior’s spasms weren’t involuntary motor movements elicited by its devastated musculature at all; they were the fruitless efforts of the Vanduul to will its ruined body to attack until its last breath.

With an unbidden stroke of inspiration, DeCappa lowered his weapon and knelt to seize the alien's knife from out of the red sand. He studied it, running his gauntleted finger across its unique handle and taking note of the intricate scrollwork etched into every square millimeter of the hard metal. It was known that a Vanduul's only truly personal possession was their blade, given to them as the single trinket that forever tied them to their familial roots. As he took in the elaborate design that was painstakingly hand-carved into the blade, it became evident how emotion must play such a pivotal role in the tradition.

The ornamentation across the primitive weapon was an expression of a lifetime's worth of words that its designer wished to say to the blade's wielder, condensed into the tangled lines across that hardened alien steel. When his eyes returned to the warrior on the ground before him, the Lieutenant noticed that the creature's gaze was now affixed to the blade in the human's undersized hand. DeCappa looked down at the knife, then back to the Vanduul.

Before he, himself, even knew what he was doing, the Lieutenant unhooked his submachinegun from his chest plate then cast it aside into the dirt. Reversing the knife in his grip, the human regarded the alien at his feet once more and saw a different look smoldering in its eyes than it had been sporting earlier. Its thrashing had calmed and its features had softened slightly, if you could call it that, from the acid hatred of a mortal enemy to the cold level stare of a soldier facing a dignified death. Without hesitation, DeCappa obliged; swinging the blade in a tight arc that swept straight through the warrior's neck, leaving the weapon buried up to its hilt in the soft sand. He then knelt again, withdrawing the knife from the soil to place it on his dispatched adversary's chest.

"That was pretty hardcore, my man." chuckled Miller over the radio, "Claiming some skulls for your trophy case or what? Because if you don't want 'em, I'll take 'em."

The Lieutenant remained silent, choosing to shrug off the burly security officer's comment. Though Miller didn't catch DeCappa's solemn display of respect, Jack did; and he admired the man for it. One of the most difficult things that a warrior of any species can do is acknowledge his respect for the enemy. Nothing spoke of a race's qualities louder than how they chose to conduct warfare, and the young lieutenant had proven himself to be a prime example of humanity on the battlefield that day.

"Everyone report in." ordered Jack over the comm channel, "Any injuries or suit damage?" The Captain's ragtag little group of survivors then each checked in individually, providing both the status of their physical well-being as well as the condition of their weapons and supplies. Aside from a quickly patched leak in Simms' left gauntlet, nobody was hurt.

Surviving the initial shuttle crash itself may have been a minor miracle for the humans to begin with, but pulling through the assault that came afterward seemed nothing short of divine intervention. Jack's master plan had been to simply take as many enemy warriors with him on his way out as he could manage, but the breath still filling his lungs after the dust settled had left him floundering for an idea on what to do next. Inevitably, more foes would arrive; and if they

survived that wave, another would pour in from behind to take its place. Each new rush that hit them would leave the humans less and less equipped to fight back until they were eventually overrun.

The Captain steeled his nerves against the private thought, reminding himself that his death certificate had already been signed the moment that first Vanduul missile tore into Curiosity's engines. The transaction had been made; his life was now forfeit. All that was left for Jack and his fellow Marines to do was to try everything in their power to make that transaction as costly as possible for their enemy. Today, Captain Burgundy decided, would be his last day in this universe; so he intended to make a hell of an exit.

Chapter 11

The courtyard fell eerily still in the absence of combat, with even the steady whistle of the wind falling silent during the respite. It was as if the universe were holding its breath preceding some impending cataclysm that had yet to make itself known. The sudden onset of placidity quickly began to get under Jack's skin, which pathologically prompted him to break the descending hush; "DeCappa, why don't you go ahead and start gathering Vanduul weapons and charge packs," he said, gesturing to the Lieutenant standing at the foot of his pillar, "and I'll climb up into that downed Crawler to see if I can find anything useful for us. Miller and Simms; you gents have overwatch."

Upon hearing confirmation of his issued orders, the Captain dismounted his perch and started for the crashed alien ship. The craft sat on its side, featuring a mangled tail-end and crumpled nose to match. Grey smoke rose steadily from the wreckage in snaking wisps that dissipated quickly whenever kissed by a sporadic gust of breeze. Jack propped his rifle against the Crawler's exposed belly then jumped and pulled himself onto its tattered side. With caution, he held his pistol at the ready and retrieved a chem-light from a pouch on his belt.

The Captain cracked the device's chemical activator then shook it gently until a vibrant blue glow swelled to life in his hand. Once its illumination had been established, he dropped the chem-light through the Crawler's open side door. The small rod of fluorescence clattered to the floor inside, bathing the interior of the ship in a wash of cobalt. The colored glow was enough to see by, but it left long swaths of deep shadow across the cabin that threatened to conceal any dangers that may lie in wait.

With caution, Jack magnetically hooked his armor's anchor line to the crawler's outer armor then lowered himself to sit on the edge of the open doorway, allowing his feet to dangle loosely amid the darkness below. He sat there with his pistol at the ready; resting the wrist of his gun hand atop the wrist of his other, which was now firmly clutching a combat knife. Pausing there for a dozen heartbeats beyond what he felt comfortable with, Jack nervously swung his feet as nonchalantly as he could muster. After he was satisfied that nothing was going to take the bait and suck him into the Crawler, he began to lower himself inside.

The interior of the craft was sparsely equipped, featuring merely a single row of simple restraints on either side of the main cabin. As Jack activated his suit's flashlight, the true hue of the craft's interior came to life. The floor and ceiling of the ship were constructed of a dull gray metal, while the walls were a reddish-purple and adorned with large patches of intricate carvings. He leaned close to one of the inlaid designs, running his light over its elegant and purposeful curves with silent awe.

Having married a xenobiologist gave Jack a rudimentary grab-bag of fun facts regarding the creatures of the universe, but he had never been so intimately intrigued as he was by Anne's tales of the Vanduul. She always made a point to mention that, contrary to their outward appearance and behaviors, the Vanduul as a race are surprisingly artistic. While art in the classic human sense was often merely for decoration, Vanduul art was generally functional in some form or another as a record keeping device.

Any time a piece of equipment was involved in a great triumph or defeat, a new design would be etched into the bare metal to commemorate the appropriate shame or glory onto its wielders. Each line was a memory, good or bad, and Jack couldn't help but wonder how many of them signified a victory over humanity. How many of the jagged designs came soaked in the blood of his fellow Marines? With sour pride, he scoffed at his inanimate tormenter; remembering that it was he that would carve the final design. The Captain then stepped forward with vigor and roughly stroked his combat knife across the wall in a wide X.

Though he couldn't make logical sense of the adornment around him, he could somehow feel what it all meant. Surrounding him was a monument to the fallen and, in a private moment of understanding, Jack grew admiration for the destructive species; briefly seeing through their war-poised exterior for an esoteric glimpse into what drove their reclusive society. To fight and die for the clan was the ultimate service that a Vanduul warrior could provide for its people, and it could face the darkness of oblivion knowing that its contribution would be forever remembered.

"You find anything good, Captain?" came Miller's voice in Jack's helmet, shaking him from his quiet contemplation. The Captain tore his eyes from the carvings and took a quick look around the cabin for loose equipment. There were no boxes or other containers to speak of lying around, and he could spot no obvious compartments within the wall paneling either.

Finding nothing that looked immediately useful, he activated the comm to relay his report; "Negative. There could be beneficial stuff stored away somewhere, but there's nothing just lying about. How about you, DeCappa? Find us any weapons to use?"

The comm channel let out a frustrated sigh, then the Lieutenant's voice came pouring out; "Nothing. From what I can tell, either all of these weapons were knocked out during the explosion or they all have some sort of ID lock. Long story short, they're no good to us."

"Well damn." huffed the Captain with resigned frustration, "Might want to pick up a few of those fancy knives of theirs, then. We don't have a whole hell of a lot left to throw at the bastards, but I wouldn't be opposed to skewering a few of 'em on my way out."

The silence that followed served only to illustrate the grim reality of the prediction, and the near certainty of it coming to fruition would be hard for anyone to stomach; like standing in a transport tube, staring down the pipe at a passenger car headed your way. Few would find it

within themselves to make a wry joke at a moment like that, but, then again, few in the universe were quite like Tyson Miller.

“Ooh, I’ve got dibbs on a pair!” beamed the evidently unconcerned voice of the Aimless’ security officer, “They’ll look pretty bitchin’ on the wall of my stateroom. That, and they’ll probably give Misra the creeps enough to keep that nosey little SOB out of my ra-”

Miller’s comment was cut short by an earth-rattling explosion from above as a lone missile came tearing from out of the clouds to strike the overhanging central crystal. A sizable chunk of the structure was blasted away in a bloom of flame-woven smoke, sending flecks of pulverized color raining from the sky. The detonation was followed closely by a thundering crack as the massive pillar began to split, its tip dipping ponderously toward the ground in an ever-slouching droop until an ear-shattering snap sent the mass of crystal into a freefall.

When it hit the dirt, the destroyed pillar seemed to shake the universe; sending a plume of dust into the air that stretched all the way to the clouds overhead, discoloring them with a long rusty swirl. Once the great rumble of destruction had subsided, a deathly silence fell over the scene. The comm channel had gone quiet, the friend or foe network had gone dead, and every sensor at the Captain’s disposal groped uselessly at the world; only to be blinded by the thick blanket of dust that was now choking the courtyard.

Jack slowly pulled himself up and out of the downed alien craft. He strained his eyes against the fine dust in the air and found his mouth agape with horrified awe. The upper half of the titanic central column that loomed over the courtyard had snapped off at the structure’s mid-point, sending north of a hundred-thousand tons of crystal crashing to the ground with cataclysmic effect. Smaller formations within the shadow of the falling pillar were pulverized under its bulk and their remains were splintered in every direction with deadly velocity.

The Captain could see no signs of life and had received no response to the dozens of chirps over the comm. Abandoning that line of thought in favor of something fresh, he wiped off his mobiGlas and took a closer look at his suit’s built in sensors. Now, more than ever, he wished he had been wearing the exploration suit that Anne had been hounding him about for all this time. It had not only seismic and EM detectors, but an IR camera and heartbeat sensor as well.

Alas, as a creature of habit would, Jack once again chose instead to wear his aging and outdated Marine armor. He didn’t know why, but he just never felt fully clothed unless he was wrapped in that ole’ trusty & dusty hunk of faded green steel. The real curse of any Marine that moved into civilian life was the prospect of being forced to keep their *real* skin locked away in an armor closet somewhere, made to suppress time-honed reactions and behaviors while the world latched onto their new *civilian issue* exterior; a perfected mimicry of those whose lives were untouched by the horrors of mortal conflict.

Now regretting his lofty opinion on the moral downfalls of civilian mimicry and the newfangled tech that came with it, the Captain lowered his arm with a sigh and activated the

bright red lights of his suit's rescue & recovery beacon. When all else fails, he thought with gloom, the old fashioned way can never hurt. He lowered himself to the ground next to the tipped crawler and activated his suit's PA speaker, saying; "Hello? Is anyone still out there? Give me a shout if you can hear me!"

A few seconds passed with no response, so Jack walked a dozen meters further into the debris field and repeated his call. This time, a small tone rose in response. Starting low and rising in pitch, the distinct repeating sound was the UEE standard distress ping designed to aid rescuers with echolocation of the survivor emitting it. It was then a matter of minutes before the Captain was able to locate the source of the sound, finding it emanating from under a crumbled pile of rubble.

As he started to remove chunks of rock and crystal from the heap, he heard a shout from Lieutenant DeCappa rise from below; "Captain Burgundy, is that you?" he called faintly, his voice muffled heavily by the stone engulfing him.

"It's me." replied Jack confidently, "Are you okay? Are you injured down there? I can get you out, but you need to let me know if my dicking around up here is causing any cave-ins."

"I'm okay, I think." Answered DeCappa with good humor, "I was able to get into this sturdy cluster of crystal before the big one came down, but my leg is pinned. So I don't really know what I'm going to be able to do to make your job any easier up there."

"No worries, Lieutenant," assured the Captain as he heaved another heavy stone aside, "just sit back and relax. I'll have you out of there in no time."

And so, after just over ten minutes of intensive labor, Jack had fulfilled his promise by pulling the Lieutenant from the rubble. Standing slowly, DeCappa rotated one of his shoulders in a wide stretching arc to check himself for damage. Satisfied that his pain in the joint was merely cosmetic, he turned and said; "I may know where to look for your security officer. Saw him go flying after the missile struck. Blast pushed him toward the shuttle, I think."

Sure enough, DeCappa was able to lead Jack straight to Miller, who they found lying on his back in the middle of the courtyard. The inert security officer was completely uncovered by debris and sat amid lethally massive hunks of crystal that were strewn across the ground all around him. It were as if the silent hand of fate had placed him just so, arranged to fit like a perfect little puzzle piece amid the carnage.

The Captain rushed over to check the man's vitals and let out a sigh of relief when his readout delivered the good news. Miller's suit had no detected punctures, which meant he had not been hit with any fragmentation, and his heart rate was strong. By Jack's best guess, the missile strike must have been close enough to toss the security officer free of the collapse zone, but the concussive force of it all had knocked him out cold. Leaning in, he accessed Miller's mobiGlas and prepared something to wake the man with. Upon seeing a confirmation button on the other's wrist-mounted readout, Jack approved the command and stepped back. A rapid

series of ice cold puffs of air then began erupting inside Miller's heavily armored helmet, deforming the security officer's scarred features as the bursts of wind continued their rhythmic assault. After nearly twenty seconds of this, Miller's eyes finally began to flutter open.

Jack stopped the air jets and watched patiently for the armored behemoth at his feet to stir. After a moment, Miller slowly sat up and shook his head, seeming a bit lost as to where he was until he looked up to see the stunted remains of the once magnificent crystal spire. Seeming to absorb the scene with astonishment, his eyes drank in the destruction left above and fell to the boulders in the sand around him. Then, to the Captain's surprise, the older man began to laugh wildly with genuine mirth.

"I see you're happy to be alive." Commented Jack with a chuckle.

"Actually, Captain," corrected the security officer with a smirk, "I'm not really all that surprised. I must've been pretty good in a past life or something, because this kind of thing just keeps happening to me. I guess you could say that I have a knack for not dying." Miller then held up an armored gauntlet and began counting on its giant digits; "Survived a bridge collapse, accidental ordinance discharge in a hangar, three...no...**four** shuttle crashes, dud grenade landed in my lap once, then now this whole...thing. Fate has kept me pretty untouchable up to this point. It's why I can get away with charging you so much for keeping me around."

"I think it's that half of a Hornet you keep strapped around your ass that saved you this time." Teased Jack as he helped his armored comrade to his feet, "My kit would've peeled off of me like paper if it had taken a blast like that."

"Well then, I guess it's lucky for me that I don't get my armor from the woman's section like you do, Captain." Retorted Miller with a jesting grin, "Never liked the standard issue greenies to begin with, to be honest. They never came with enough dance floor for the ballroom, if you catch my drift."

The dust had begun to settle across the tattered clearing and Jack could now see DeCappa making his way for the rocks that were clustered near the rear of the crashed human shuttle. The Lieutenant was stopping every dozen meters or so to kneel down and dig through the rubble that had collected there. On his third such stop, Jack saw the Lieutenant dig with fervor for a moment, clawing away at stone and crystal like a man possessed, until he abruptly ceased his efforts to fall back onto his heels with slumped shoulders.

Jack knew it was coming, but he willed his radio to remain quiet; as if relaying the news would somehow cement it as truth. His comm activated nonetheless, coming to life with the strained voice of Lieutenant DeCappa; "Simms is down." He reported with a heavy heart, "Didn't have enough time to get back into cover before it fell..."

"I'm sorry to hear that, Lieutenant." Consoled the Captain with an equally heavy heart, "He deserved better."

“They *all* did, Jack.” retorted DeCappa sourly, “**WE** all did. Alan Simms is just another name to add to the pile that I carry with me every single second of every single day. What makes me sick, what *really* twists my guts, is how I’ve gotten used to it; how I can strike a name and face off of my mental roster as a matter of routine. It’s too much. I’ve only been at this for half a decade, but it has already been too long. It’s all a goddamn meatgrinder, man, and I’m tired of sending people into it. Four from my unit had their pods miss the mark entirely, only to leave them *several minutes* to contemplate what burning up in the atmosphere was going to feel like. Why *them*? What was *their* mistake? It’s all bullshit. Nobody wins. Nobody *can* win.”

