

# The Phoenix Conspiracy

by Richard L. Sanders

Book One in The Phoenix Conspiracy Series

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# Chapter 1

All was quiet.

Those eyes not glued to computer-screens were staring out the windows at the two very large cruisers flying alongside them. Warships more interested in preventing their escape than offering protection.

Raidan felt the weight of every passing second, each moment taking him one step closer to the inevitable. And, in the silence of spaceflight, he heard the solemn bells of the executioner.

"This is it, boy," he whispered to himself. "I hope it was worth it."

His XO looked up from her station, probably a response to his mumbling. Her narrow eyes shot him a hateful glare. Seeing her that way, knowing her disgust was justified, it made him almost regret his decision to leave her in the dark. She'd been a faithful friend these past several years and deceiving her left a bitter taste in his mouth. But if he hadn't betrayed her, if he'd chosen to tell her everything, she would have worked against him and tried to compromise his efforts. Or, perhaps worse, she might've taken his side. He doubted it—breaking the law and defying orders wasn't her way—but if she had, she'd be a prisoner now too. And *that* would be unbearable.

Poor beautiful Commander Presley. And she really was beautiful with glossy golden hair, a splendid physique, and, most important of all, cunning green eyes that pierced anything, feared nothing, and gleamed with intelligence. She was more than most twenty-eight year old officers could hope to be, and an outstanding second in command. His eyes traced her misleadingly delicate face and part of him wished he were ten years younger, like the junior helmsman at her side, enthralled and intimidated by such a stunning young woman. With an amused smile, he imagined himself as the boy he used to be—the timid young officer at the ops post—nervously scouring his mind for an excuse to ask her out. It made him smile and, for a moment, he almost forgot the gravity of his situation. *Almost*.

"We're being instructed by the flagship to increase speed," said the helmsman.

Raidan raised a curious eyebrow. They were afraid he'd somehow slip away and escape, despite the massive force they'd sent to arrest him. *The powers that be must realize how much I still threaten them...* "Comply with all instructions," he said, knowing he had no other choice.

"Aye, sir."

The helmsman and the rest of the bridge staff looked elegant in their blue-and-black uniforms while they worked tirelessly to keep the damaged

ship under control. They had a certain dignity, and it had been a true honor serving with them over the years. An honor tainted by the fact that he was leaving them this way, shocked and confused. Wondering... why had fellow Imperial starships intercepted and boarded them? Why were they being escorted to the nearest government station, Praxis One? And why was their faithful CO under arrest? Had their last mission been the Captain's personal crusade and not orders from the Fleet?

Poor officers, they'd never know the whole truth. Very soon they'd all arrive at Praxis and the tribunal would invent whatever explanation it wished. No one would ever get the real story. If only they could, they'd realize he'd done the right thing. But that knowledge was too dangerous to have. So, for their own safety, he'd kept his crew out of it. If things didn't go as planned, if his friends didn't come through for him, then he'd be dead soon. No sense in dragging such fine men and women to the grave with him.

"I'm going to my quarters," he announced, all heads turned his way. "Commander, you have the deck."

"Yes, sir." Even though hate poured through her striking green eyes, her tone remained respectful. Despite how he'd betrayed them all.

"Thank you," he paused. "All of you." It was barely more than a whisper—an inadequate tribute, but sincere.

He left the bridge, flanked by a marine who followed him down three decks to his quarters. Raidan thumbed the plate and the door whisked open. Before stepping inside he addressed the marine. "What's your name, soldier?"

"Lance Corporal Charlie Davis, *sir*."

Raidan nodded. "Thank you for the escort, Corporal. That will be all." He stepped into his quarters, making it clear the soldier wasn't invited to follow. Instead the marine took up a position outside, guarding the door which slid shut.

Finally alone, Raidan was able to relax. He pulled off his uniform shirt, replacing it with something more comfortable, and took a seat at his small desk. His bedroom was the largest aboard the ship but he kept it just as barren as the lowliest midshipman. Basic carpet, empty grey walls, a standard bed, and a simple desk. His only luxury was the one he couldn't dispense with, the window set against the port wall. The current view was dominated by the very large ISS Andromeda, the flagship of the Fifth Fleet. She was an awesome spectacle to behold. More than four times the size of the Phoenix, she was like a giant tapestry with every contour and edge boasting the finest human craftsmanship and engineering in the galaxy. Her running lights splashed the royal Navy's colors against her hull, blue and white, and the ship glowed fiercely against the black vacant backdrop of space. To Raidan that starship was a symbol of everything that had once been great about the Empire, and his heart saluted it.

They wouldn't believe him. But the truth was, everything he'd ever done had been for the good of the Empire. That knowledge gave him some small measure of peace.