“I know how you feel, Lieutenant,” replied Jack with a sympathetic sigh, “believe me, I do. I’ve commanded fleets. Sent ships, at 200 souls a pop, into battle to fight and die over things as trivial as mining rights or who could squat where. Hundreds of young Marines, lost to the void over some government contractor’s bottom line. The guilt for such senseless loss is not for the likes of you or I to bear. It lies not in foxholes, or on the bridge of a starship; but around fancy wood conference tables, lined with the sharp-dressed lords of our fate. They are the ones who send us to die on their behalf at the stroke of a pen. There is nothing that you, I, or anyone that either of us has ever met can do about that. Soldiers are sent nonetheless; It is simply our job to do the best we can for them with the situation we are provided. A good leader feels every death, and it’s their job to dwell on each and every one of them. It’s what keeps them sharp, and it’s the driving force behind what keeps the rest of their people alive for the missions to come. If it ever becomes trivial for a subordinate to lose their life, it’s time to step away from command. Your time, lieutenant, is not up. Not yet. That much, I know.”

DeCappa chuckled sadly and made a show of looking around, gesturing to the broken courtyard as he said; “Is that so? And where shall I report for reassignment, *Trooper Burgundy*?”

“It was Major, actually,” Smirked Jack as he offered his hand to the other man, “but I’ll let it slide...*this* time. No sense in abandoning the fight just yet, old chap. Whether minutes, hours, or decades; we still have a future. So it’s my intent to keep on kicking ass until my foot falls off. Whaddaya say?”

“Well,” sighed the Lieutenant as he heaved himself to his feet, “I don’t really have anything else going on at the moment, so I might as well join in.”

Jack promptly noticed DeCappa favoring his left leg, so he threw the man’s arm over his shoulder to help him toward the shuttle. While they hobbled along, dragging what was likely a broken leg that worsened with each grunting step, the world suddenly seemed to light afire. The inside of the courtyard flooded instantly with blinding red heat, fully polarizing Jack’s faceplate as he was hurled to his back. The rough ground stole his breath when he hit and his vision was completely blacked out, but no amount of disorientation in the universe could mask that sound. Through the pounding of his own heartbeat, as he lie motionless in the dirt, Jack blindly listened to the scream of a Vanduul Scythe slicing through the sky overhead. Before he got a chance to process his dread from the first sound, a low rumble rose to join the mix.

“We have another Crawler on our hands,” called DeCappa over the radio with a pained cough, “but this time it has a Scythe flying cover.”

“Hey, Miller,” Prompted Jack, “did that leprechaun you keep in your ass see fit to let you hold onto your Scourge?”

“Afraid not, Captain.” Replied the security officer, his tone embittered by his missed opportunity to shoot back at the fighter that was now lazily arcing around for another deadly pass. A hunter; declawed.

With an unspoken nod of mutual understanding, the Captain and his security officer both grabbed one of the injured lieutenant’s arms and began an all-out sprint for the relative safety of their crashed shuttle. Dipping and weaving, with their partially cooperative cargo howling in pain, they made their way through the maze of crystal debris and shattered stone.

Meanwhile, the alien fighter had completed its turn and had begun to bear down on them again, splashing the rocks and rubble with deadly bursts of energy that threw bits and pieces of crystal in every direction. Both men retained their footing through the onslaught, but their charge lost his and nearly pulled them both to the dirt as the fighter swooped away to start another pass.

As the Scythe peeled off, the long and bulbous form of the Crawler began to decelerate over the courtyard. It then wasn’t long before the landing craft began to pour fire of its own into the melee, raining a thick hail of lethal red to erode the landscape in wide swaths of destruction. The Barrage drove the fleeing Marines diving for cover behind a boulder, hunkering low as the wave of death passed overhead. Perfect cover, Jack thought, for the insertion of a Vanduul ground team.

Chapter 12

They were coming, and there was no changing that now. The side doors of the crawler had slid open and dispersed its payload of angry warriors into the courtyard. Jack understood the fact that if he stayed hunkered down for too long, the enemy would be right on top of them before he knew it; and Vanduul loved it up close. As the incoming cover fire from the landing craft above began to dwindle, Miller stole a peek over their battered cover.

“Get DeCappa to the shuttle,” said the security officer quickly, “I’ve got an idea that will slow them down.”

Jack nodded, then heaved the injured lieutenant to his feet. He waited for a lull in the incoming fire, then began a mad dash as soon as the alien barrage had dwindled. DeCappa hobbled along with him, dipping and weaving through the rubble with an awkward lack of grace. They soon reached the partially open rear hatch of the shuttle and the Lieutenant threw himself inside. Jack stepped in after him and grabbed a submachinegun from the weapons rack, only to spin on his heel to leave again.

Once back outside, he saw his security officer walking his way, but his gait showed no sign that the man was particularly in a rush. “What the hell are you doing?” barked the Captain over the comm, “Hurry it up, will ya?”

“You go on ahead.” Urged Miller with a grave nod, “I can buy you a bit of time, so do something clever with it.”

That was when Jack noticed the object clutched in Miller’s hand. It was not a rifle, but one of the ornate Vanduul knives that he had pried from one of the dispatched warriors. The oversized blade looked more natural in the security officer’s equally oversized grip than it had appeared when the Lieutenant had wielded one earlier. “Are you serious?!” gasped the Captain with surprise, “There’s no need for that just yet. We can get you a weapon from the shuttle, and I can back you up. We still have ammo to hold them back, and I can take those roc-“

“Captain!” interrupted Miller with an impatient boom, “Get your ass in that shuttle and let me do my goddamn job! If you wanna help, then make sure that you take as many of these freaks with us on our way out as you can. Got that? Now go make it happen.”

It twisted his guts into a knot to do so, but Jack nodded solemnly and turned to join DeCappa in the shuttle. Inside, he found the Lieutenant tending to Lance Corporal Juno. He was crouched over her prone form and was accessing her suit’s systems via his own mobiGlas, tapping away at the device with mounting frustration as it chirped a negative tone at him.

DeCappa looked up with a start, frantically clawing at his thigh holster, then relaxed as he recognized the newcomer as Captain Burgundy. He glanced back at his mobiGlas for a moment with a hopeless gesture, then lifted his gaze to explain; “I’ve been trying my best to wake Juno. No Marine deserves to die in their sleep, but everything that I’ve tried doesn’t seem to be

getting the job done. Maybe I screwed up with the neural sedatives and gave her too much. I don't know...I'm not a medic."

"A nap ain't a bad way to go." Soothed Jack as he offered his hand to the kneeling Marine, "You did the best you could. And need I remind you that taking down an entire freakin' Kingship is something that sits within the bounds of what your best can and *has* achieved? You've already won the Cup, Lieutenant. This is just your victory lap. Care to help me prepare the champagne? I was thinking we could rig the shuttle's reactor into a nice little light show for our friends."

Miller stood proud and defiant atop a two meter tall crystal, watching for the enemy that he knew was flooding through the labyrinth of debris toward him. He would catch sight of them in brief flashes as they prowled across the courtyard, always moving quick and low. When he finally saw the first of the aliens stepping from out of the rubble thirty meters away, the security officer activated his suit's thunderous external PA speakers and roared a guttural snarl. He held the Vanduul blade in one hand, hanging confidently loose in his grip, as he hurled one of the severed Warrior's heads as hard as he could toward the newcomer.

The head took to the air with a slight underhanded spin in the low gravity, only to come down a mere ten meters from where the living Vanduul stood. As the gory trophy struck the sand and rolled across its soft surface, the prowling warrior jumped back with surprise. It then slowly looked up and noticed Miller for the first time, pausing to regard the human with a look that was either caution or bewilderment, before slinking back into the relative protection of the rocks and out of view.

The security officer didn't speak or understand a single syllable of the Vanduul tongue, so he had chosen to merely adopt what he could only assume was a universally understood body language that stated quite plainly; Fight me. And there it was. He had laid it all on the line on account of a simple hunch. Well, what was left of *'it'*, anyways, he thought bitterly as he watched for their reaction. Now it was up to the proud warriors closing in, unseen amid the shattered crystal, as to whether or not they would buy into his gambit. If the Vanduul decided to spurn his challenge and open fire, there wasn't much he could do beyond light up like a Christmas tree and die very quickly.

After thirty seconds of absolutely no movement within the rocks around him, a pale form stepped out from behind a crystal that sat fifty meters away from the shuttle. At first, Miller thought the alien looked small for its species, but as it got closer he saw the reason for its slender silhouette. The warrior approaching him was not encumbered by the thick plates of armor that enveloped the rest of its brethren, and the light bound in its quickening step reflected that fact. The dressed-down creature's skin was a ghostly pale and wasn't obscured by any attached weapons or equipment that the security officer could discern. In fact, the Vanduul appeared to be armed with only a single blade, clutched expertly in its left hand.

Miller stepped from off of his perch and landed heavily in the dirt below, his confiscated blade still firmly in his closed gauntlet. His foe came to a stop twenty-five meters out and silently awaited the human's approach. Once the security officer had closed the gap to ten meters, he slowed to a halt and dropped into an athletic stance. Raising the knife in a reverse grip that hugged tightly to his forearm, he lifted his other hand to beckon his enemy closer.

Before he had time to properly raise his middle finger for a follow-up taunt, Miller found himself automatically backpedaling as the alien lunged for him, blade-first. The human slipped the thrust by turning his shoulders and had managed to seize his enemy's wrist, when a crushing kick was delivered to his stomach that sent him crashing to the ground.

Then, even as the stars were still clearing from his vision, Miller saw a blur pouncing at him from above. Rolling to the side, he was barely able to dodge the Vanduul's blade as it sank into the soil just outside of his desperately shrugged shoulder. The human used his foe's mishap to take a swipe at the creature's legs with his own knife, but the warrior's blade leapt out to deflect it as a powerful kick to the chest sent his battered body sliding across the dirt.

Once he tumbled to a stop, Miller lifted himself to his knees and fought through the urge to vomit. Steeling his resolve, he looked down to see his own blade that was still firmly rooted in the unyielding locked-down gauntlet of his right hand. Taking a deep breath, he forced himself to stand and brandish the knife at his adversary once more. The warrior granted him no respite for the gesture, lunging again immediately. This time the Vanduul's blade bit into the security officer's chestplate, dead on, plunging a full two centimeters before its tip snapped off and sent the alien crashing into him.

Miller tried to wrestle the warrior to the ground, but was tossed aside like a ragdoll by the towering creature; landing roughly in a nearby cluster of rocks. During his short and unceremonious flight, the security officer had lost his grip on the hilt of his knife and watched it disappear within the chaos of the courtyard as he fell. When he hit, the ground stole his breath and sent a fresh rush of stars spinning through his vision that made it hard for him to think.

Miller's mind was rushing, grasping wildly for any ideas as the Vanduul hastily closed in on him. Then, in an act of desperation, the human ducked into the cluster of rocks he had slammed into and began searching the ground for a stone that he could use as a weapon. While he was frantically scanning the area, a ghostly box swept across his helmet's HUD. Miller stopped abruptly and adjusted his view back to the overlay, finding it hovering over a little mound of loose dirt. Underneath that lump of fresh soil, sitting two meters away at the base of a small pillar, was one of Lieutenant DeCappa's undetonated remote charges.

Miller lunged for the buried device, but was stopped short by the powerful tug of an iron grip on his left ankle. The bulky Vanduul warrior could not fit its wide torso between the close-set cluster of rocks, so it had to reach in and drag its prey out instead. The creature's armored prize did not come easily, however.

Miller was ferociously kicking at his captor's hands and face while he struggled to squirm free, but his efforts did very little to counteract the warrior's overwhelming strength. The struggle, he realized, would be all for not if the Vanduul was able to drag him within striking distance of the knife clutched in its raised hand, so he fought viciously for every centimeter; clawing his fingers deep into the sand beneath him and treating each passing second as its own individual battle in a primal war for survival. A war he was losing as centimeter after centimeter was stolen from him.

The security officer rolled to his back to see the warrior raising its blade above its head and decided to kick one last time at the crushing hand that was reeling him in. Once again, the effort was fruitless, but it just so happened to coincide with a deafening boom that thundered from above. The side of the warrior's face was briefly illuminated by a bright blue-white flare, causing the alien to turn its attention for a look.

Just as the Vanduul had snapped its head around, a hulking mass suddenly came sliding into view; tearing a deep gash across the courtyard to crush the warrior when it came to a stop against the unyielding crystal of the human's desperate refuge. The warrior's grip went limp instantly and its weapon clattered carelessly to the ground without an effort from the creature to do otherwise.

Miller shook his foot free and frantically scooted away from the alien on his elbows with shock filling his expression. He looked for life in his foe's eyes and found no sign of it as the creature's features bore a blank expression and its jaw hung slightly open to droop to the side. Once the dust had begun to settle and the security officer's heartrate had finally dropped from its adrenaline-soaked frenzy, the twisted remains of the second Crawler slowly came into focus.

"Ground team, this is the *Aimless*" came Cavas' scratchy voice over the radio, "Keep your heads down and your asses covered, we're comin' in hot!"

Chapter 13

There it was; dipping out of the clouds above like an Archangel on a mission to deliver its sweeping vengeance, the *Aimless* tore into view spewing a hurricane of bright green at the courtyard from its dual side-mounted turrets. As the glowing hail of destruction rained down upon the rock and crystal below, plumes of dust and debris leapt into the air in every direction. Whenever a belch of Vanduul return fire rose from the ground to sparkle uselessly against the underbelly of the exploration cruiser's shields, the devastating guns above would quickly adjust their aim to swat the annoyance into oblivion. The human ship then slowly came to a stop, hovering twenty meters above the battlefield as it continued to pulverize the landscape below.

"What in the hell are you doing here?!" Demanded Jack over the comm as he peered up through one of the crashed shuttle's busted out viewports, "You should have been over halfway home by now, goddamnit!"

The playfully stern voice of Jack's wife rose quickly in reply; "Calm down, you grumpy old fart, before you give yourself an aneurism. When you stopped answering our calls, I stepped in to assume full command of the *Aimless*. And as her *new* Captain, I was free to scrap any of the previous Captain's dumb-ass orders that I felt like. So shut up and get your fine ass ready to hop into the rover, because I am *not* going to leave you on this dustball. Not today!"

With that, the front ramp of the *Aimless* began to lower, revealing the lights of the armored vehicle sitting just inside its threshold. The Carrack slowly yawed toward the downed shuttle, then ejected its mobile payload. As the rover came spilling out, it made liberal use of its jump jets to slow its fall to the courtyard fifteen meters below. The vehicle hit the dirt with a thud, hopping slightly on the rebound of its suspension, before the auto-turret mounted to its roof began to open fire wildly with its attached Bulldog laser repeaters.

While the battle raged on outside, DeCappa was still buried up to his elbows in a component rack inside the shuttle trying to finish setting up the power feedback loop that would make Curiosity's damaged reactor go critical. While the Lieutenant was fully absorbed in his work, it was up to Jack to defend them from attack as the rover laboriously snaked its way through the war-torn courtyard toward them. Ducking out from under the shuttle's damaged exit ramp, the Captain took a long moment to survey the scene before him. His beloved *Aimless* was still hovering above, driving the Vanduul scurrying to cover as it continued its brutal barrage. Meanwhile, the rover was busy working its way over a hunk of fallen crystal; its turret swiveling on the roof to spew angry red in all directions as it rapidly tracked and switched between targets.

While he was watching the chaos unfold, Jack saw one of the creatures attempting to pull itself on top of the armored rover. Observing the imminent threat encroaching on his one and only getaway vehicle was finally what the Captain needed to snap himself out of his mild shell shock enough to shoulder his weapon. He took aim and expertly swept the Vanduul off with a

controlled burst to its upper chest from his borrowed submachinegun. As the Captain was readjusting his aim at a follow-up target, an oversized hand reached out of nowhere with a powerful swipe that knocked his weapon to the ground. Spinning to face his attacker, Jack was just in time to dodge the Vanduul blade that went thrusting past his head.

The human drew his sidearm and managed to squeeze off a couple of shots into the alien's stomach before it backhanded him, sending the Captain tumbling to the ground at the foot of the shuttle. As he lay there staring hazily up at the crashed craft's inverted entry ramp, Jack noticed a wide crack running along the centerline of his helmet's visor and could hear the soft hiss of atmosphere escaping through it. The dark figure of his coming demise stepped to loom over him, blade in hand, and all Jack could do was raise his arms in a helpless attempt at defense. As the Vanduul wound up for its killing blow, the Captain braced himself for the inevitable; but the inevitable never had the chance to arrive.

All Jack remembered through his concussed haze was seeing his attacker's head snap back with great force just before a bang emanating from deeper inside the craft caught up to his ears. The warrior instantly fell limp, spilling the contents of its pulverized skull as it toppled to the dirt outside the shuttle. Still in shock, Jack propped himself up onto his elbow and turned to see the grimacing face of Lance Corporal Juno cradling her still-smoking Klaus & Werner sniper rifle.

Thank you." began Jack, oddly conversational, "I'm glad you could join us."

"What did I miss?" asked the newly woken Marine with a rasp.

Jack took a moment to steal a glance over his shoulder to the inverted entryway of the shuttle and shrugged. "Not him, it would seem." He said as he jerked a thumb toward the doorway and the crumpled form lying within it. The Captain then pulled himself to his feet and stepped over to Juno, who was still lying stiffly on the cabin's upturned ceiling.

Stooping to lift her arm with the utmost care, Jack activated her mobiGlas and accessed her suit's systems. The emergency override built into the armor had allowed its wearer to circumvent enough of their medical restraint to defend themselves with, but nothing beyond that. What this amounted to was the freeing of her arms and hips, allowing her to merely sit up and operate a weapon. Despite her newfound freedom, however, her neck, spine, and legs were all still stiff as blastplating and she could not move on her own.

Jack accessed the lockdown function on Juno's suit and removed all of her restrictions, save for the lockdown on her injured neck. She seemed to slump more organically to the floor as her joints unlocked, with the small of her back sinking to touch the ground beneath her. Juno then took a moment to wiggle her extremities experimentally, systematically making her way up each leg to check her toes, feet, ankles, and knees for damage. Seemingly satisfied, she slowly sat upright to meet Jack's gaze fully for the first time.

"Better?" asked the Captain as he offered his hand to help her to her feet.

“Much better, thank you.” She replied while seizing his offered gauntlet to pull herself onto shaky knees, “So where are we? What happened?”

“That’s a bit of a long story for the moment,” said Jack apologetically, “but it suffices to say that I need you to shoot that rifle of yours some more. Can you do that for me? Our ride is on the way, but I need to go fetch my security officer or else he’ll miss the bus. Can you swat the uglies off of me while I do that?”

Juno nodded, bending her entire upper body in a gesture reminiscent of a bow to achieve the action from behind her armor’s stiff neck joint. She turned and plucked a submachinegun from the rack behind her, then tossed it to Jack. He caught the weapon and instinctually attached it to the mounting plate on his chest in a single smooth action, a perfected sequence of events that required no labor of conscious thought for the old Marine to achieve. In the air, just behind the gun itself, were a pair of loaded magazines. The Captain caught those as well, then slammed one of them into the magwell of the submachinegun hanging from his chest.

Kneeling carefully, Juno bent down to retrieve her sniper rifle then rummaged around in her gear bag for spare ammunition. Satisfied, she tucked her equipment away and rose to regard Jack, who was already standing in the shuttle’s open doorway. Juno stepped forward to join him, but was frozen in her tracks as the annihilation outside came into focus. She stood there for a long moment, her mouth floundering open helplessly as if the words she had chosen to speak had decided to flee instead.

Her moment of shock came to an end in an instant, as Jack shook her arm impatiently to command her attention. “Listen,” he began with urgently strained patience, “I know there’s a lot going on right now, things *did* get a skosh out of control; but I just need you to post up here and focus on shooting the tall ones with all the teeth. Okay?”

She appeared to attempt a nod, but decided to go with a thumbs up instead before raising her rifle in compliance. Jack then gave her a quick pat on the shoulder and turned to face the courtyard; deactivating his weapon’s safety as he brought it to the ready. The entire area was a blur of chaos, with streaks of glowing plasma seeming to fill every square centimeter of airspace with boiling death. The Aimless was overhead absorbing most of the enemy fire, while the rover sat just under twenty-five meters away now with its turret still flaring like mad.

Looking past the armored vehicle, the Captain spotted the unarmed figure of his security officer hunkered low inside a small formation of rocks. His shelter was being pounded by a nonstop Vanduul Assault, and his attackers were on the verge of encircling him. “Juno,” called Jack over the comm, “don’t let them get behind my man down there. I’m going down to get him.”

Jack dropped his submachinegun to its mounting plate and pushed himself into a sprint across the courtyard. After bounding fifteen meters, unimpeded by enemy attention, the air about the Captain’s head suddenly burst alive with searing heat. Almost falling to the ground,

partially blinded by the shot that had just grazed the top of his shoulder, Jack stumbled forward and caught himself on a pillar of crystal.

As the Captain was resetting his footing to continue his dash, a figure stepped around the pillar he had propped himself against. The warrior spotted its quarry and began to lower its rifle in the human's direction. The Vanduul weapon never had a chance to discharge, however, as a shot from Juno's distant Klaus & Werner tore through the creature's neck to coat the crystal in a thick spatter of alien blood. The warrior's legs buckled instantly with the shot, but Jack unleashed a long burst of point-blank submachinegun fire into its snarling face nonetheless, for good measure, as it fell to the dirt.

Poking his head around the pillar, Jack scanned the courtyard ahead of him for his security officer. Miller was fifteen meters away now, and his attackers were within five; closing in to encircle him. Seeing the urgency of the situation heading toward a tipping point, Jack heaved himself into action by resuming his mad dash into the open.

Miller looked up between incoming volleys and saw the Captain heading in his direction. To Jack's surprise, the heavily armored man appeared to be waving him off to head the other way. Confused, the Captain halted and dropped to a knee to shoot at a Warrior that was rounding the corner of his security officer's rock. Miller ignored the threat and rose into a sprint of his own, covering the distance between them with surprising speed.

Instead of running past him like Jack had expected, Miller bowled directly into the Captain and hurled him to the ground. They both hit the dirt with a thud and Jack had the breath stolen from his lungs as the bulk of the armored behemoth crashed down on top of him. After a second, Jack regained his wits and was instantly furious. He tried to shove the other man off of him, saying; "What in the hell are yo-" just as a massive explosion rocked the courtyard.

The blast originated from the cluster of rocks where the security officer was hunkered, and its effect on his encroaching enemy had been devastating. Crystal was pulverized and sent to fill the air around the detonation zone, slicing any warriors within close proximity to ribbons. The blast had also sent shrapnel up to batter the underside of the aimless, denting her hull in several spots along the port side.

"Come on," pressed the Captain as he pulled himself up, "Our ride is here." He then heaved Miller to his feet and pushed him toward the shuttle, urging him to hurry for the open rear hatch of the rover that was now parked right next to the smoldering craft. The security officer complied, heaving in long bounds across the open courtyard while Jack stood firm; laying down suppressive fire on the rapidly regrouping enemy.

The very moment that Jack's weapon had clacked open, having fired its last remaining round, a wide spray of red energy began pouring over his shoulder to assault the attacking Vanduul. The Captain turned to run, watching the rover's turret sweep across the battlefield in

purposeful arcs; recognizing instantly the telltale touch of a human intelligence behind its exceptionally effective aim.

The rear ramp of the heavy rover was already down and Miller was leaning out of it, urgently gesturing the Captain forward. Jack dropped his expended weapon and threw every fiber of his being into an all-out sprint for his beckoning crewmate. As he ran, he could almost tangibly feel the danger that was closing in on his heels; sensing it as an ominous heat that was festering in a warming lump at the back of his neck that grew warmer with each step. It was as if each additional meter were purchased by yet another sliver of his ever-dwindling supply of personal luck.

A flash of red went whizzing by Jack's head, snapping him from his intense focus as the offending plasma splashed against the armored side of the rover. Even though the shot had struck only half a meter from his faceplate, the awaiting security officer didn't even flinch; he just calmly remained standing there, offering a steadfast hand toward his approaching Captain.

The second that Jack was within reach, Miller seized his arm and sucked him up into the rover in a tangled heap. "GO!" he shouted as he slapped the control to close the vehicle's rear ramp, leaning back suddenly to avoid a final splash of plasma that snuck through the sealing hatch. While the vehicle lurched into motion, Jack sat himself upright and took a look around the inside of the cabin.

Juno had strapped herself into a crash seat toward the back of the rover, with her sniper rifle squeezed between her knees as they gently bumped along. She wasn't saying much, but the expression on her face said that there was still a certain degree of shock for her to work through yet. DeCappa, on the other hand, was fastened into the frontmost passenger seat in the rear section of the vehicle. He didn't say much either, but that was because his face was buried in the controls perched in front of him. The lieutenant was too busy to acknowledge the newcomer, as his absolute focus was spent in commanding the rover's turret in those deadly arcs of fire that the Captain had admired earlier.

When the Captain's gaze drifted forward to fall on the rover's pilot, he froze; perched upside down upon the driver's delicate shoulder, was a little green alien with big black eyes. Jack ran up to the cockpit and rushed to bend down and touch his faceplate to the pilot's. "Anne, you smart idiot, I love you to death and I'm so glad to see you, but you should've gotten yourself out of here when you had the chance!"

"What does it *look* like I'm doing, my dear?" retorted Anne as she shoved the rover's throttle forward, "So shut up and work the shields, or neither of us are going home. We need to survive long enough to get out to a flat spot that's big enough for the Aimless to set down. Volkov mapped one out for us on our way in and dropped a nav-point. It's just over ten clicks east and none of the terrain between here and there looked too thick for the rover to get through, but it's going to be rough. Especially with these fine gentlemen on our heels."

“You make a hell of a Captain, you know that?” praised Jack with an impressed smirk peeking from behind the crack in his faceplate.

“Careful, *co-pilot*,” Teased Anne with a crooked grin, “or I might just decide that I like your seat better than my old one. It *does* have much better lumbar support...” While she said this, she was casually ignoring the Vanduul warrior that had just forcefully clinked against the rover’s windshield; thoughtlessly twitching her finger to pulse the rover’s jump jets momentarily to suck the creature under the wheels, feeling nothing but a minute bump in the suspension as they passed over the battered alien body.

The rover was now at a decent clip, moving across the obstacle-laden courtyard in a deft weave. The Aimless still sat motionless above, raining its death on the enemy in swaths of perpetual destruction that seemed to consume the entirety of the Vanduul’s combined attention. Anne was aiming their vehicle for a widening in the ring of crystal that encircled the courtyard, and the debris hindering their progress was beginning to thin out.

“Cavas,” ordered Anne, her voice firm with the edge of command, “Peel off and meet us at the landing zone. You’re good to go, we’ll make sure they don’t follow us.”

Jack then leaned forward to watch the Aimless dip its left wing and start banking away from the war-torn courtyard, its turrets still flaring with bright green as it gained altitude. “We’re clear.” Said the Captain as the rover passed between twin pillars at the edge of the clearing, “Hit ‘em, DeCappa.”

With that, the Lieutenant pulled up his MobiGlas and accessed the crashed shuttle’s systems. He found the dial he was looking for, labelled *throttle*, and pushed its sliders past their maximums. Five long seconds later, a boom shook the occupants of the rover and Jack witnessed, through the rear view camera, the giant trio of crystals that were hanging over the courtyard beginning to fall.

When the massive structures hit the ground, it created a downright seismic event; shaking the world sufficiently to send chunks of the crystalline forest crashing down around the rover. As the thick cloud of dust from the courtyard collapse overtook them, Anne had to swerve to avoid a falling boulder and nearly ran directly into a pillar at high speed.

Though blinded completely by the suspended dust in the air, Anne pressed on at a crawling pace. She was guided by Jack’s directions while the Captain stared at the rover’s faint sensor readout to determine their path. After fifteen minutes of twisting and weaving their way through the choking haze, the obscuring cloud had begun to dissipate. With her vision cleared, Anne was able to greatly increase their speed and they were soon approaching the rendezvous point.

The rover then finally broke out into an opening to see the Aimless landed nearby, patiently waiting with its front ramp down. The engines were obviously still spun-up and prepared to lift-off at a moment’s notice. This was made evident by the swirling plumes of fine

dust dancing along the cruiser's belly. The ship looked as if it were crouched at the ready, like a tiger in the long grass; menacing for its unnatural stillness in a world of motion.

"Aimless, this is recovery squared," reported Anne over the radio, "We are on-site and hitting the loading ramp in twenty seconds. Prepare for dust-off."

Jack cocked an eyebrow and shot a look at his wife; "Recovery squared?" he inquired with a chuckle, "*Dust-off*? Who ARE you, and what have you done with my nerd of a wife?"

"Well..." Shrugged Anne with a swelling smirk, "You see, the first recovery team amateurishly failed their initial extraction. So, naturally, I had to come down and clean up after them. I was recovering the recovery team. Therefore, I'm acting as a one-woman recovery-team recovering recovery-team. Thus, Recovery²."

"*There's* the nerd I love." Laughed Jack as the rover's wheels hit the front ramp of the Aimless, "Ya know, I'm really glad you haven't made a habit out of listening to me; because I wouldn't be here if it weren't for your reckless disregard of my final requests. So, thank you."

"Hey, we shot a probe at the jump point before coming down." huffed Anne with a defensive scoff, "Cavas saw to that, believe me. The message was in the bottle and out to sea, so to speak. The way I figured it; with that out of the way, I was free to come down here and rob you of your macho heroic sacrifice. I hope you don't mind, but you still owe me two kids and a dog."

"A debt I will gladly pay," chuckled Jack as he reached to grab his wife's hand, "but let's hold off on the condo shopping for now, shall we? After all, we *do* still need to get out of here in one piece." Jack gently assisted Anne to her feet, then continued; "On that note; thanks for the pickup, love, but I'd like my ship back now. You are hereby relieved of your command, *Captain*. You did my job well, and you did it all with a *way* better looking caboose behind ya than I ever had goin' for me. I shall have to inspect it at your next *de*-briefing." The newly reappointed Captain then winked with a cheeky grin as his wife's eyes nearly rolled out of their sockets.

Chapter 14

By the time Jack was helping Juno out of the back of the rover, the entry ramp of the exploration cruiser had sealed and he had felt the quasi-motion of take-off in the pit of his stomach. "Misra," ordered the ship's reclaimed Captain over the comm, "I need you in the medbay to run a full neural workup ASAP." Jack then turned to Miller, who was busy shedding his bulky armor onto the floor of the rover bay, and added; "You should swing by too, Tyson. I, for one, can't believe you weren't turned into human soup inside that suit of yours, so you'd best check with Ravi to make sure all your organs are still in the right place."

"Thanks, Captain, but I can hit the Medic later." Retorted the security officer with a pained grunt as he slid his arm out of his armor's shoulder joint, "I already checked to make sure all the important dangly bits are where they're supposed to be, so we're good. I was thinking that I'd take DeCappa with me to the turrets and free up Volkov to do some of his techno shit for ya."

Jack nodded and watched as his security officer lead the injured lieutenant through the rover bay's forward hatchway and into the bowels of the ship. The Captain's gaze then shifted to his wife, who was tending to Lance Corporal Juno near the workbench at the rear of the bay. Anne was helping the injured Marine remove her leg armor when Jack cautioned; "Don't remove any armor above her waist. She's got possible spinal damage, so we'll let Ravi and the autodoc handle that. Can you escort her to the medbay please? Have Misra run the full battery on her, and make sure he knows that she has spent a lot of time unconscious in the recent past. I've left notes for him on her mobiGlas."

"Thanks for coming to get us, Captain Burgundy. I owe you my life." Said Juno with an awkwardly stiff bow.

"Can't owe me what you don't own, Marine." Replied the Captain with a wry smirk, "Your ass belongs to the Emperor till he sees fit to let you go. But I'll tell you what, Juno; if you ever find yourself in the civilian world looking for work, give me a call. A woman of your caliber would be wasted on lesser crews."

Juno smiled warmly, the first of hers that Jack had seen in fact, and said; "I'll be sure to do that, Captain." She turned and accepted Anne's guidance through the hatchway. Spotting the lift that she was being gestured toward, she stepped forward to board it. The young Marine did not, however, see *Mrs.* Burgundy's face as she quasi-humorously stared daggers of suspicion over her shoulder at her husband as they left.

Jack riposted with his signature lop-sided grin and a shrug as he watched the women step through the doorway and out of sight. Alone now, he finally became acutely aware of the fact that he still had his helmet on. With belated urgency, Jack reached for his helmet seal and undid the clasp. A puff of sterile air burst from the seam and the helmet began to lift away. Air from

the ship rushed in to replace the flavorlessness of mere survival that his suit had been providing him for the past several hours, and it felt *good*.

There was something about the imperfections, the *aromas*, in the air aboard one's ship that made breathing so much more of an experience than simply sucking in suit O₂ was. Generations of space travel had conditioned human beings to long for their pressurized bubbles of personalized scent, and that quasi-subconscious draw served to quell humanity's need for a place to call home; even when wandering among the harsh vacuum between stars.