Vice Admiral Aleksandra Harkov was somewhere aboard that ship. Whether she was on the bridge or asleep in her quarters, her commanding presence filled every inch of her massive starship and permeated the space all around. She'd been kind to allow him the dignity of retaining his command until they reached Praxis, even if it was just a façade. And, even though she'd been the one to corner and arrest him, Raidan felt no grudge toward her. She was equal parts good intentions and ignorance. He doubted she could see or understand the true threat facing the Empire, despite her lofty position. Most likely she was just another unknowing pawn in the deadliest game ever played.

"Don't worry, Admiral. You'll get no resistance from me... *yet*."

He picked up the bottle of whiskey on his desk and pulled off the cork. An old proverb came to mind. "Eat drink and be merry, for tomorrow I die." He took a sip, trying to forget that in three hours' time he'd be taken into custody by the authorities on Praxis. And, after that, either his friends would come through for him or they wouldn't. But at least he'd done his part to save the Empire.

## Chapter 2

The IWS Nighthawk was one of only a few phantom-class stealth warships ever to be commissioned. Small and agile, it was hard to see and even harder to target. Black from bow to stern with its identifier lights usually kept off, its signature was that of Intel Wing. One that, when transmitted to an Imperial Station, said in no uncertain terms: *Do what we say without asking questions. Why we're here is none of your business. Stay out of our way.*

The ship was fast and quiet, but relied mostly on stealth for defense, utilizing technologies most of the galaxy didn't even know existed. And it was because of those technologies that the rogue ISS Phoenix had finally been tracked down. The Fifth Fleet had swept its space looking for the ship for over two standard days before eventually appealing to Intel Wing for help. Two more days and the Phoenix was again under Fleet control. Now the Nighthawk trailed it, and the rest of the interdiction flotilla, on their way to Praxis where justice would be served. And, hopefully, the incident would be investigated.

Calvin Cross, the commanding officer of the Nighthawk, remained unsettled. The whole incident made no sense to him. His investigation into Captain Asari Raidan and the Phoenix had been unfortunately short, conducted in only the two days it'd taken to corner the missing ship, but he'd expected to find a motive in that time that explained everything. He hadn't. No one had. A decorated captain, a veteran of the Great War, had inexplicably gone rogue, attacked and destroyed a civilian convoy of alien traders, and then refused to communicate with all Imperial ships and outposts. Then, when finally caught, he'd surrendered without a fight. Now he sat, presumably on his bridge, soaring toward Praxis where he'd certainly face the death penalty.

*Why did you do it, Raidan?*

Some believed he'd mentally snapped. Years of too much pressure, perhaps a mid-life crisis, or maybe it was a chemical imbalance only now manifesting. Calvin dismissed all of these theories. Raidan definitely had a motive, it was just a matter of finding it.

"Entering Praxis System. Braking thrusters have fired and we're again in normal space, Captain," said Sarah from the helm. She was a young brunette, though a year his senior, with wide brown eyes and a relaxed demeanor that was famous among their tight-knit crew. People joked she'd be calm even if the ship were breaking apart and everyone was about to die.

"Thank you," Calvin nodded. He didn't like being called Captain, partly because it felt too formal, but mostly because it wasn't true. He wasn't a captain. Not a real one. On paper he was a Lieutenant Commander, a technicality few outside his staff knew about since he was a CO and therefore held the rank of Acting Captain.

"Contact the control tower, put in a docking request, and begin a standard approach. You know the drill."

"Yes, sir."

Their ship followed behind the Phoenix and the two warships at its flanks. The Phoenix's identifier lights flashed the brilliant white signal of surrender, illuminating its damaged hull—which highlighted another mystery. The plasma burns and the shredding patterns that scarred the renegade warship hadn't come from the Fleet's interdiction operation. Raidan had not resisted. But the injuries had come from somewhere. The question was—who had the rogue captain been fighting? Certainly the damage was too severe to be the work of the civilian convoy he'd attacked.

A transmission came over the bridge speakers. "IWS Nighthawk. Power down your weapons and standby for authentication." Two sentry ships broke from their patrol pattern and approached on the port side. Calvin watched them maneuver on the 3d display.

"We've been targeted by two small destroyers, weapons hot," said Miles from the defense post.

"They're a bit touchy this close to the border, aren't they?" Calvin had done plenty of missions this far out but had never docked with any of the deep space outposts. "Okay, power it all down. Do what they say."

A minute later, the ships broke off and swept back to their patrol pattern.

"IWS Nighthawk, you are cleared to approach."

They passed through the station's outer defenses and, after receiving clearance from Traffic Control, entered a long orbit around the planet, awaiting their turn to dock. They were last in line so they had a few minutes.

"What do you suppose happens next?" asked Sarah.

"Two words," said Miles, spinning the defense post's chair to face center. "Military Tribunal."

"I don't think so," said Calvin. "The Phoenix never fired on any of our ships, and given the international nature of the incident, I expect a General Tribunal."

"I would have expected a court martial," said Shen.

"It's a complicated situation to be sure, which makes me wonder what other people are speculating," said Calvin, flashing the mischievous smile he was so famous for, the one that made people guess he was even younger than his twenty-five years let on. "Let's tap into the local news. Shen, go ahead and put it on every non-essential screen on the bridge."

"Aye, sir," his ops officer said. His long, unkempt hair and bulbous figure made him seem a poor fit for Intel Wing but Calvin doubted there was a more intelligent person on the ship.

Seconds later, several dark screens flickered to life—including the one at the command position. The image clarified to reveal a female reporter whose voice filled the bridge speakers.

"... and we're getting reports now that the man who military police took into custody is Captain Asari Raidan of the Imperial Starship *Phoenix*. For those just tuning in, moments ago, military police swarmed the terminals of Access Point One and arrested who we now know to be Imperial Navy Captain Asari Raidan. A passer-by caught this footage."

The image on the viewers shifted to reveal several blue-and-black clad Navy officers descend a ramp, accompanied by marines in grey fatigues. Upon reaching the bottom, the lead officer—Raidan—raised his hands and allowed several military police to surround him, cuff him, and take him away. A throng of people, including station personnel, tried to get a closer look but were held back by a line of security officers.

"We've just heard that Asari Raidan is now being transported to Detention Center 201. The Military has refused to comment officially on the arrest but we've heard from one officer, under condition of anonymity, that a General Tribunal might begin as early as tomorrow. He did not know if the trial will be made public."

Sarah waved her hand to get Calvin's attention. "Message from Control. We're cleared to dock in five-B."

Calvin muted the broadcast. "Okay, Sarah, take us in."

"Your word is my command," her fingers deftly took the controls and, through the windows, the stardock slowly became visible.

"Roger that, Control, this is IWS Nighthawk beginning our final approach," said Sarah into her headset while piloting.

Calvin leaned back in his chair. "You know," he said, looking over at Anand, his best friend and faithful XO. "I'm really looking forward to this time off."

"As if *you* could ever stop working."

"No, I mean it," Calvin laughed. "I'm worn out."

"If you're worn out that means the rest of us are postmortem—or close. The way they work us, sometimes I wish I were in the Navy and could lounge around on one of those luxury liners." Anand shook his head in an exaggerated display of irritation. Calvin knew Anand somewhat resented the regulars for having several more conveniences aboard their vessels: lounges, bars, gyms—things a stealth frigate didn't have space for.

"Enough to request a transfer?" asked Calvin. His voice was full of laughter but he wasn't truly joking. He knew his XO had some real



grievances with Intel Wing and it was probably only a matter of time before he gave it up completely.

Anand ignored the question.

"Slowing to seven point two mc's per second," said Sarah as the ship angled into position and halted. "All stop. The docking clamps are attached, concluding another perfect flight." Sarah spun her chair to face the center of the bridge, grinning.

"Good work, as always," said Calvin. He tapped his intercom. "All hands, this is the CO. We're docked with Praxis One and the jetways are attached. You are ordered to the airlocks to vacate the ship. As of this moment you are all on official leave for four weeks. That is all."

"So does that mean we don't have to follow your orders anymore, Cal?" asked Miles with a dopey grin.

"Something like that," Calvin smirked. "But when it's all over, so-help-me, I'll make you swab every deck on this ship. Now hurry and get out of here, your freedom is ticking away."

Miles laughed, he was a big man and his laughter was deep. "You don't need to tell *me* twice." He stood up and marched to the elevator. "See ya around the casino, Captain."

"Not this time. I only have a little money and I can't afford to lose any of it to you," said Calvin, lying. As a single person earning a captain's paygrade he had more q than he knew what to do with, especially since he preferred a simple lifestyle, and Miles was nothing if not horrible at cards, if anything Calvin would walk away with Miles' life-savings. The real reason Calvin planned to avoid the casino tables on this trip was the Raidan case. He wanted to focus on it without any distractions—especially the kind that could swiftly turn his affluence into poverty.

"Suit yourself, Cal. I have 2,000q begging to turn into 20,000—so don't get jealous when I return with the deed to somebody's house." Miles flashed a huge grin and the elevator door shut.

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Calvin exited the ship via the deck two jetway. Despite their being quadruple sealed and not very long, he always hated stepping through them. Somehow he couldn't hold back the thought of being blown out into space. Such accidents never happened, but it bothered him anyway because he could imagine it.

He cleared the secondary hatch without any trouble and descended the ladder, starting down the long ramp that led into the terminal. Before he reached ground-level, he caught sight of the concourse swarming with people. Some wore staff uniforms, others military garb—including soldiers at

every checkpoint—but mostly they were civilians. Scattered in hundreds of small groups, all awaiting transport on whatever ships docked after the Nighthawk was moved into long-term holding. The size of the crowds surprised him, until he realized that while it was late at night in Standard Time, what he was used to, in Local Time it was almost midday. As if to rub it in, enormous blue digits glared at him from the wall.