A man's ship, and the air inside it, are sacred things, and Jack drank it in with an almost desperate fervor. The Captain had thought that he would never step foot on his beloved Carrack again; to never again feel its deckplate underfoot, or sense the protective comfort of its armored walls enveloping him. It was a feeling that he thought he had lost forever, yet here he was. And it was all thanks to not only his wife, but the loyal men of his newly formed crew that came down at considerable risk to themselves to get him. You can't *buy* character like that; you've got to find it and wait for it to unearth itself.

After pulling in several large and drawn-out breaths of the Aimless' sweet scent, Jack dropped his damaged helmet to the deckplate and made his way for the bridge. The Captain was at a jog by the time he hit the doors of the command deck and he breezed through to see Cavas plunging their craft into the clouds. Summiting the stairs to the bridge's second level, he stepped around his command chair and plopped himself into its familiar cushioned embrace.

"Welcome back, Captain." Said Cavas with genuine relief, "We're pushing through the lower cloud layer now and should reach space within three minutes. So hang tight and enjoy the ride."

Then, once they had fully nosed out of the lowest tier of clouds and into the wind-swept layer of clarity beyond, the sensors on the Aimless began to blare madly. "Contact overhead," reported Volkov from his station, "and it looks BIG!"

Jack referenced his sensor readout and moved his eyes to the patch of sky that the alarm had indicated. A shadow in the clouds above was slowly sinking, coalescing into an impossibly large structure that seemed to defy physics as it hung suspended in the air. A cruel ribcage of twisting metal then materialized out of the fog just as a pulse of red light moved rhythmically across the massive silhouette in a ripple, making the terrifying shape looming above appear as if it were alive and breathing.

"It's the second Kingship." Jack heard himself saying as he watched countless self-guiding specks, trailing red thruster-lines, falling from the belly of the capitol vessel, "Eighty-five percent power to the shields, and send what's left to the turrets!"

"Enemy fighter screen inbound." Alerted Anne from her control board, "They're on an intercept course to cut off our escape vector, and they're moving *fast*."

“Output adjustments complete, Captain,” Reported Volkov, “but I must warn you that this leaves a bare minimum of power provided to our engines. Our speed and maneuverability will be quite poor during atmospheric flight.”

“We don’t need *speed*, Tony.” retorted the Captain sharply, “What we need is an unfair advantage. It’s never a good idea to find yourself within range of a Kingship’s main guns, so making a run for space at the moment was never on the table to begin with. We’ll have to shake them off through the mist. Cavas, please drop us back into the clouds, bearing east.”

“With all due respect, Captain,” replied the pilot, “I’m not Maddox friggin’ Holloway, Okay? I need to be able to *see* if you want me to fly this damn thing, and there is plenty going on down there for me to kill us with. It’s straight-up suicide!”

“So don’t fly with your eyes, then.” suggested Jack with a verbal shrug, “Anne, I want you to deploy the Aimless’ sensors and calibrate them to detect silicates only. Then point them straight ahead with a sixty-degree FOV at maximum power and feed the readout to both my and Cavas’ displays. We should be able to utilize our augmented awareness to safely slalom our way through the crystal. And *wouldn’t* you know it; those power-starved thrusters of ours will keep us at a nice and *reasonable* pace while we’re at it.”

Anne went to work, furiously tapping at her console with practiced grace, until Jack’s display chirped and came to life with a grainy black and white image of the horizon in front of them. The view cut straight through the clouds directly below them to reveal towers of crystal whipping by, unseen to the naked eye, just under the Aimless’ belly.

“Well, I’ll be damned...” marveled Cavas as he inspected the surroundings with his newly-augmented vision, “That’s a pretty neat trick.”

“No tricks, Bill; just *science*.” Riposted Anne with professional pride, “Scanners are up at full blast, but their range is limited in this environment. I could only give you about a half a kilometer of sightline before the image gets too grainy from interference.”

“I can work with that,” assured Cavas thankfully, his knuckles white around the control stick as he dipped the exploration cruiser into the clouds. The light outside the ship’s sweeping front viewport dimmed more and more as they dove, until the world around them disappeared under a shroud of Smokey white. Once firmly within the clouds, the pilot leveled the craft and pushed his throttles forward. Using the small grainy image to guide himself, Cavas banked left and right in a lazily snaking path through the concealed obstacles with flowing grace.

Just before the clouds had enveloped and blinded them, the Aimless’ radar revealed a large portion of the Kingship’s deployed fighters dipping into the mist after them. Those fighters would pursue directly as another group shadowed their progress, skimming the topside of the endless sheet of clouds; waiting for their quarry to come up for air.

Watching the rear camera's feed on his display, the Captain could see the occasional crimson flash of Vanduul thrusters in the haze behind them. They had to hunt by sight and wound intricate arcs in the abstract blindness of the camera feed, swooping in and out of view as they drew ever-closer. It wasn't long before the red glow of thrust-lines were accompanied by the outline of one of the craft that had created them. It featured a pair of sweeping avian-like wings perched outstretched before a central body that spat twin lines of angry flame in its wake.

"Three contacts, two-hundred meters aft!" Reported Miller from his port-side turret, "They're closing in- *OH*...One just hit a pillar. Correction, we have two contacts closing in fast; Glaives by the look of 'em"

Just as the comm clicked off, a trio of red plasma bolts seared past the canopy; their brightness partially darkening the photoreactive glass in the exploration cruiser's front viewport. His rear camera-view now distorted by the continuous ripples running through the ship's energy shield, Jack turned his attention back to the bridge; "Volkov, gimme a report. How are we looking?"

"Rear shields are taking a lot of damage, Captain!" replied Volkov, his console aglow with swaths of flashing red, "We're about to lose an entire capacitor bank; and if *that* goes out, I don't have the required supplies onboard to fix it. We'll be exposed and ripe for the picking. I need to be able to take the shields offline for about five minutes to repair what I can *before* that genie leaves the bottle. If we wait too long, sir, we're screwed!"

"Take evasive action!" Boomed the Captain with an urgent bellow, "Fifty-percent power to thrusters and put the rest into the shields. Weave as much as you can and maybe we can shift their focus from firing at us, to just keeping up."

The pilot obliged, wordlessly dipping the nose of the unwieldy ship and entering it into a lumbering corkscrew dive that narrowly skirted several pillars as it fell. The two enemy ships on their tail dove to follow, staying close to the stern of the Aimless as it plummeted. "Engineering," prompted Cavas, "Prep the braking thrusters for a full burn on my mark."

Volkov addressed his computer for a moment, preparing a short sequence of commands on his console before confirming; "Ready!"

"Mark!" shouted Cavas, and the crew of the exploration cruiser were thrown against their harnesses. The Carrack's sudden deceleration forced the trailing Vanduul ships to break off and swerve to avoid the human craft. In doing so, one of the Scythes shot past the canopy of the Aimless and impacted a tower of crystal to their port side with a splash of blue flame.

The second pursuing Vanduul fighter managed to avoid the same pillar, banking hard to starboard as its shields flared in protest of the near-miss. The alien pilot's triumph was short-lived, however, as its evasive flightpath put it directly in view of both of the Aimless' turrets. A short series of dull thumps, felt through the Carrack's hull, then rang out as her twin pairs of Behring M7A laser cannons quickly swatted the Vanduul craft out of the air in a glowing blaze.

“That was the last of them.” Confirmed Jack, checking his sensor readouts, “Nice flying, Cavas. Now we just need to worry about getting through their blockade and out into the black. They’ll have fighters spreading out above, setting out a net to snag us in. But let’s not play to their expectations, shall we? Turn us around and head back the way we came. I want to get at least fifty kilometers past the ass-end of that Kingship before we make our break for space.”

“Roger that, Captain.” Acknowledged the pilot, “Adjusting our heading to one-six-five.” The Aimless then banked around and leveled off in the indicated direction, swaying from side to side as it lazily dodged its way through the clouds.

“Volkov;” continued Jack, “that should give you the time you need to repair the shields, I trust?”

“Plenty of time, Captain,” assured the young engineer, “I may even be able to reroute the turret power into the drives for a little extra kick when we’re making our burn for orbit.”

“The soldier in me tells me that it’s a bad idea to leave us toothless,” began the Captain with a resigned sigh, “and I’m certain that Miller will share my sentiment; but would wisdom suggest that sprinting to safety is generally preferable to jogging your way to an early death. Make it so, but you get to be the one to tell our lovely security officer that his toys aren’t going to work anymore.”

Chapter 15

After Fifteen minutes in a peaceful slalom through the clouds, the Aimless was well astern of the Kingship and hadn't run into any resistance. "Scanners are clear." Reported Cavas, "Ready to push for space on your command."

"Volkov," ordered the Captain, his fingers nervously drumming on his armrests, "Are you done dicking around back there yet?"

"We're ready to go." replied the Engineer over the comm, "Power is set to a seventy-thirty split between thrusters and shields. She'll go pretty quick, for a bigger gal, Captain."

"Good work, Tony." commended Jack, "Now get back up here to the bridge and keep an eye on her for me. Miller and DeCappa; you don't have any bang left in those turrets of yours, but you *do* have eyes. Keep 'em on a swivel and let me know of anything that seems important." Jack then turned his attention away from his comm and to the pilot seated below him, saying; "Alright, Bill. Let's see what this baby will do. You may drop the blast shield and push for space at your convenience. This here is about to be a sprint to the finishline."

In confirmation of the order, slats of dark grey metal began to unfurl across the sweeping front viewport of the exploration cruiser. As they slid into place, the armored shell left only a narrow rectangle of sightline, positioned within a claustrophobic box perched at the very tip of the ship's usually all-engulfing canopy. After waiting for the blast shield to lock into place, Cavas oriented the Aimless' nose toward the heavens. The ship sat still for a moment in complete silence, as if coiling to pounce, then the pilot announced; "Main drives active. Engaging exit burn in 3...2...1...ignition!"

The crew of the Carrack could then *feel* the throaty roar of the ship's robust engines as they awoke with frightening power, propelling them violently skyward until Jack was pressed into his seat and his armrests rattled wildly under the strain of their desperate scurry for space. Within seconds, the Aimless had punched out of the clouds and was pulling hard for the starlit vacuum waiting above.

Shortly after breaking free of the sensor-dampening haze, the Aimless' scanners picked up several enemy contacts nearby. Chief among them, was a group of four Vanduul heavy fighters that had appeared on the scopes just over twenty kilometers away; and they were closing in fast.

“Four bandits, twenty clicks out.” warned Anne belatedly, “They’ve definitely seen us and they’re adjusting course for a pursuit vector.”

“Cavas;” commanded the Captain, “As soon as we’re free of the planet’s gravity well, I want an immediate jump into Quantum Drive. We can’t afford to let those fighters get within missile range.”

“We may not have a choice, Jack” winced the sensor officer as she studied her console, “They’re on our tail now and catching up rather quickly. They will be well within targeting range before we’re going to be able to make a jump, that much is simple math.”

Jack chewed the inside of his cheek, nervously watching his rear-view camera as the specks of color that were trailing them slowly grew on his display. The enemy fighters were flying in tight formation, directly aft of the exploration cruiser, and had now closed the gap between them to a mere fourteen kilometers.

The Vanduul pilots had chosen their approach angle on the larger human ship wisely, as well, because they were coming up behind the craft whilst remaining firmly inside the blind spot of its main turrets. Even though the human ship’s weapons were inactive and the maneuver was essentially meaningless, Jack acknowledged and admired the tactical flying of his foe nonetheless.

“Can you give me anything more out of this damn thing, Volkov?” implored the Captain with unintended force.

The young engineer, his face awash with impotent determination at the impossible task, tapped away at his console nonetheless; searching for something, *anything*, that would allow him to comply with his Captain’s request. He found no such option. Resigned, he reported; “I’m afraid not, Captain. Any more stress on the drives and we’ll completely blow out the cooling system. I’ve already lost a pair of coolant lines heading to the Main drives, and they’re heating up fast as a result. To be honest, I’m not sure how long we’re going to be able to sustain *this* level of thrust before we end up slagging our engine housings. I haven’t done the math, sir, but it can’t be long.”

“Missiles inbound, Jack!” alerted Anne from her station, “A cluster of six of them. Nine kilometers out, closing in at fifty-three meters-per-second, relative, and accelerating. Impact projected at one minute and twelve seconds.”

“Cavas;” barked the Captain with supernatural focus, “launch all countermeasures, now!”

The pilot complied and the rear camera-feed lit up with a dazzling trail of sparkling bits of chaff interlaced with the brilliant flashes of golden flare-light. Seconds later, the group of Vanduul missiles had entered the cloud of engineered confusion laid in the Aimless’ wake. Jack watched on his radar as two of the six trailing missiles veered off-course and detonated prematurely, but the remaining four continued, steadfast, on their flightpaths.

“We need to buy more time!” growled the Captain, slamming his fist into his armrest, “Volkov, I want you to pump one-hundred percent of our power into those drives. Kill the shields if you have to! **Now** is the time for speed, Tony! *Anything* and everything for **more speed!**”

“Aye-aye, Captain!” was the engineer’s only reply, even as he went to work on a task that he, himself, had just advised so desperately against. His fingers flew across his board and the results of his efforts were seen almost immediately. The speed indicator on Jack’s readout slowly started to tick upwards. Five, fifteen, soon they had piled twenty-five meters per second onto their velocity; granting full seconds to that precious clock of life that continued to tick away. Try as they might, the clock’s progress could not be stopped, however.

“Impact in thirty-nine seconds, Jack!” cried Anne with panic seeping into her voice.

There was then a sudden boom that shook the entire hull of the exploration cruiser from stem to stern. Alarms started blaring across the bridge and the lighting dimmed into the pulsing red of its emergency configuration. Jack expected to hear the accompanying wail of decompression alarms, but that distinct sound remained un-trumpeted. “Report!” demanded the Captain, “Are we hit?!”

“No, sir!” replied Volkov, “Our cooling system gave out and we lost all power to our drives. What’s more, our left-primary thruster has been *completely* destroyed by a power feedback surge; caused by its slagged thruster-housing. All we’ve got now is our leftover velocity.”

“Well shit.” Sighed the Captain, defeated, “Any ideas?” He looked around his bridge and was met only with stunned silence. “Alrighty, then.” He continued, “In that case, let’s open up the canopy and let a little light in. I want to see the stars...” Jack reached out to his side and somehow knew without looking that his wife would be standing there. She was; and she accepted his hand, pulling herself close to his chair to wrap him in a tight embrace.

They sat there for a short moment, gazing longingly together at the stars; their shared love of which had brought them together all those years ago. Even though the sight of the dotted inky black of space was absolutely mesmerizing, an unexpected urge bade Jack to sneak a peek at his wife enjoying the view. One look at the way her eyes lit up above that perfect smile of hers and he knew what it was that drew him to the stars. It wasn’t about the verse’s endless possibilities or the opportunities if offered at fame and fortune; it was how the stars had always managed to make Anne smile, and he had always been willing to move heaven and earth to give them to her.

She noticed him studying her out of the corner of her eye, so she smiled warmly and lowered her face to say; “Jack, no matter what happens, just know that I would happily do it all over again with you. I regret none of our time together and I lo- **oooly shit!**” as something flashed past the canopy, heading toward the planet at a blinding speed.

“What in the *hell* was that?!” demanded Jack as he tried to gather his wits, “Bring the rear camera feed onto the main screen!”

As the view winked to life before him, Jack saw three sets of glowing rectangles, wide and flat with a slowly pulsing glow, flying in a neat formation toward his enemy. The shapes drifted apart then suddenly lit the sky with a flurry of red bolts that lashed forth to materialize powerful detonations in the darkness. The blossoms of fire erupted one after another, until four roses of deadly flame had bloomed and died out.

“Incoming missiles destroyed!” cheered Anne; now back at her station, dutifully working its controls. Jack hardly heard her, however, because his eyes were still glued to the rear-view camera and those mesmerizing shapes of evidently friendly light. They were dancing now in intricate swirls about one another, shrinking in the view as they pulled further and further away. A trio of new, much dimmer, glows then materialized and snaked away from the ships. They left visible trails of white vapor as they twisted and weaved through the vacuum until they found their targets.

Two rapid detonations of turquoise flame then erupted on top of one another, which elicited a follow-up explosion of a larger and much redder variety. The third missile of the bunch had veered a different direction and detonated alone in front of the planetary backdrop. As the flame of that explosion cleared, however, it left a distinctive shimmer of failing Vanduul shields in its wake.

The trio of friendly drive trails were now in tight formation and bearing down on the lone missile’s target. They all then lashed out at once with a flurry of deadly red and the damaged Vanduul fighter vaporized into a flash of nonexistence. “What in the hell *are* those?” demanded the Captain for a second time, “*Who* the hell are *they*?”

“It’s hard to tell, Jack.” Replied Anne as she hunched close to her readouts, “I’m getting a fair bit of IR off of them now, but I’m still struggling to pick up much EM when they’re not firing. I can’t even get a good radar cross-section on them.”

“Who called in the Sabres?” came Miller’s voice over the Comm, “because I owe you a beer!”

As if in response to the security officer’s elicited question, the open comm channel came to life; “Attention, TSS Aimless: This is Cerberus-1 off of the UEEN Idris Thanatos. You look like you could use a hand.”

“Your timing is impeccable, Cerberus!” replied Jack with an audible sigh of relief, “How did you find us?”

“We were in the area for a search and rescue operation,” explained the pilot, “when we heard a three second burst over the E band coming from this planet. We came running as quickly as we could.”

“Look no further, Lieutenant,” said the Captain with a knowing smile, “because I have a couple of stray Marines onboard with me who just so happen to be in possession of some important data that I think your bosses are gonna want to have a look at. Going down to scoop them up was how we picked up our fan club back there in the first place. The problem I’ve got at the moment is that our main drives were damaged in the scramble out of there and are now all but dead in the water. We’re currently coasting at an escape velocity, but we’re going to need a few minutes to get our engines back up and running before we can make the jump into Quantum drive. Can you keep the uglies off us until then?”

“Understood, Captain,” Came the pilot’s confident response over the bridge speakers, “We’ll draw the flies off of you.” There was something about the self-assured quality of the man’s voice that seemed to have a calming effect on Jack, as if there was now proof that another Captain existed out there somewhere; shouldering the situation’s weight of responsibility with him. He now had another brain at his disposal to augment his own tired and burned-out mind as he faced his next crisis. One could never overstate the value of teamwork.

Jack finally turned his attention back to his bridge and asked; “Volkov, did you do anything to my turrets with that power re-route of yours that you can’t *UN*-do within a reasonable amount of time?”

“Should take me about three minutes or so to tie the turrets back into the main power-draw.” Responded the Engineer, pausing only slightly to consider his ETA before issuing it.

“Do it.” Ordered the Captain, “Turrets first, then get our remaining drive back online. We just need to be able to limp our way into Quantum drive for now. Go!”

A friend or foe network had been established shortly after the comm call, and Jack could now see the highlighted outlines of Cerberus one, two, and three weaving nimble patterns in the distance; lashing out with their laser repeaters on their approach of the enemy, and releasing a blast from what had to have been ballistic scatter-cannons as they passed by. The practiced technique was devastatingly effective and the three human fighters were able to down the remaining two Vanduul craft with ease.

The pilots of Cerberus squadron then regrouped, organizing themselves into a standard escort formation, and burned to match speed with the Civilian cruiser. One of the sabres inverted itself and delicately maneuvered along the spine of the Carrack until its pilot was looking directly down into the breathtaking canopy of the exploration vessel.

Jack spotted the craft approaching overhead and raised his hand into a stiff salute. The pilot returned the gesture as his voice came to life over the bridge speakers; “The registration for this ship came back under the name of one Jack Burgundy. Would that be you, Captain?”

“Indeed it is.” Nodded Jack amicably, “Forgive me for not properly introducing myself earlier. In my defense, things were a tad hectic at the time. Thanks for coming in when you did.”

“Don’t mention it, Captain Burgundy.” Replied the pilot with a stiff nod of his own, “How are things looking over there?”

“Our engineer is at it now.” assured the Aimless’ Captain confidently, “And as an added bonus, we’ll soon have our manned turrets back up and running to help you out with.”

“That is excellent news, Captain.” Acknowledged the pilot, “Does that carrack of yours still have its factory sensor package installed?”

“Yeah,” answered Jack with a raised eyebrow, “For the most part, anyways.”

“Alright, good.” Responded the pilot quickly, “I would like to bring you into our battle-net. We have a terrapin on hush out in the black, and I would like to bring you in on what she’s picking up.”

Jack looked to his wife with a nod and said; “Do it.” before reactivating his comm to reply, “Battle-net accepted. Bringing it online now.” The Captain then rose from his chair and stepped into the open behind it; into an area filled only by a central, waist-high, rectangular island that made up the Carrack’s holo-viewer. He hit a command on its leading face and the space between the island and the roof above it glowed to life.

The faint hum of the device intensified as its image came further and further into fruition. Then, like pieces on a chess board, his ship and the three Sabres of Cerberus materialized before him. Jack rotated the view with a gesture, to better see both parties represented, and activated his comm; “Okay, Cerberus. Battle-net established. What did you want to show me?”

When it returned, the voice of the pilot had lost an unquantifiable quality of command to it as it said; “Set your viewscale to 300 km and you’ll know exactly what I’m talking about.”

Annoyed at the pilot’s reluctance to just tell him, Jack did as he was instructed. The holo-display winked away, then slowly came back to life at the new scale. The Captain knew instantly why the Pilot above was apprehensive about declaring, over an open bridge speaker, exactly what awaited them 150 kilometers away; in high orbit above that harsh world of dust and color.

Jack zoomed in on the shape, trying to identify its large alien curves. A ghastly organic-looking spine of metal stretched over 500 meters, perched atop a trio of bladed protrusions jutting out to either side. The silhouette was readily recognizable to any pilot who had fought or even manned a picket line against the ‘Duul. Dreaded and deadly, were the legendary Vanduul Mauler-class cruisers.

In the re-zoomed display he could also see more shapes floating in the view. They were the small and symmetrical outlines of scythes, moving with great speed toward the small flotilla of human ships. Jack was able to count twelve of them, and as they approached; they seemed to be breaking off into three distinct groups of four fighters each.

"It looks like those scythes are scouting ahead to plot a micro QD jump for that Mauler." hissed Jack into his comm over a private channel to the pilot above.

"I was thinking the same thing." Replied the pilot on the private channel, "How do you think we should play this? Are you confident in your turret gunner's ability to protect the ship for a bit while we push out to intercept the enemy? We're going to have to split those fighters up if we want to make it through this"

"Agreed." Nodded Jack with finality, "Cerberus will stick together, I imagine, so we will do our best to hold off the other groups until you can deal with yours and swing back around to help. Good luck, Cerberus. To all of you."

"Likewise, Captain." Returned the pilot before peeling off to rejoin his comrades trailing the cruiser. The group of stealthy fighter craft then activated their drives in unison to burn hard toward the enemy.

As the Sabres tore past the Carrack's canopy, Jack spun to address his crew; "This isn't over, I'm afraid. We have a large group of fighters coming at us, and they are supporting what appears to be an enemy cruiser in high orbit. Our friends are headed out to meet the enemy at a distance, which will hopefully split up their forces a bit for us. We have about three minutes before the enemy fighters will be within our effective combat range. So before that happens, I would like everyone to get into their pressure suits and keep your helmets at the ready. And Cas, please bring the blast shielding back down before you head aft to change."

The crew's reaction to the frightening news was a testament to their firm trust of and loyalty to their relatively new Captain. There were no cries of despair, no voiced pleas to have Cerberus stay to protect them; just compliant silence, broken only by the mechanical sound of suspended control seats spinning to retract. The command deck of the Aimless cleared quickly under the sound of hustling steps, leaving only the Captain and his wife to fill the quiet.

"No need to worry, my love." Soothed Jack as he lightly ran the back of his fingers down her cheek, "Our luck hasn't run out yet so far, so there's no reason to suspect that it'll run dry *now*. I do still owe you those kids and that plot of land under the stars, after all."

She nodded, then briefly buried her face in his chest. Anne held him there for a moment, resisting his slight urges to move her along. Jack soon stopped and smiled warmly down on his wife before wrapping her in a tight hug that lifted her feet from the deckplate. She giggled and stepped away, accepting his lead as if the carefree embrace had been the password she was waiting for.

They moved to the stairwell at the rear of the bridge and descended to the lower deck. Through the open rear hatchway of the bridge stood Jack's crew, pulling themselves into simple blue pressure suits that imperfectly cinched down over the bumpy features of their existing clothing. They had retrieved said suits from a discrete row of lockers, installed just off of the

bridge for this very purpose. Jack stepped up and grabbed one for himself, then handed another one back for Anne to slip into.

Once everyone had suited up and returned to their post, the time to intercept clock read forty-five seconds. "They're just under thirty kilometers out, Jack." Called Anne from her console.

"Volkov," prompted the Captain over the ship's intercom, "Are you guys all zipped up back there? How are my turrets looking?"

"Turrets online, Captain." Replied the young engineer's stress-worn voice, "I'm suiting up now and have enlisted the aid of Lance Corporal Juno in repairing the drives. As it turns out, she's pretty handy, sir. I'm not confident on an ETA, but I can be sure now that the task isn't impossible. We have to salvage some unblown coolant lines from the slagged engine and plug them in on the other end to get the second thruster up and running again. If you'd asked me with a pistol to my head, I'd throw out a guess of roughly ten to twelve minutes before we can make a QD jump."

"Good work, Volkov," declared the Captain, impressed, "Grab the tools you need and get into the engineering area. I am going to seal off all the bulkheads in preparation for combat. And good luck back there, we're all counting on you."

Chapter 16

The enemy Scythes were within twenty kilometers now, and closing in fast. The Aimless, carried along by its inertia alone, was no longer facing the direction of its momentum; having spun to face the approaching threat. Jack stood, hunched over his holo-viewer on the upper deck of the bridge to watch the events beyond the shielded canopy unfold through the augmented eyes of the battle-net. One of the three groups of fighters had been intercepted by Cerberus, and they were engaged in combat just over fifty kilometers away to their port side. The remaining two groups of Scythes had bypassed the human fighter screen and continued toward the Carrack in a widening pincer maneuver.

“Identify and get a missile lock onto all contacts closing in on us from the starboard-most group of fighters.” Ordered the Captain confidently, “As soon as a lock is established, I want you to fire everything we have readily available. As much as can be sent in a single volley; Understood?”

“Understood, Captain.” Answered Cavas from below, “Tag range is twelve kilometers, and our nest full of Ratlers is armed and ready to rock & roll.”

The Nova: Ratler II cluster missile was a favorite go-to among larger ships that could store a great number of smaller missiles, and their reputation was not undeserved. As the Ratler approached its target, it would burst into a cloud of self-guiding sub-munitions that would speed ahead with the purpose of striking the intended target first; whittling away at its shields and armoring before the missile’s core explosive charge struck home.

The cloud of death that the devices could bloom was impressive and terrifying, and the Aimless had eight of them on standby; ready to scream across the dark and unleash hell. In the absence of his engineer, Jack pulled up the ship’s power management screen on a nearby bridge display and fiddled with its settings for himself. He moved the power-balance into a sixty-forty split between shields and the weapon systems, ignoring the deactivated engines to focus on the craft’s ability to put up a fight.

“Fighters within range,” reported Cavas from the pilot’s chair, “Ratlers away!” With that, the hull of the Aimless rumbled as the volley of missiles left their launch tubes and took to the vacuum of space. The white vapor trails left in their wakes looped then twisted starboard, weaving through the darkness toward the inbound fighters.

“Maintain target lock for follow up volleys if needed,” Commanded Jack, “but roll to present our topside to the other incoming group. I want to set up a good field of fire for Miller and the Lieutenant to work with.”

“Aye, Captain.” Replied the pilot as he rolled the massive ship in compliance. The stars outside the narrow slits in the armored canopy began to shift, but Jack was too glued to the

image within his holo-viewer to notice. The eight Ratler missiles had closed in to within five kilometers of the four inbound scythes and continued to shave the gap as they wound through empty space in intricate arcs. Suddenly, the missiles bloomed into a torrent of tiny lights in the dark that all swarmed forth to engulf the Vanduul craft in wreaths of fire.

A hail of detonations lit the sky with brilliant blooms of red and purple flame, drowning the entire area with blinding light. The initial flash was then soon followed by a second wave of explosions, these ones larger spheres of red and white heat. As the chaos subsided, a jumbled collection of pulverized metal drifted chokingly around a single, weakly shimmering, outline of Vanduul energy shields.

Jack examined the cloud of destruction with a tug of triumph, impressed at the simple and elegant efficiency of it all, just as the dull thump of the side turrets began ringing out through the hull. "Scythes at two clicks and splitting, over-under." Called Miller's voice over the intercom, "We have a good look at em, so keep us steady."

The gunners worked as a team, targeting the same craft while it continued to spiral nearer. Under their combined fire, the scythe soon lost its shields with a flare of amber; just before its cockpit vented to space. The alien pilot's resulting demise had been immediately evident by the way the ship had veered wildly off-course as soon as the expanding cloud of gasses from within the craft's fuselage blasted outward. The human Turret gunners then adjusted their aim without hesitation and fired on a second target; each scoring a single hit on the craft, flaring its shields madly, before it screamed past the Aimless overhead to lay down some fire of its own.

The shield readout over the holotable had flared with an angry red under the barrage, but the Aimless' stout size seven generator was far from giving out. The power hungry, and wallet shrinking, SoloMax shield from Ascension Astro had initially been a friction point between the Captain and his wife. In order to get the oversized shield running, Jack had to replace the brand new Carrack's stock power plant with a heavy-duty Typhon from GNP and drop the remote turrets. It was a hard sell at first, but the Captain was now certain that it had been a good investment. A shield is a spaceman's shell, and a hard enough shell can keep *any* nut alive.

"Roll again, Caval!" ordered the Captain, "Keep our topside to the larger group, shields are focused there. Turrets, I want you to adjust your aim deckward and finish off the remaining fighter coming in from the other group. He's already damaged and doesn't look super mobile, so it shouldn't take long."

Miller and DeCappa immediately set themselves to the task, squeezing off rhythmically offset volleys of green toward the limping enemy. After three such volleys had hit the damaged scythe, it began an uncontrolled roll that ended suddenly with a bright explosion upon the backdrop of stars. That left them with three enemies, who were fanning out in an ever-widening arc to surround the human vessel.

With their tactic of unified fire broken by the scattering Vanduul, the turrets were forced to engage the enemy separately. As the Aimless' weapons continued to thump, her shields continued to absorb a beating. One of the scythes that had cut toward the nose of the cruiser fell from the sightline of Miller's port-side turret as DeCappa focused on a more opportune target with his starboard-mounted armament. As the Scythe passed the front of the Aimless, the wide blade mounted to its wing bit into the sensor arm mounted under the chin of the exploration cruiser; tearing it clean off with a single brutal slice.

"Sonofabitch!" spat the Captain as the deck bucked beneath him with the impact, "Does that toothy scumbag have any idea what one of those damn sensor assemblies costs?! Volkov, how are we looking on that drive?"

"Almost there, Captain." Assured the engineer, his voice winded and distorted by heavy breathing over the bridge speakers, "We've got the coolant lines mostly in place and are starting to rewire everything back into the system. Hang tight!"

"Alright," replied Jack with a confident calm, "Let me know when you've got some good news for us." He then deactivated the intercom and returned his attention to the battle being projected within his holo-viewer. Reaching for the table's control pad, he adjusted the view scale out to fifty kilometers. Moving their way back toward the Aimless, were the three cobalt outlines of Cerberus squadron. They had dealt with their first group of Vanduul quite quickly and were now just over twenty kilometers away and closing at maximum burn.

The three Vanduul were now circling their prey, each focusing their fire on the same portion of the cruiser's topside shields in an expertly choreographed dance. The exploration vessel's defenses held out under the barrage, flaring a brilliant blue-white as it absorbed the nonstop assault, but their protective energy was rapidly draining and threatening to fail. "Cavas," ordered Jack sharply, "We need to de-focus their fire. Put us into a roll and start flipping the Aimless end-over-end. We need to spread their attack enough to keep our shields up until Cerberus gets back to help." The Captain then activated the ship's intercom to say; "All crew, Strap in and prepare for some rough internal inertia. We're putting this baby into a roll!"

In compliance of his order, Jack felt the motion of the Aimless' nose dipping as he made his way to his seat to buckle in. By the time he had claimed his post, the nausea inducing roll had already begun. The Carrack's intricate dance was controlled and precise, with the grace of a Worlds Championship gymnast as it flipped over and over through the vacuum.

The ship's internal inertial dampeners struggled to compensate for the wild maneuver, and its failure to do so left an odd feeling in the pit of one's stomach. The inner ear had a tendency to fight against what the eyes were feeding back to the brain in that situation, and the human stomach could only take so much.

"Oh god, Jack," moaned Anne weakly from behind him, her pale face buried in her hands, "I think I'm going to be sick..."