*1110 L.T. and 0230 S.T.*

Since he was government personnel, security ushered him over to a basic checkpoint instead of the usual customs screening with its cumbersome procedures and long lines. Immigration was tough in all Imperial Systems, especially alien immigration, but he barely gave it a thought since he was both human and in an elite branch of the government. They waved him to the next available desk where a middle-aged guard sat at a computer station. He wore a green uniform—local security, and sported a huge moustache.

"Hello, sir, and welcome to Praxis One," the guard said. "Hand me your I.D. and press your thumb to the plate."

Calvin complied. They waited a minute for the computer to analyze his card for tampering.

"So uh... black-and-silver," the guard said, whistling as he looked over Calvin's uniform and saw the colors of Intel Wing—mostly black from neck to boots with a touch of silver, including his rank bar and officer's sash. Calvin liked the look, it was much more stylish and interesting than the standard blue-and-black of the Navy.

"So... are you here for some kind of big assignment? We usually only get blue-and-black through here."

Calvin fought a smile; he did like the attention, but he'd be a terrible officer if he let his ego loosen his lips. "Sorry, just on vacation."

"Right, of course," the man winked. "Then I wish you good luck with your *vacation*," as he spoke, the computer beeped its approval and the old guard nodded him through. "Follow the arrows to your left for accommodations, transportation, information, and anything else you need."

"Thanks." Calvin put away his card and wandered to the offices against the far wall. Had he actually been on an assignment, the military would have pre-arranged everything and someone would have met him the instant he stepped through security. But since he was on leave—aside from his role in the Raidan tribunal—he was effectively a civilian. Which meant civilian accommodations, and having to deal with long waits, no-vacancies, prices, and lines. Inconveniences he'd forgotten about because they didn't exist in his world of starships and open space.

He fell into line, trying not to push his way too hard through the mob of people doing business with the various offices and kiosks. Calvin found

himself wishing Raidan had been arrested on some small fringe outpost with fewer people so he wouldn't have to put up with the delays.

He took a number and moved aside for others. Unable to find a seat, he leaned against the wall and wondered how he'd pass the time. That was when a random stranger tried to engage him in polite—and very boring—conversation about nothing. The idle chit-chat quickly turned to questions about Calvin's personal life—which he didn't want to discuss with a complete stranger. And when Calvin proved less than talkative the old stranger launched into a very spirited monolog about the positive traits of her granddaughters whom she'd love to have him court—or grandsons if that was more to his liking. It was very awkward and Calvin searched for an escape. That was when he spotted a familiar looking, extremely beautiful woman in full Navy garb across the room. Even from this distance she was striking.

"Oh what do you know," said Calvin, interrupting the old woman's boasting about one of her granddaughter's cooking skills. "I see an old friend. Thanks, though!" With that he rushed away.

The beautiful woman across the room was Summers Presley, XO of the ISS Phoenix, and definitely not an old friend. In fact, he'd never seen her before in his life, not in the flesh. She was breathtaking with her cascade of blond hair and exquisite physique, and her aura of certainty was disarming. He recognized her from his short investigation into the Phoenix and there was no mistaking her. Her file photo had looked more like something from a model's portfolio than a military profile, and even it hadn't done her justice. She was probably the most beautiful woman Calvin had ever seen. A fact he hoped to ignore since it gave her an unfair advantage.

"Summers Presley," said Calvin, catching up with her. "I'm glad I recognized you, I have a few questions..."

"I'm sorry, do I know you, officer?" She stopped and looked at him, seeming distracted and annoyed, no doubt because he'd just breached protocol. Unacquainted officers in uniform always referred to each other by title or rank, never by first name. Casual use of given names was something unique to Calvin's command style, and certainly not encouraged by either the Fleet or Intel Wing. But this practice had now come back to bite him, especially since, officially, he was the lower ranking officer here.

"Oh right, sorry," said Calvin, but the damage was done. "I'm Calvin Cross of the IWS Nighthawk."

Her eyes jumped to his rank insignia. "Lieutenant Commander?"

"Yes. But don't let the silver bar fool you, I'm a CO."

Her eyebrows shot up and she gave him a strange look—a mixture of intrigue, disdain, and skepticism.

"Listen," he said, waving her away from the crowd of people. "I'm attending the trial of your CO and, as an Intelligence Officer, I've had to do some research. And, frankly, several things don't add up for me. I'm hoping you can help to fill in the gaps, you know, the details that don't make it on paper. Like habits, traits, behaviors, and anything peculiar about Raidan's personality. I'd like to make it make sense—"

"I don't fully understand," said Summers, interrupting him. She made no effort to mask her reluctance to cooperate. "Am I being implicated in some way?"

"Oh, no, no, not at all," said Calvin, raising his arms innocently. "This isn't an official investigation," he wasn't yet convinced she'd had no part in what had unfolded on the Phoenix, but his priority was to investigate Raidan first. For now Summers was only an intelligence asset and nothing more. "Don't take this the wrong way. I'm just hoping you can tell me something I don't know. All of Raidan's, I mean Captain Asari Raidan's personnel notes describe you as an outstanding officer and, more importantly, a close friend. He trusted you. And you were near him when everything went down. Your perspective would be invaluable."