“Are you serious?” huffed Jack with an unexpected chuckle, “Am I finally not going to be the first schmuck to fumble their lunch for once?! The bridge security cam footage of your long-deserved gastrointestinal comeuppance would make a great vid for this year’s holiday mailer. Plus you know I’d *never* let you hear the end of it. You know that, right?”

“You’re an asshole,” fumed the Captain’s wife with exasperation, “you know *that*, right?”

Jack just laughed as he pressed his head firmly into his seatback. “Well gosh, I love you too, dear.” He said as he smiled to himself. Returning his attention to the task at hand, he reviewed the shield system readout to evaluate the effectiveness of their gut-churning maneuver. The feedback reports from the Vanduul weapon impacts were now scattered seemingly randomly across the shields, allowing their battered top-side the respite it required to heal from a dark red on the ship model displayed before him to a healthier, bluer, hue.

“Aimless,” came Cerberus-one’s voice over the comm, “You appear to be tumbling out of control. Were you hit? What is your status?”

“We are cool as a cucumber at the moment, Cerberus,” answered Jack with a placid, even playful, unconcern, “but any help you can provide in dealing with our friends here would be greatly appreciated.”

“Copy that, Captain Burgundy,” replied the Cerberus pilot, “moving to intercept.” Jack then pulled up a 2D representation of the Battle-net on his console to watch the friendlies approach. At six kilometers out, all three human fighters each released a missile that tore across the vacuum at one of the trailing Vanduul ships.

The alien pilot seemed to have dodged the first missile, but in doing so, it bled most of its speed and presented the belly of its craft to the munition behind it. Missile number two struck its target, sending the scythe into an uncontrolled flat-spin that the Vanduul tried desperately to pull out of until the third missile hit home to finish the craft off in a blaze of violet fire.

“Cavas,” prompted the Captain in his booming tone of command, “Level out our spin and face us into our momentum. Once those drives are online, I want a QD jump spooling right after, you got that?”

“Aye, Captain.” Came Cavas’ clipped response, his voice stress-worn by their nauseating tumble. The Aimless then slowed its roll, utilizing every single maneuvering jet lining the ship’s hull at maximum power to expedite the process. The craft’s movement ground to a halt, save for its forward momentum, in just over eight seconds; prompting Anne to dry-heave at her station behind the Captain as the inertial dampeners struggled again with the change in G-forces.

“Captain,” reported Volkov excitedly over the intercom, “Engines are repaired and coming online now!”

“You heard the man, Cavas!” bellowed Jack from his command seat, “Prepare for QD.” The Captain then flipped a switch on his armrest to activate the battle-net comm network; “Cerberus, repairs have finished and we are rea-”

Jack’s message trailed off as the space off to the Aimless’s eleven-o’clock shimmered with pseudo-motion for a moment, just before a behemoth materialized to blot out a large section of the starfield. A jagged spine of dark metal shimmered slightly in the distance, lit by the subtle red glow of the stout shields enveloping it. The alien cruiser sat still for only a moment before yawing to present its leading edge to the largest of the human craft. Then, in near unison, several flashes of energy dotted the dark beneath the intimidating Mauler.

“Twelve small fighters inbound, Jack!” yelled Anne from her seat, “They are sixteen kilometers out and closing quickly!”

“Cavas,” barked the Captain, “How is that QD looking?” There was a long moment of silence before Jack was forced to ask again; “Cavas, are we going to jump outta here or what?”

“Sorry sir.” Said the pilot with a frustrated sigh, “They’ve got a damn interdiction net over us and it feels like a wide one. We can’t jump and there’s no way we’re going to outrun them with a single engine. I’d say we’re pretty much hosed.”

Jack let out a sigh of his own, saying; “Ya know what, Bill? I’ve kissed my ass goodbye about four times today already, and frankly I’m getting sick of the taste. It’s not over till its over, my man, so let’s not cash out just yet. Shields are pushed to the front, Mr. Cavas. Now; Let’s face the enemy and deal with them as they come, shall we?”

“Aye, Captain.” Returned the pilot stiffly, with some semblance of his military rigidity returning in a Pavlovian display of obedience to the command.

The Aimless slowly yawed to face its aggressor. Featuring a mean looking set of long, sharp, fins that ran along its underside, the Vanduul Mauler looked deadly and absurdly animal-like. They were known to use those sharpened fins as massive blades, dealing devastating damage to larger capitol vessels that stood in their way. Its silhouette left the impression of a shark swimming through the briny depths at them, bearing down on its prey with a wide head that trailed into a thin tail section that housed the Mauler’s powerful engines.

Jack let out a weary sigh, looking out across the dark at yet another impossible situation closing in on him, and started to get the feeling that the universe wanted him dead. The Captain steeled his nerves, swallowing hard to rewet his desperately dry throat and reclaim his voice. Activating the comm, he said; “How do you want to play this one, Cerberus?”

To Jack’s surprise, the Navy pilot returned immediately with a confident command; “Head for the placed nav marker with as much speed as you can muster. We will keep them off of you.”

Jack muted the comm and looked to his wife; “Anne, where’s he sending us?”

Anne pulled up the transmitted coordinates on her screen and examined them. “I don’t know, Jack,” she said with a shrug, “It’s just a point in space that is eighty-four kilometers away. Could be the edge of the interdiction field perhaps?”

“Works for me.” sighed the Captain, “Cavas, lets stretch her legs out a bit. Adjust our heading into a beeline for the following nav marker. We’re making another run for it.” With a gesture, the information was transferred to the pilot’s HUD and the ship began its slow bank to port. “Volkov,” he continued over the intercom, “don’t be afraid to speak up if Cavas is pushing her too hard. I should have taken your advice about pushing the drives earlier, and that is not a mistake that I intend to make twice.”

“No worries, Cap,” returned the young engineer over the intercom, “I hard-set safe limits in this time, so he can have at it. Ill fiddle with the levels and fine-tune it a bit, but we have about sixty-three percent of our normal thruster power at our disposal. Pushing any more power down those pipes is bound to melt ‘em.”

“Understood.” Replied Jack with a satisfied nod, “Good work, Tony. Gunners, I want you to focus your attention on keeping the Duul off of our escorts. Our shields can take more of a beating than theirs can, but they’ll swat more flies than you two will. Keep *them* in the fight and they’ll worry about *us*!”

As Jack finished issuing his command, the first volley of incoming fire from the new group of Vanduul sparkled off of the Aimless’ shields. Two scythes flashed by, a dozen meters from the front viewport, followed by a boom that shook the human cruiser roughly. The impact was then followed shortly by wailing decompression alarms.

“Explosive de-com in the shuttle bay!” shouted Volkov as he was settling into his station. He wasted no time getting to work, skittering his quick little fingers across his workspace with determined expertise. “Ookay...” he continued, his tongue poking from the side of his lip in concentration, “Surrounding corridors have been sealed and the leak has been contained. Overall structural damage is minimal.”

Just as the engineer finished his report, another boom rang out through the hull that emanated from the deckplate. This time, the bang had elicited even more alarms ringing across the bridge. “What the hell is it now?!” demanded the Captain as he reseated himself after the brutal impact.

“We are losing air pressure in cargo module number two, Captain.” Alerted Volkov, “I believe it was caused by another missile strike.”

Jack hissed an expletive under his breath and kicked on the battlenet comm channel; “We’re getting peppered pretty badly here, Cerberus. Anything you can do to keep those missiles off of us?”

“We’ll do what we can, Captain.” Returned Cerberus-1, “There are three Stingers in the bunch, so we will go after the missile boats first.”

“That’s not a bad idea.” Replied the Captain with a thoughtful stroke of his chin, “Cavas, arm what missiles we have left and get them ready to fly. Anne, find me a stinger in the crowd to lock onto.”

Moments later a red targeting bracket fell into place around a red icon on his battlenet readout. “Arm two missiles and sit on them. As soon as that Duulie starts banking for another pass, let ‘em rip.”

“Aye, Captain.” barked the pilot in response, his discipline absolute as he yawed to face the targeted enemy. The enemy ship was just over three kilometers distant, pulling away from the exploration cruiser at a lazy pace. Suddenly, the pair of red glows from its drives rolled and the ship started to bank back toward the battle. In response, two distinct thumps rang out through the hull overhead. Both Ratlers tore away from the Aimless with blinding speed, twisting and weaving around one-another through the dark as they screamed toward their target.

Just as the Vanduul Stinger was rounding its lazy turn, it was met face to face with a hail of swirling lights; closing in on the craft in an inescapable net of impending destruction. The Ratler submunitions detonated and drowned the enemy ship within a bright flash of red and violet. Shortly after, the main munitions had no shields to contend with when they struck home in wide splashes of brilliant blue-white. The Stinger didn’t explode outright, but it listed through space unpowered and seemingly unmanned.

“Nice shot, Aimless!” whooped the female voice of one of the Cerberus pilots over the comm, “Got any of those left to help me out with?”

Jack addressed his control board and saw that the speaker was Cerberus-3. She was three kilometers aft of the Aimless with a pair of scythes on her tail, and it didn’t look like they were making life easy for her. The Captain considered for a moment, then activated his comm; “All I’ve got are Ratlers, and the uglies are a little close on your ass for comfort. They seem to be tailing you pretty straight, so take them in a sweep over my topside. Bring ‘em stern to stem.”

“Will do, Captain,” replied Cerberus-3, “bringing them in now.”

Jack then activated his intercom to the ship’s gunners to say; “Eyes aft! We have Cerberus-3 bringing two bandits with her over our topside. Let’s sweep them off for her, gentlemen.”

After receiving two confirmation chirps from the comm system, Jack turned his attention to the aft camera feed. Cerberus-3 was just over a kilometer away now, twisting and rolling to avoid the fire coming up at her from behind. At nine-hundred meters she jerked her ship upwards to reveal her pursuers. As soon as her craft wasn’t eclipsing her trailing enemy, the twin turrets of the aimless opened up with their matching sets of powerful laser cannons.

Green streaks of energy tore across the vacuum, reaching out with deadly accuracy as the head-on enemy closed in on a flat trajectory. The combined fire was once again devastating, consuming the leading scythe in four tightly controlled volleys. The wreckage of that destruction was then glancing off of the Aimless' rear shields as the Vanduul's partner was flying past overhead. The turrets reacquired their target as it flew past the nose of the human cruiser and managed to score two more solid volleys on its tail before it peeled off in panic.

The Vanduul's self-preservation tactic didn't grant it much time, however, because Cerberus-3 had done a 180° flip & burn and was now heading right for him with her laser repeaters blazing. The Sabre then swept past the topside of the enemy ship, emitting a burst of blue from its ballistic scattergun. In response, the Vanduul ship lit the darkness with a bloom of red flame.

The deck of the Aimless Cheered with excitement at the enemy ship's destruction, but Jack withheld his celebration. It was a small victory in an ever-worsening situation, and he was still struggling to see the logic in Cerberus' plan. Sure, the three Sabres had done a great job leading several of the Vanduul fighters away, but more were closing in now and they were all fixating on the largest of the human ships. The Carrack's shields were strong, but they wouldn't hold forever.

Frustrated, Jack activated his radio to Cerberus and sighed; "Any more bright ideas? Our shields are wearing down and we cant keep this up forever. There's too many of them and I don't think they're fixing to give us a fair fight."

"That's why its always nice to have friends, Captain." Came Cerberus-1's casual reply.

Before Jack had time to fully absorb the pilot's out-of-place nonconcern, a new shimmer rose in the distance. Snapping into existence, twenty-two kilometers in front of them and directly within the Aimless' desperate flightpath, was the massive but familiar outline of a UEE Navy Idris. It was painted all-black and none of the ship's guidance running lights were illuminated. All that could be seen, beyond a dark silhouette that blotted out the starfield, were the small twinkles of light from the interior of the ship's numerous side-mounted turrets.

Almost as soon as it had fully materialized, the Idris' massive spinal-mounted railgun belched a blue cloud of flame into the darkness. A heartbeat later, a large flare of energy erupted from the shield near the tail of the Vanduul Mauler. As the Idris charged its railgun for a second shot, it released an impressive volley of missiles that stretched across the black toward the Vanduul Cruiser.

The railgun belched again, eliciting another flare of Vanduul shields just before the cloud of incoming missiles struck their target. Absorbing only the first few munitions with a flash of violet, the enemy's envelope of protective energy finally failed and allowed the second half of the deadly volley to strike the hull of the cruiser directly. The blast tore away swaths of armor

plating and left the flickers of internal fires and sparking electronics sprouting along its tail section.

Yawing slowly away from the human newcomer, the Maulers engines began to sputter and brighten with exertion. Before any momentum could be gained, however, the Idris lashed out once more with its massive railgun. The incredibly fast projectile tore through the thinnest part of the alien cruiser's tail section, severing the front of the ship from the thruster housings perched at its rear.

As Jack watched the Mauler drift into its death throes, he heard Anne calling out from behind him. "Jack," she urged, "the interdiction net is down and the Vanduul fighters are peeling off to regroup!"

The bridge's speakers then came to life with a gravely voice; "Attention, TSS Aimless, this is Commander Alexander Grayne of the UEEN Idris Thanatos. Mark the transmitted coordinates and jump-link with Cerberus. They will escort you out of here and lead you to our rendezvous point. I look forward to meeting with you."

"Likewise, commander." Returned Jack with a respectful nod that he knew the other man couldn't see, "Establishing link now. Thanks for the assist, Thanatos, you've got a hell of a fighter wing operating outta that clubhouse. They're damn fine fliers with a real gift for timing."

"It is a privilege to help those who would help our soldiers in need, Captain," Replied Grayne, "and I look forward to meeting with you face to face. Thanatos out."

"Cerberus has signaled that they are ready to jump and will go on our command." Said Anne as she studied her readout, "Destination has been locked and we are ready to go."

Jack nodded and said with a sigh; "Cavas, get us the hell out of here, please."

"With pleasure, Captain." Returned the pilot from below, yawing the nose of the craft slightly before kicking in the snap-pop of the quantum drive. Jack then brought up the rear-view camera to watch as the ferocious little planet of hidden beauty shrank on his screen. He smiled to himself while the world slowly receded into a dot of rust-colored light in the vast starfield. Once again, Death had failed to lay a single bony digit on him; and that bastard never would, Jack thought, as long as he had his wits and his crew about him.

Chapter 17

After two misdirection jumps, the Aimless found itself coming out of Quantum Drive within the shadow of a nearly planetoid-sized asteroid at the outer edges of the system. Thanatos was already there and waiting for them, its mass prominent against the sprawling backdrop of stars and tumbling rock, with running lights illuminated and looking far friendlier than it had appeared during combat a half hour before.

Through the long canopy of the Aimless, Jack watched the three Sabres of Cerberus pull forward and peel off toward their mother ship. The wide ramp at the rear of the Idris slowly lowered on Cerberus' approach, revealing the capitol ship's central flightdeck within. Then, one by one in a smooth and practiced procession, the three Sabres gently slid through the narrow opening and into the larger ship to land.

As the final fighter had disappeared inside, the comm channel sprang to life with the voice of Commander Grayne; "Captain Burgundy!" he beamed, "Welcome! I am sending a shuttle over to ferry you and the survivors aboard for a quick debrief. Are you in immediate need of any support or supplies that I can throw onboard before it heads your way?"

Jack muted the microphone to address his crew; "Are we in desperate need of anything?"

"A beer would be nice..." Mumbled Cavas, mostly to himself, "...or some Big Bennys."

Jack sighed at the pilot and retorted; "You can get your fat guy snacks at the next cry-astro we hit. What about parts, Volkov? Anything critical we need?"

The young engineer scratched his head for a moment, then shrugged; "We could use some power control modules and a few extra coolant lines, but nothing critical for the moment. If we want to better our odds of navigating a jump tunnel in one piece, though, I will need to do some major repair and retrofitting to the main engine."

Jack reactivated his microphone and replied to the Commander; "Thank you, we could use some supplies, but they are not emergency in nature. Mind if my engineer transmits a list of what he needs to get our drives fixed up enough to limp home?"

"If we've got it, it's yours." Replied Grayne assuredly, "I will free up a deck team to handle requisition for you. They'll get him squared away, and I can even offer some well qualified hands to help out if you need them."

"I appreciate that, Commander." Thanked Jack with genuine relief at the man's eager willingness to provide what was needed without the hassle of haggling, "I will gather the collected mission data and prepare the survivors for the arrival of your shuttle."

Jack rounded up Miller and the two recovered Marines, then directed them to the airlock. After a short wait, a hiss began to emanate from beyond its round metal door. The audible adjustment in air pressure was followed by a muffled whirr of mechanical action somewhere within the wall. The mechanism then loudly clicked home and the airlock's doors began to slide apart.