She looked hurt for a split-second. It passed almost instantly but Calvin knew what it was when he saw it. When it vanished she became even colder.

"Captain Asari Raidan was a very secretive man and he kept his true feelings to himself. I'm as mystified as you are, Lieutenant Commander. But the writing's on the wall. He either snapped and bowed to a hunger for violence or else succumbed to a deep hatred for the Rotham people he made us kill. Whatever the case may be, he's a criminal and unfit for command. Nothing more to it."

"With respect, Commander, there *is* more to it. A lot more. And you should be the first to realize that. You served with him for six years and were his XO for almost two. Doesn't it bother you that a nine-times decorated captain, from an established affluent family, and a full citizen, would throw everything away without a reason? Especially a fter twenty-nine years of diligent service?"

She closed her eyes for a moment and looked incredibly frustrated. "You speak as if I were somehow involved, Lieutenant Commander. I'm sorry to disappoint you, but I was not."

"No, I'm sorry," said Calvin. "Sometimes I'm not very good at communicating what I'm trying to say. So, instead, if you don't mind, I'll just ask you a few simple questions about the days leading up to the Beotan Incident. Beginning just before Captain Raidan ordered the Phoenix to go dark."

Again he saw the glimmer of what might have been sincere hurt. But this time, instead of looking vulnerable, Summers' eyes narrowed and her voice

turned to steel. "I'm sure all your musings will be satisfied by the trial, which—despite what you may think—doesn't begin until tomorrow. Now, if you don't mind, I'd prefer not to discuss this any further off the record."

"Yes, of course," said Calvin, giving her an exaggerated nod.

"*Commander.*"

She returned the nod with a fake smile and walked away. He tried to keep his eyes from following her. He was irritated and wondering how he might have handled the conversation better.

He hated arrogant women, especially the attractive kind who'd probably had everything handed to them on a silver platter.

## Chapter 3

The room Calvin had been given was about the same size as his quarters aboard the Nighthawk. Just large enough to have a bed, a desk, various drawers, and enough floor space for a pile of boxes. It was sparse and barren, with a small liquor cabinet as the only luxury. But since Calvin didn't drink, it was only there to take up space in an already cramped room.

At his feet, and in piles on his bed, were all the effects from his quarters aboard the Nighthawk. Even the posters had been removed from the walls, the remains of which were in tatters. He was probably the only CO in the Empire who decorated his military quarters with posters of music artists and slick-looking ads for upcoming blockbusters. He liked the color and noise they filled his space with, and they reminded him of the lighter side of life. But, because of the ship's scheduled cleaning, they'd all been removed and in their condition would never hang again. Luckily they were less than 1q a piece and would be easy to replace.

He shifted his things around, only unpacking the boxes that were on his bed. His better judgment knew he should unpack everything now and avoid taking a nap in order to adjust to Local Time. But, to Calvin, better judgment wasn't all it was cracked up to be. And he knew he couldn't be productive while tired. So, with a heave, he pushed the last box off the bed so he could sleep. It spilled open and a lemon-shaped chargeball rolled out. He scooped it up, feeling the firm leather as he turned it in his hands. It was worn from casual play and bore the white and crimson colors of the Camdale Cardinals.

He, Anand, and Miles had each been part of the so-called "miracle class" of 1212. The year when their rogue public school—from one of the dumpiest parts of Capital World—beat all the premiere universities in the Empire at both academics and the only sport the Empire seemed to care about, chargeball. And though he and his friends never attended a single game, it was still one more thing to be proud of. The rebel underdogs with the surprising—and never repeated—upset.

He smiled, thinking back on some of the "glory" days of just six years prior. From outlandish, and often unsuccessful, forays with girls to pranks and parties that as often as not ended on a low note, their academy years had brought them all together. And now, partly as a reward for his efforts on the Hadar Mission and partly because of good luck, they were still together. Calvin had been given the chance to handpick most of his crew once he'd taken command of the Nighthawk. He knew it wouldn't last forever,

transfers happened, but for as long as they let him serve alongside his friends, he'd enjoy it.

Lying on his bed, he rotated the chargeball in his hands and stared up at the ceiling. His thoughts shifted to his recent encounter with Summers Presley. He had a keen memory for images and as he replayed the conversation over in his head, he could see her in his mind almost as clearly as a photograph. He paid attention to her body language—which often proved more honest than words—and he found himself feeling unsettled. Something about the encounter bothered him. Yes, he didn't like that it had been cold and unsuccessful, but more importantly—she'd inadvertently given something away. Summers cared for Asari Raidan. For all her show of spite and ice she couldn't hide the fact that she felt betrayed by him personally and not just professionally. At one point or another, she'd had sincere feelings for him. What were they? Admiration? Friendship? Or was it romance?

Sadly, Calvin hadn't picked up on anything more. Summers had been too distracting with her flowing hair, eyes like deep green pools, luscious lips, teeth white and glossy, and a face that was both delicately crafted yet confident and strong. Her beauty pit his body against his mind, making her incredibly difficult to analyze. Eventually he gave up. Deciding she was probably not part of Raidan's scheme to attack the Rotham ships—though her relationship with Raidan was definitely more than she'd pretended.

The chime broke his concentration.

"Come," he said

The door slid aside and Anand stepped in, complete with stubble and mussed brown hair that matched his skin but contrasted with his overly-immaculate black uniform. In one hand he held a set of papers.

"Who dares disturb my slumber?" asked Calvin as he sat up. He tossed the chargeball to Anand who botched what would've been a neat one-handed catch. Anand reached down to scoop up the ball. "Don't worry about it," said Calvin. "The room's a mess anyway."

"It wouldn't be you, if it wasn't," said Anand with a smile.

"Very funny," Calvin rolled his eyes. "Is that what you're here to do? Harass your superior? Keep him from his much-deserved nap?"

"Easy there, Cal, I'm the one who's a full Commander here," Anand pointed to the gold bar on his lapel. "So I'm perfectly safe disturbing you and your much undeserved nap, *Lieutenant Commander*."

"You know that's the second time someone's reminded me of that today. I should just never step off the ship again... But don't think just because we're ashore that you get a free ride. The minute we're back I'll have you on continuous watch for days," said Calvin. "And don't think this big vacation will make me forget it either. I'll stew over it the whole time. I take my naps very seriously, you know."

Anand laughed, but there was a touch of sadness in his laughter, and when he stopped his face became pensive. "Actually that's why I'm here. I'm not going back aboard the Nighthawk."

"What are you talking about?" Calvin stood up and Anand handed him the papers.

"I've been given command of the Phoenix, effective immediately. It seems the Fleet isn't very confident Captain Raidan will return to duty any time soon. And they want an outsider to do a full audit of the ship and crew."

"And that's you?"

Anand nodded. "Who better than Intel Wing?"

Calvin thumbed through the documents which were all very official, complete with digital seal. "Why wasn't I notified by the Fleet about this?"

"After I found out, I asked the Vice Admiral to let me be the one to tell you."

"Well... that was nice they let you. Did they say who my new XO is?"

"No. I bet they're waiting for the trial to be over to announce it."

"Yeah right. I give it nine to one *on* that they haven't even decided yet."

Anand laughed. "That's the Imperial Fleet for you."

"Well..." Calvin wasn't sure what to say. He felt a little hurt but masked his disappointment. "Your own command..." he floundered for words.

"That's got to be exciting."

"I'm ecstatic," said Anand, perhaps more eagerly than he'd intended.

"Not that I won't miss the Nighthawk or anything."

Calvin forced a chuckle. "Yeah right, you'll forget all about us the minute you sit in that big chair and hear someone call you *Captain* for the first time."

Anand shrugged.

"Well I guess we'd better get it over with." Calvin signed the papers and handed them back.

Anand then read the orders of detachment. "Commander Anand Datar, you are ordered to take command of the ISS Phoenix immediately, and all current assignments are hereby dissolved." He continued until he'd read the entire address.

"I relieve you as Executive Officer of the IWS Nighthawk," said Calvin.

"I stand relieved." Anand saluted.

"Well, Anand. You'll be missed. It was an honor serving with you. Do me a favor and try to keep yourself alive out there, the galaxy is a fearsome place."

Anand laughed. "You're the one I'm worried about. How many times did I save the Nighthawk when you tried to crash it into a planet or something?"

"At least a hundred."

"More like a thousand."



Calvin smirked. "All right, Anand, see you around the stars."

"Take care, Calvin." He nodded and left.

Once the door whisked shut Calvin shook his head. He'd just lost an excellent officer. And as a CO who put a lot of value in his XO's capabilities, he hoped his next one would be as good.

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Calvin awoke slowly, rubbing eyes that seemed to be glued shut. His throat was parched and his stomach growled like a beast on the brink of starvation. Everything was black, except for the blinding glow of the clock on the nightstand.

0430 L.T. & 1950 S.T.

A yawn escaped him as he stretched out his limbs and crawled out of bed. His fingers skimmed his clumpy, messy hair and he realized he'd slept on-and-off for the better part of fifteen hours. The unhealthy result of sleep deprivation, stress, and way too much equarius. *Speaking of which...* he reached for the bottle of pills and placed it back in its locked case, which he then buried in one of his many boxes. It'd been sloppy of him to leave the bottle in plain sight, even in his own quarters. Had someone seen the pills, he'd be in a lot of trouble.

His shirt was sweaty as he peeled it off and he realized he hadn't showered in over a day. For someone obsessed with being clean, hygiene trumped breakfast as top priority, despite the protests of his stomach—food would have to wait a little longer.

The private shower was much larger than his on the Nighthawk and being on the station carried another advantage, the hot water seemed endless. He scrubbed himself more than he needed to, lathering everywhere with soap as he enjoyed the soothing hot water and steam. It was relaxing, like his own personal chamber of solitude. There was a tranquility here that even equarius couldn't offer, and in his relaxed state his mind wandered like a dream.