Beyond the doorway sat a small chamber with four tightly placed seats lining the walls on either side. Each chair featured a full crash harness that hoisted its restraint bars into the air, as if to offer the seat to prospective occupants. The sparse Argo shuttle didn't even have a passthrough up to the cockpit, which served as a small reminder that they were merely passengers and that their life belonged to a pilot they've never met. In a craft like this one, humans were merely cargo and were treated as such.

Miller sighed heavily when he caught a glimpse of their transport. He shook his head vigorously, stating; "Nah. No thanks, Captain. I don't need to be trying to squeeze my wide ass into this thing. Why cram yourselves, ya know? You don't need me holding your hand while you drop the kids off, do you?"

Jack arched his brow and looked back at his security officer as DeCappa and Juno slipped past with their gear bags to take a seat. "What if the Thanatos isn't what they say they are?" proposed the Captain with an exaggerated shrug, "What if they're pirates or Banu slavers? What if they think I'm *pretty*? I'm afraid I can't take that risk."

"I don't think they're pir-" was all that Miller got to say before being cut off by his Captain's flat and commanding voice; "I don't give a shit, Tyson! I don't care if you forgot your purse in your rack, just choose a friggin seat and plant your ass! Your boots were in the dirt and you'll need to be debriefed. You know that as well as I do. What's the matter? Afraid you'll run into an ex-girlfriend over there or something?"

Miller just huffed in response as he pushed past his Captain and chose the seat closest to the door. Jack ducked into the tight space just after his security officer and chose the seat directly opposite of the large man, watching his uncomfortable fidgeting as he attempted to secure his restraints. The Captain lowered his own restraints and toggled a switch to reseal the rear hatch. Soon after, a light click could be heard as their Argo undocked.

They all felt a slight lurch of movement as their small ship pulled away from the airlock, offering the gentle hum of the pulsing engines to accompany the sensation. It took only a matter of moments, squeezed inside the military minded comfort of the little Argo shuttle, to cross the vacuum to Thanatos' awaiting hangar bay. The Shuttle set down with a light bump, then the engines could be heard powering down.

As the Argo's rear-facing airlock door hissed open and slid away, blinding lights from beyond the doorway's threshold poured in to assault them. Jack raised his hand to shield his eyes from the visual onslaught and heard a stern voice calling out from a distance behind the

glow somewhere; "Oiy! Cool it with the third degree over there, *Corporal*. This isn't a prisoner transport, so why would you treat it like one? These folks took down a kingship; so show a little respect, will ya? Kill the damn high-beams and go do something useful with yourself."

"Aye, Lieutenant." came the clipped reply of another, much closer, voice before the flood of light snapped off to reveal two men standing near the Airlock's doorway. The one in light armor clipped his rifle to his chestplate and spun to walk away without another word, his annoyance plain to see in his expression. Donning a green flight suit with a close-cropped buzzcut and a thick blonde mustache, the other figure stepped forward to offer his hand.

Jack accepted the man's hand and pulled himself to his feet. "My name is Lieutenant Denton Hayder." Began the mustachioed pilot as he cleared his throat, "I am Cerberus one."

"It's a treat to meet you face to face, Lieutenant." said Jack with a friendly nod, "If it weren't for you and your wingmates, I wouldn't be breathing right now. If you ever need a favor, or even just a beer somewhere down the road, don't you hesitate to give me a call."

The lieutenant laughed, saying; "I will keep that in mind, Captain. I just wanted to come over and introduce myself before you went up to see the Commander, because I really respect what you did down there. Most folks would have turned tail and run if they had seen what you saw."

"Meh." Shrugged Jack with a dismissive wave, "I'm simply not smart enough to have the good sense to run when I should, so the credit really needs to go to my crew for going along with my crazy scheme in the first place; let alone managing to pull it off."

When Jack stepped out of the shuttle, two more figures stood patiently nearby. The closer one was a petite woman in a standard issue pilot's suit, sporting chin-length straight black hair with a fierce streak of blue running through it on the left side of her face. Standing next to her was a barrel-chested man in a matching flight suit, his features mostly obscured by a bushy brown beard that sprung from his face in a wild thicket.

"Captain," began Lieutenant Hayder, "I would like to introduce you to Lieutenants Coyne and Mao. They are Cerberus two and three respectively.

"Thanks for pulling your weight out there." said Mao as she stepped forward to offer her hand, "There's no way we all would have made it out if you didn't run an effective ship."

"Humanity has lost enough of its best and brightest in this god-forsaken system already," lamented Jack as he shook her hand, "so I'm glad we didn't add any more to that number on our way out. I just hope it is all worth it in the end."

"I bet the other folks on that shuttle with you would agree with me," began Lieutenant Coyne, "If I said it was worth it to save who you could. Take solace in that, Captain."

In acknowledgement of the statement, Jack felt a hand clap him on the shoulder from behind. He spun to see the smiling face of DeCappa, nodding along in agreement with the Navy pilot. "Thanks to you, Jack," said the Marine Lieutenant as he sucked in a deep and savoring breath while gesturing widely to the room around him, "Juno and I get to go home. Hell, we *are* home on *any* deck of the fleet."

Jack felt it too, and understood exactly what the younger man meant by the statement. The air around him had a familiar aroma of grease and fuel that took his mind all the way back to his days in the service. He watched the deck crews scrambling to and fro, tunnel-vision focused on their assigned tasks while expertly weaving through the chaos. Cascading showers of sparks were falling from an open access panel under the closest of Cerberus' landed Sabres, dancing across the deckplate to light the area with brief flashes of white-hot brilliance. Once the crackle of the worker's torches reached his ears, the illusion was complete and Jack was once again a lieutenant himself; at home and comfortable, deep within the protective belly of a mighty and invincible war-beast of the Empire.

Feeling a new sensation of ease enveloping him, Jack let his shoulders relax for the first time in twelve hours as he spun to assist Juno out of the shuttle. She bowed low in her newly applied neck brace and stepped down to the flightdeck next to him, smiling broadly as she looked around Thanatos' hangar bay. She and DeCappa continued onward to meet with the pilots of Cerberus as Miller stepped out of the shuttle behind them, showing no emotion across his face but mild annoyance at having been crammed into an Argo's jumpseat.

The burly security officer stepped out with obvious impatience and sourly remarked; "A fancy ship like an Idris should have a nicer shuttle. Don't they have to ass-kiss politicians who come aboard every once in a while or something? Does the Commander make *them* sit in that godawful shit-can?"

"Since when are you the pissy diplomat type, Miller?" chuckled Jack as he shook his head in amused disbelief, "You looking for a 600i to ferry you around, or what?"

"Listen Captain, I just hate Argos, alright?" Returned the security officer with his arms folded grumpily across his chest, "They account for three out of my four lifetime shuttle crashes and I don't trust the damn things. Frankly, sir; I'd prefer EVAing back to the Aimless while in my underwear over riding in that piece of shit again. *Anything* over that deathtrap."

"The man that fears nothing is afraid of an Argo?" Snorted Jack as he lightly shoved the larger man ahead toward the elevator that sat across the bay, "*Duly* noted."

Chapter 18

Once they had ascended the lift, it was a short and well-remembered journey before they found themselves stepping onto Thanatos' bridge. Just as the flightdeck had its own intricate ballet of activity, the command deck was a flurry of movement as well. Crew members strolled between stations and wall consoles, weaving around one another as they went about their business; all while backdropped by stunning pinpoints of starlight outside the Idris' massive forward-facing viewports.

Jack strode at the front of the group now and extended his hand to the approaching Commander, easily identified by his crisp naval uniform and the intricate pins and stripes upon it. "It's a pleasure to meet you, commander Grayne." Announced Jack as he leveled his open hand toward the man. The Commander accepted and shook with the civilian Captain.

"I'm told that you went on quite the adventure to bring these Marines home." Said Grayne with a smile, "I would love to hear all about it."

"Absolutely," replied Jack as he accepted the other man's lead toward the central command console situated next to the ship's two-meter tall spherical main holo-display, "I have the mission data for you on this drive here. It's everything the boarding team was able to pull from the Kingship. Lieutenant DeCappa would know more for you on the subject, as he was the one to actually collect the data. I was merely his ride off-planet."

The Commander accepted the drive and passed it off to a member of his bridge crew, saying; "Plug it in and we'll see what we've got." Grayne then returned his attention to his guests and continued; "The risk you took in completing the mission set forth for Lieutenant DeCappa and his team was astronomical, but the Empire is ecstatic to see that you have succeeded. Not only in retrieving the data, but in saving human lives. You are a shining example of what every UEE citizen should strive to become, Captain Burgundy."

"Does that mean you're gonna let me name the system?" asked Jack with a wry smirk, "Or does DeCappa get that honor for getting here first?"

Grayne shrugged noncommittally and replied; "Neither, actually. The ICC isn't going to be putting this one on their maps anytime soon, so it'll just stick with its numerical designation assigned by the UEEN for now. We don't need civvies up in here leading the Vanduul back through the jump tunnel and into the buffet that is the Leir system."

"Commander!" called the young bridge crewman that had been handed the data drive, "I think you're going to want to have a look at this!" He stood at the console for the main holo-display and punched a few commands into it. As he typed, a blown up three-dimensional image of a Kingship glowed to life within the main display. "Not only do we have weapon, shield, and power statistics," continued the excited Ensign, "we also have intact navigational data! I'm

showing over two hundred mapped systems here, and only a handful of them are on current UEE charts.”

The commander stepped over to the young man’s workstation and usurped its controls for himself. After a moment of tapping away at the console, the image within the main holo-display changed from the floating ship model to a nebulous web of interconnecting points of light. The labeling and notation displayed on the alien starmap was unreadable to Jack, but something about the odd lines of text seemed to excite the Commander.

“Ensign,” began Grayne abruptly as his wide eyes fixated on the holo-display, “Have you cross referenced the Vanduul map with our own? Do we have enough information to properly utilize this data?”

The young bridge officer nodded confidently, saying; “Yes sir. We have overlap in Leir, Vega, and Orion. From there, we have access to all of it.”

“My god...” breathed the Commander with awe as he leaned closer to the floating starmap to examine it intensely, nearly forgetting the guests on his bridge until one of them audibly shuffled their feet on the deckplate behind him. Grayne then spun to face the outsiders, offering them a grand smile as he said; “You’ve brought back something pretty special here, Captain. If this map legend is accurate, then the innumerable harvest worlds that are documented on this chart outweigh the UEE’s current known resources by double...*at least*. And even better than that; analysis of these maps could lead us to some semblance of a Vanduul home world, or even other species that are hiding out there, waiting for first contact.”

“Well I’ll be damned,” murmured Lieutenant DeCappa with a low whistle, “I had no idea what I was carrying all that time. Makes sense why the Duul would go to such lengths to recover it from us. I wonder what else we can learn from it.”

“That will be up to the research folks.” Retorted the Commander with a shrug, “I doubt either of us will ever know the full scope of what was gained from this, but I think it’s safe to say that it’s going to end up being a pretty big deal. Thank you, all of you, for completing this mission.” Grayne then looked to DeCappa with a fraction of a sorrowful frown before continuing; “I know we lost a lot of good people on this, but at least we know it was for something important. This will be an incredible tool in our fight against the Vanduul, and can help turn the tide of the seemingly never-ending war with their kind.”

“Sounds valuable...” Commented Miller flatly from the rear of the bunch, “and we sure did go through *quiiite* a bit of trouble getting it to you. I’m assuming that a little compensation would be in order for the *brave heroes*, yeah?”

Jack shot an annoyed look at his security officer, saying; “Let me handle the negotiations, will ya? Now is not the time for numbers...”

“Oh, he’s quite right, Captain.” Soothed the Commander with a placating gesture, “What you have brought me is indeed very valuable to the Empire, and you *will* be rewarded accordingly. I will personally see to it that you are. That being said; we will need to send a tech aboard your ship to assure that all sensitive data from this event has been scrubbed from your computers entirely, including all navigational data pertaining to this system and its Jump point. We will then escort you back into Lier and you will be free to go about your business.”

“Fair enough, ” interposed Jack with a politely raised finger, “I can understand the need for informational security, Commander, but what about my contract with the client that hired my ship? I have a reputation to keep, you know.”

Grayne shrugged and replied amicably; “Understood, Captain. I will send you along with an official letter of Imperial merit and an edict of redirection. You can tell your client that you were accosted by pirates on the outer edges of leir, and that we held your ship for questioning before sending you back out of the area. That way, the Empire will reimburse your client’s investment and you get to save face while collecting a payday of your own. Deal?”

“I’d say that’s a deal, Commander” agreed Jack as he held out his hand to shake on it. Grayne accepted his offer and shook heartily to seal their verbal agreement.

Chapter 19

Over the next two hours, Jack and Miller were debriefed in a small interrogation room alongside DeCappa and Juno. They spoke in detail over every aspect of the recovery, with the officer conducting the debriefing rushing in to hush the active duty Marines every time that they started to trail off too far into the details of their original mission. It was a tedious process, but nothing new for anyone involved. By the end of their tale they had raised more than a few skeptical eyebrows from their host, but the patient officer had just continued to nod as he jotted notes on his mobiGlas until he was satisfied with the sequence of events.

Once they were finished telling their side of the story, Jack and Miller were lead back down to the flightdeck with Juno and DeCappa in tow. The Argo still sat there waiting for them, its rear hatch open and inviting as its engines spooled up on their approach. Miller groaned at the sight of the small shuttle, then let out a resigned sigh as he stepped toward it to board without a gesture of farewell.

Unlike his security officer, Jack stopped before boarding the Argo and turned to address DeCappa and Juno. In response, the Lieutenant clacked his heels together and snapped his hand up into a crisp salute, with Lance corporal Juno following suit shortly after. Jack eyed them for a moment, seeing the genuine respect in their eyes as they held the gesture. The former Major then snapped his own heels and steadily raised his hand to his brow.

“You’re a hell of a warrior, DeCappa.” Said Jack matter-of-factly as he eyed the man from foot to face, “You honor the uniform on your back, and you damn well deserve that rank on your shoulder. Trust your gut, keep a saddle on your ego, and always remember that respect goes both ways. Do that and you’ll go far, my friend. I guarantee it.”

“Thank you, Jack.” Replied the Lieutenant as he lowered his hand for a shake, “I’ll be sure to remember that. Any thoughts on where you’re headed next? Because if you’re going out exploring again, let me offer you a nugget of advice; try to find a planet *without* Vanduul on it already. It would make the whole process much easier, I imagine.”

Jack laughed, saying; “I’ll have to keep that in mind. Take care of yourself, lieutenant.” He then turned and shook with Juno before nodding his final goodbyes to the pair as he boarded the awaiting Argo. The Captain took his seat across from his security officer and fastened his restraints, looking through the open hatchway as the rescued Marines turned to walk away.

As soon as the small shuttle’s rear door had sealed, leaving Jack and his security officer alone in its cramped rear compartment, Miller finally spoke up; “So how much did they give us? We get screwed or what?”

“I don’t know.” Shrugged Jack with a tired sigh, “We’ll apparently soon receive a lump transfer into the company account for our services. Grayne said we should be able to check on it once we get back within a comSat network to verify the amount and if it went through or not. It

kinda struck me as the take it or leave it sorta deal, but I think we will be pretty well taken care of. Nothing is more expensive than silence, and that's what they're gonna aim to buy from us today."

By the time the Argo had returned Jack and Miller to the Aimless, Volkov had already finished patching up their remaining drive. With the equipment stores aboard Thanatos open to him, the young engineer took full advantage of that access to overhaul a damaged shield capacitor bank and replace some worn components with brand new military-grade modules that one would be hard-pressed to find on the open market. The Aimless, while a little battered and bruised along its hardened hull, was purring once again and ready for action.

Volkov made sure, as well, to note his displeasure with *'Trooper dickthumbs'* who came over from Thanatos to wipe their relevant mission data, but that displeasure was quickly silenced at mention of their impending sizable monetary reward. It was amazing, thought Jack, what people were willing to put up with for money. From there, it was only a short wait before the Aimless was following Thanatos through QD toward the system's jump tunnel to Leir.

Once they had arrived at the jump point, Thanatos peeled off and instructed the Aimless to head through alone. In compliance, Cavas spooled up the jump drive and dove in. For the second time in as many days, thanks to trooper Dickthumbs and his happy delete button, the Aimless' pilot was forced to fly the unwieldy Carrack through the deadly twists and turns of the jump tunnel completely unguided. Even with a damaged engine, Cavas had a way of making the white-knuckle flight look easy; swinging the ship about in gently premeditated arcs through the maddening unpredictability of the winding tunnel. After a dizzying journey, they once again passed back into real space and to the relative safety of the Leir system.