Until a chirping sound brought him back to the present.

At first he didn't know what it was, but he had to cut short his shower when he realized the comm panel was going off. As he grabbed for a towel to wrap around himself he wondered who would call him this early. *If it's a sales call they'll never bear the end of my wrath!*

He tapped a button on the panel and the screen came to life, blue text informed him that a private call was coming through. He tapped *Accept* to the

audio but denied the visual, since being broadcast wet and shirtless wasn't his style, even if a few people might have enjoyed it.

"Lieutenant Commander Cross, are you there?" The voice was disguised by computer modulation.

"Yeah, I'm here," said Calvin. "Who is this? What do you want?"

"I just want you to know... I'm sorry."

He wondered if this was some kind of prank. "Sorry for what?"

"For involving you in this. But I hope, when the time is right, you'll understand that there was no choice."

Calvin didn't say anything for a few seconds, wondering if the mysterious voice would continue.

It didn't.

"Okay, I have no idea who this is. If you want something from me, you're going to have to give me more to go on than that. Like your name and what this *thing* is you're involved in."

"Goodbye."

The screen flashed the text "Call Terminated." Calvin searched for caller information but there was nothing, not even a call-back link. Maybe the caller was harmless, but maybe not.

He wrote down what the voice had said, verbatim. Including details about the voice's sound and texture. Even though the computer modulation disguised the caller's voice perfectly, no detail was worthless until proven otherwise. Perhaps if he could identify what software they used he would be that much closer to identifying the caller... Though he didn't have the faintest idea how to begin that investigation.

The panel chirped again. He quickly tapped Accept Call and, in his haste, forgot to deny the visual.

"Well, that's certainly... unprofessional attire." From the other side of the screen was the narrow brown face of Vice Admiral Harkov in full dress uniform, including her emerald rank insignia.

"Hey... what I wear at obscenely early morning hours—while on leave, is my business and not the Fleet's." He cracked a smile. He'd been chastised in the past for being too casual or "sarcastic" in tone while talking to the top brass, but since he wasn't part of Harkov's Fifth Fleet, he didn't care what she thought of him. It was easy to let his privileged Intel Wing status get the better of him.

"They moved the trial from 0800 to 0600 to decrease media attention. Also it'll be in chamber three instead of one. You're still expected to be there early and in full dress uniform—I hope you packed one."

"So do I," he said with a smirk.

"That is all."

Calvin saluted and the call terminated.

So... two unwelcome calls already and before six in the morning... *I can already tell what kind of day this is shaping up to be.*

He scrambled to find the pieces of his dress uniform which were mostly wrinkled, "where's that damn hat," he mumbled, while hopping on one foot to get his pants on. He dreaded the thought of wearing the whole outfit all day, including the coat and heavy boots. Sure it looked great but it was horridly uncomfortable and far too hot.

Once he was technically presentable, deciding not to brush his hair because he was pressed on time and had to wear a hat anyway, he dug through a box of rations and grabbed a dehydrated breakfast to eat on the way. *Mmmm... everyone's favorite.*

He locked the door and headed for the trial chamber, deciding not to worry about the mysterious call.

# Chapter 4

Calvin entered the court chamber behind the other commanding officers who'd taken part in the interdiction of the ISS Phoenix, including Vice Admiral Harkov—who'd held the overall command. They took their seats together at a designated table and were sworn in, just in case the court wanted them to testify. It was kind of exciting to sit on one of the raised platforms apart from the general audience.

Calvin had never had a role in a General Tribunal before, but until now he'd never wanted one. This time his excitement came from the hope that Raidan's true motives would be uncovered. Why a decorated and distinguished captain would suddenly and deliberately betray the Fleet was a question that should be at the forefront of these proceedings.

At a table opposite them, on another platform, sat the senior staff of the ISS Phoenix. Most prominent was Summers Presley who radiated beauty even through her tired appearance. Calvin also recognized the officers at her sides from his investigation of the Phoenix's crew, they were the White Shift bridge officers and the chief physician. Then, on a guarded platform, sat Captain Raidan himself. He was tan and broad, and looked very fit for a man almost fifty. He sported a sharp grey suit instead of his uniform, and at his sides were royal marines with Navy emblems on their fatigues.

As Calvin watched Raidan, he got the impression that the captain seemed a bit too confident. Instead of looking anxious or indignant he seemed amused, almost smug. And then, for seemingly no reason, Raidan looked right at Calvin and made eye contact. Almost like he was studying him. Then he looked away. It made Calvin more confused than uncomfortable. He instantly connected Raidan's behavior to the mysterious call he'd received earlier. *Were they related? Impossible. Raidan had neither access to a terminal nor reason to be interested in Calvin.*

The Judicator entered and all rose, not taking their seats again until she'd taken her place at the elevated podium. She wore the burgundy uniform of the Executer of Justice Office, marking her as a local authority and not someone dispatched by Capital World.