"Volkov," prompted the Captain from his seat, "how did we hold up through the jump?"

"Looking green across the board, Captain." Replied the engineer with a hint of pride touching his voice, "Engine number two got a little hot for a second there, but my patchwork is holding up nicely."

"Well done." Nodded Jack with satisfaction, "Anne, how are we looking on our comSat connection?"

"Connection is a bit spotty this far out." She began as she examined her console, "With the main signal array gone, we only have our backup receivers to rely on; and they are relatively short range. I have the system running a repeating handshake and it should alert us as soon as it establishes connection."

"Understood." Acknowledged Jack as he settled into his chair, "Cavas, set a course for Mya. We should be within their SatCom network fairly shortly."

"Aye Captain." acknowledged the pilot, "Course set and preparing for QD." The Aimless then yawed to face the system's distant central dwarf star before a growing hum began vibrating

the hull. With a pop of pseudo-motion, the Carrack appeared to stretch out of shape as it leapt into quantum drive.

After only two minutes, Anne's console lit up with warnings of an incoming network connection. She took a moment to log in and navigate to their company's financial site before letting out a choking gasp. "Holy shit!" she exclaimed in disbelief, "Did you sell them Miller's kidneys or something? This total can't be right..."

Jack rose from his seat and strolled over to take a look for himself. When he saw the figure scrawled across her screen, he let out a low whistle. "Now THAT is what I call proper payment for a hard day's work."

"Frankly, I find it hard to believe that a pay-off that large isn't coming with some strings." Commented Anne hesitantly, "So what's the catch?"

"The catch" replied Jack with a knowing smile, "is that none of us are allowed to talk about what happened out there...to anyone. Ever. And believe me, they will be checking up on us to assure we maintain our end of the bargain. I'd say that is a small price to pay for a minor fortune."

Jack then leaned forward to activate the financial site's payout calculator. After punching in a few parameters, a chart was returned that displayed each crewmember's cut of the reward. Jack had awarded himself 25% of the take-home while providing his wife and the other four crew members 15% each of the total.

With the final payout being so massive, the top 10% from his own cut that he planned on putting back into the Aimless in the form of upgrades and repairs would be more than enough to get it performing well beyond factory specs. He would have to take another look into the Carrack's missile defense, he mused to himself as he mentally sifted through his myriad of options. Satisfied with the figures, he hit the command to transfer the credits out into everyone's accounts.

Several seconds of silence then lead to an explosion of cheers and gasps from the lower bridge deck as each crew member received confirmation of their newly transferred credits. Ravi stammered as he tried to count the zeroes on the figure presented to him and Volkov just started laughing rather maniacally. Ever-vigilant at the controls, Cavas resisted checking his mobiGlas until he heard Ravi sobbing over his shoulder. He finally gave into his burning curiosity and, after a moment of silent reading, his delayed expletives of joy became the final instrument to join the symphony of celebration that was surging below.

Jack listened to his crew rejoice, filled with an oddly paternal pride that he had never quite felt before. Not only did they follow him into danger, they willingly came back for him when they knew the odds were against his survival. He really did owe them his life, and he would never forget it for as long as he helmed the Aimless. His silent reflection was interrupted by a

gentle touch on his shoulder as Anne stepped up behind his chair. “Where do we go now, Captain?” she asked with an easy smile.

“Your name is on the title, too, ya know...” sighed Jack with a shrug, “Where would you like to go, my love?”

“Well...now that we can afford it,” beamed the Captain’s wife with giddy excitement, “I say we rent out a private beach on Cassel and go slippers-only for a whole month. How does that sound?”

Jack chuckled and shot her a lopsided grin, saying; “I think it sounds like I might make some progress on that kid I owe ya...”

By now, the commotion on the bridge had cooled to pockets of excited conversation. Ravi could be heard going on about his newly conceived plan of going to earth, wistfully reciting the vast collection of art and architecture that he wished to see. Meanwhile, Volkov and Cavas had apparently made fresh plans to attend the upcoming Galactic Series Sata-ball tournament, and were now arguing about which team they would root for in the finals. Miller, as usual, didn’t say much, but he did mumble something to Volkov about doing a little mercenary work for a friend out in Nyx if he had nothing else to do.

Jack allowed the conversation to naturally wind down, then descended the lift to join his crew on the lower command deck. When they noticed his presence, they all reflexively trailed off their conversations to turn and give respectful attention to their Captain. Jack picked up on their expectant gazes and stepped forward to speak; “I think it would suffice to say that you all appear quite satisfied with your compensation. That’s good, because you’ve earned it. Every credit. You had every opportunity to abandon Miller and I on that rock to save yourselves, but you didn’t. You faced uncertain danger and plucked us from *certain* death. For that, I owe you my respect and my deepest gratitude. Each and every one of you will forever have a home aboard the Aimless, and I absolutely mean that. We are to dock at Mya for repairs and shall go our separate ways from there. The Aimless will be off-duty for about two months starting now. If you would rather move on, or even if you decide to use your newfound wealth to purchase a ship of your own to run, there will be no hard feelings and I truly wish you the best. But if you would like to continue your time here with the Aimless, I would be honored to have you. You are without question the best damn crew I’ve ever had the pleasure of working with.”

With a military crispness that Jack had never seen from the grumpily aging Marine, Miller stepped forward and snapped a neat salute. He held his chest out and his chin up, proud and sure in his support of his Captain. It was a rare display of respect that bade the others on the command deck to step forward and mimic the security officer’s gesture, each just as proud to serve. Jack looked out among the faces on his bridge and found that he already knew them by heart. They had faced the fire with him and come through the flame tempered and honed, which forever tied them together in a bond reserved for those who had faced death side by side and prevailed. They had each put their lives on the line for his own with no promise of reward but

that of a job well done. As a result, he could no longer see them as numbers and stats on a balance sheet. When he looked out across his bridge, he didn't see merely a crew standing before him; he saw family.

The End

Epilogue

With a low whine, Cal's Herald shuddered out of the jump tunnel and into real space. The cabin was bathed in red light and overly warm amid all of the craft's tightly packed electronics, which spilled their pooling heat inward instead of venting it out to space. The self-torture wasn't any form of penance, but merely what was necessary to stay hidden amid the cold vacuum. Sitting at the elaborate control suite situated near the rear of the craft, wearing tropical print swimshorts and a colorful tanktop, was Cal's brother Niko, clacking away at his console with oblivious nonconcern.

The pair were data-runners working on the wrong side of the law for several crime organizations out of Cathcart, and they were late for their most recent delivery. The data drives onboard contained the shipment schedules for priceless Teveran artifacts being moved off of Jalan in the Elysium system, but the Advocacy had caught wind of their snooping around the orbital relay and sent a couple Avengers after them that managed to track the herald through the jump point to Leir.

Cal shook his pursuers on the other end of the tunnel by kicking in the Herald's massive main thruster to surge ahead, obscuring them behind a nearby asteroid before leaping away with their quantum drive. Before the pair could hit the tunnel to Yulin, however, the pursuing agents called ahead and initiated a lockdown on the system's jump points. The Advocacy was serious about theft of cultural artifacts and they were committed to the search entirely, so Niko was forced to reach deep into his bag of tricks for a way out of their predicament.

The data smuggler had caught wind a few years back of a jump point near the outer edges of the Leir system that had never found its way onto ICC maps. Rumor had it that UEE patrols routinely buzzed anyone that strayed into the area using stealth Sabres and sensor buoys to make first contact and shoo civilian ships away. Spook stories like that were everywhere, but they always had at least a grain of truth to them. Whether ghosts awaited them in the dark out there or not, they didn't have much choice with the Advocacy breathing down their necks.

Needless to say, the phantom jump point was right where Niko's eavesdropped data told him it would be. Apparently smugglers had been using the unmapped system as a safe rendezvous point for large hand-overs and the secret had finally found its way into the skull of someone dumb enough to talk about it over an open line. It always happened that way. Any encryption is only as strong as its weakest link; and generally that weakest link manifests itself in the form of the drunkest, stupidest, asshole who knows the password. C'est la vie.

As the jump drive cooled, Cal deployed the Herald's impressive suite of sensors; unfurling flower-like petals perched at the rear of the craft that were jam-packed with cutting-edge electronic warfare components that scoured the area for threats. EM readings of the immediate vicinity were near flatlined, but a blip on the radar caught the young pilot's eye. "Ey Niko," he prompted as he looked back over his seat toward his brother, "we got something out here. Not big enough to be a ship, but it ain't natural. Wanna go check it out?"

The data-junky peeled his concentration away from his screens and popped his head out into the isle of the cramped ship's rear section to answer his little brother; "Sure. Why the hell not? We've got forty-eight hours to burn, anyways. That's how long those advocacy twerps can keep the system

locked down. And Leir is a major passthrough, so I bet they'll get enough shit rolling downhill onto them to lift the block before the full forty-eight passes. Might as well entertain ourselves in the meantime."

Cal nodded and returned his attention to his scanners. He adjusted for a sensor focus in the direction the metallic object was detected and waited for the results. There it was; fifty kilometers off of their port side sat a sub-vehicular sized piece of something with faint traces of EM leaking off of it. "I got something here for sure." Reported the pilot with mild excitement, "Ain't no ship, but it could easily be a lifepod or probe. Could even be some merch that fell off of one of those shady deals happening around here that you were telling me about. I'm gonna swing around to check it out."

A short moment later, the herald was coming to a stop next to the object. With the floating device looming large in the front canopy it was now clear to see that a probe is what awaited them. "Looks like we've got ourselves a probe." said Cal with surprised satisfaction, "So who wants to go swimming to fetch the data blade?"

Niko responded by lifting his leg onto the console next to him, pointing helplessly at his foot as he complained; "My gout is flaring up again, lil' bro, so you're gonna have to take this one."

"Aww, you can't *space* walk with your poor ouchy toes?" retorted Cal sarcastically, "Pussy. You gonna make me do everything around here or what?"

Niko huffed, spinning his chair to face his brother, then spat; "If it weren't for me and my *incredible* wealth of data, shit-stick, you'd be in cell block D protecting your chili ring from Big AI and the boys. I do the *real* work here every day, *sport*. You're just here to fill the cheap seats. With that ticket comes the privilege of all the shitty jobs that I don't wanna do...Like going for a swim, for instance."

Cal bit his tongue to stifle his searing response. He couldn't afford to break any more shit in the cabin fighting with the jackass this month, so he just set his jaw and made his way over to the suit locker. The pilot slid into the loose-fitting vac-suit within and shrugged its bulk onto his shoulders, all while staring daggers at the back of his brother's head; who was obliviously watching cartoons with his feet kicked up onto his console. Niko knew Cal would be seething at their exchange, which is exactly why he exaggerated the relaxation in his posture as he stretched to rest his hands behind his head. He always did things like that. It was almost as if being an asshole to your younger brother was an instinct instilled by evolution.

With one final annoyed glance, the pilot stepped into the Herald's cramped air exchange corridor and closed the door behind him. When the air began to pump out of the airlock, Niko looked back over his shoulder at his brother wearing a taunting grin, and was met by a gloved middle finger pressed to the inner door's small window as the outer hatch slid open.

Cal activated the micro-thrusters in his EVA harness and gently pushed himself away from the Herald, floating peacefully in the dark for several precious silent seconds before his brother's voice poured out of his helmet speakers to squash his placidity; "Hey, while you're out and about, can you pick up some chicken nuggets? I've got a real hankering for some of that golden goodness. Thaaaanks."

"You know," replied Cal with sarcastic enthusiasm, "I think I saw some sitting in the airlock for you. You should step in and check it out. Don't mind my hand on the emergency release lever. It's just there so I *don't* pull it."

“Fat chance of that.” Scoffed Niko with a snort, “I’d sooner trust a Duul to handle my circumcision than take your flimsy-ass word for anything. Seriously though, we need to install a bigger fridge or weld some storage bags to the hull or something. I’m tired of running out of my goddamn nuggets.”

Cal sighed with a glove pressed firmly to his faceplate and retorted; “Yeah, well maybe your nugget supply would last longer if you didn’t tear through them like a fat girl who didn’t get asked to Prom. Now shut up and eat your Benny’s like the rest of the broke losers in the universe. I’ve got work to do out here, unlike SOME people...”

To Cal’s surprise, the radio compliantly fell silent as he slowly approached the floating probe. The familiar device consisted of a central sphere with a set of three trailing sensor fins wrapped in a dull metal. Built into the main body of the probe was an inset access hatch that slid open at the pilot’s touch. The components within were pristine and Cal was easily able to identify the data storage blade. With a soft click, the data blade slid free and the pilot clipped it to a belt loop for his return journey.

Once the precious cargo was secured to its clip, Cal roughly shoved off of the probe, sending it tumbling off into the black as he was gracefully propelled in the opposite direction toward the Herald. He caught onto the outer hatch’s handle and easily pulled himself back inside the cramped airlock. The hiss of oxygen rushing in started to fill the pilot’s ears until the inner door clicked and slid open.

As Cal unsealed his helmet, his brother was looking back at him expectantly. Instead of reaching for the retrieved drive, the older sibling just sat there as if he were waiting for something. At first, the pilot was confused; Then it hit him. When Cal fully lifted the encapsulating bubble of his helmet off of his head, a putrid stench rushed in to assault his nostrils. “Holy Christ!” gagged Cal with a cough, “Did something crawl up your ass and die? There is no way a stench of that magnitude originated from the sphincter of a carbon-based lifeform, because that is foul and unnatural to the highest degree.”

“You like that?” chuckled Niko with a satisfied grin, “I cooked that one up juuust for you.” He then made a show of wafting the air to his nose, savoring it like a connoisseur before continuing; “It has...a nutty aroma with notes of sandalwood and rotting garbage. Simple, yet elegant.”

Cal dropped the retrieved data blade onto his brother’s console and started shedding his pressure suit, saying; “Are you honestly surprised that you’re still single? There is no way that a human female would ever willingly cohabit with your stank-ass. In fact, sharing this tin can with you borders on self-inflicted crimes against humanity.”

“Drama queen.” Huffed Niko as he scooped the retrieved drive from his console and slotted it into a data port. After waiting a few seconds to allow the drive to mount, he continued; “Well, let’s see what we’ve found here...looks like two separate data sets, but only one of them is encrypted.”

“Well, what does it say?” pressed Cal impatiently, “Does it have anything good or useful?”

“Keep your panties on, princess.” Said the older sibling with contempt, “This isn’t exactly plug-n-play over here. Looks like the probe was deployed by a ship named TSS Aimless over five years ago. The weird thing is that half of the data is formatted entirely different than the rest of the drive. Lets pop open one of these files to check it out...”

Niko scrolled through the drive's contents until he found a video file. With a shrug he selected the video and it began to play on his console;

At first, the camera view was pure darkness, broken only by errant specks of debris caught in the camera's spotlight in a fashion that suggested the view was from underwater. As the view proceeded through the water, the information HUD at the lower right-hand corner of the screen denoted "Probe #1's" decent into the abyss below. Moments later, a red glow could be seen ahead, surrounded in a torrent of rushing bubbles.

The probe passed through the occluding sheet, blaring temperature alarms as it did so, but the viewers had fallen deaf to them because of what they saw. Sitting embedded into the soft ocean floor was a behemoth of jagged metal that stretched off into the darkness. The massive structure featured what looked like a rib cage perched below a pointed spinal ridge. As Niko leaned closer for a better look, he jumped in his seat when the object suddenly let out a pulse of red light that traveled from stem to stern.

"Holy shit." Breathed Cal with awe, "Is...is that what I think it is? You've got to be kidding me."

"Cal, ole buddy," chuckled Niko with mild disbelief, "I think we've stumbled across something big here. The more I look at the encrypted half of this data, the tighter my pants get. This drive has some seriously hardcore UEE military encryption locking it down. That means that Uncle Messer really wanted to keep a lid on whatever this is, and that's got me very curious."

"You think you can crack it?" inquired Cal with excitement, "Sounds like a sweet goddamn pay day if you can."

"Me?" replied Niko with uncertainty, "I doubt it. Even with all of my gear back home, I doubt I could get half way through this before the drive nukes itself. We're gonna need a specialist. Lucky for us, I know a guy who can probably do it. It's gonna cost us though."

"Hey, even 20% of a fortune is still a shitload of money, right?" Reasoned Cal with a shrug, "Gonna be worth a lot more once its unlocked. That, I can guarantee you."

"I think you might be right, little brother." Said Niko with the elated grin of a madman, "Let's go get paid..."

...To Be Continued in; Legends of the Verse: Data Bitten

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