She ordered quiet in the chamber and the doors shut. "This court acknowledges the presence of Vice Admiral Aleksandra Harkov, the senior staff of the Imperial Starship Phoenix, and the respective Commanding Officers: Captains Jaromir Otto, Jason Harris, and Lieutenant Commander Calvin Cross. This court also recognizes Consol Nau T'ahne of the Rotham Republic along with his delegation."

Three aliens stood up briefly and then sat down again on the only other platform. They were Rotham, humanoid in appearance except for their golden eyes, scaly-crimson skin, and generally smaller physiques. Rotham could also grow tails but most had them removed directly after birth. All three present were male and wore the lavender uniforms of Rotham Military Command. Their hair was black as oil, common for Rotham, and braided in a style symbolizing status in their culture.

"And so commences the General Tribunal held aboard Praxis One, an outpost of Praxis System, this on the fifth day of the ninth standard-month of Standard Galaxy Year 1218, by virtue of a warrant bearing the date the 9th instant, from His Excellency Sir William Gregory, Knight of the King, Overseer and Commander-in-Chief of all His Majesty's Forces within Sector One-One-Six." The Judicator then listed the names and ranks of the officers of the court who would decide the outcome. After this, Captain Raidan was ordered to rise.

"Have you any objection to any of the names just read to you?"

"No," he said and sat back down.

"The Presiding Officer, Members and Judge Advocate, being duly sworn, Captain Asari Raidan of His Majesty's Fifth Fleet, came prisoner before the Court, and stands accused of three counts of destruction of civilian property, four counts of unauthorized assault on non-military starships—three of which were destroyed, one count of violating Peaceful Traffic Treaty 13-A with the Rotham Republic, seven counts of misuse of a military starship, eighteen counts of failure to maintain regular contact with Fleet Command, and one count of conspiracy against the government. The senior staff of the accused have signed and presented an affidavit to this court confirming the validity of the charges, complete with a joint testimony that the Commanding Officer was and is solely responsible for the Beotan Incident and all listed charges. Now, Mister Asari," the Judicator said, looking him straight in the eyes. "Do you stand by your request to use clause 173-B of the Citizen's Defense Contract?"

"I do."

"Very well. The accused, as a full and complete citizen of the Empire, has formally requested that no defense counsel be appointed to him other than himself. The court is hereby obligated to grant this request."

Calvin raised an eyebrow at this. Having no professional legal defense would only serve to convict him quicker, did Raidan know this? Perhaps, realizing he had no chance of a not guilty verdict in the face of such voluminous evidence, Raidan wanted to expedite the proceedings. If so, Calvin couldn't imagine why. It would only speed Raidan to his death.

"Beginning with the first of the charges, four counts of unauthorized assault on spacecraft belonging to non-military non-combatants. The

specification is that, without provocation, you commanded your starship to open fire on four commercial vessels which had entered Imperial Space en-route to Capital System. Specifically the Ortahn, Guinn, Qiun'ha, and Ursa freighters belonging to the Beotan Trade Corporation. Your ship destroyed the first three without provocation and inflicted serious damage on the fourth and only surviving vessel, Ursa, before it managed to evade you. How do you plead?"

Raidan stood up and looked around the room for a few seconds before speaking. "Guilty."

"And you understand that by such conviction the only possible recourse for such a crime, as a full citizen, is the death sentence as clearly stated under the law?"

"Yes, I understand that. And while we're at it, I plead guilty to all of the charges. I can see the Commander of the Ursa freighter among the Consul's delegation and I can't defeat a witness like that. And my own staff has come together and condemned me, and in a just and honest way. I cannot, in good conscience, or with any hope, try to pretend that I did not attack those ships. Because I *did*. And I'd do it again. So I fully accept the consequences of my actions. But know one thing I did it for the good of the Empire. Everything I've ever done has been for the good of the Empire. I want it on the record that these are my feelings and that that is why I surrendered my vessel to the Andromeda without a fight."

"So noted," the Judicator said, trying not to look surprised. "This court gratefully accepts your forthrightness, adding to the record that the accused surrendered his vessel voluntarily and that he pled guilty to all charges. Without further need for deliberation, this court is adjourned for sentencing." The moment her gavel landed, the room flooded with conversation and military police swarmed in to usher everyone outside the chamber, other than those involved in the sentencing.

"So that's it? Just like that and it's over?" Calvin asked, following the Vice Admiral out the door.

"What else did you expect? His guilt was obvious, even Asari Raidan knew he was convicted before he arrived. Seriously, Lieutenant Commander, did you honestly think this trial could go any other way?"

"Well no, I suppose not," said Calvin. "But—"

"Even if the evidence weren't as strong as it is," she said, interrupting him. "And it *is* strong, do you think the Rotham people would accept anything less than death for what happened to their ships? If Raidan were somehow acquitted of all charges it would cause an international outcry." Calvin thought her view, one of politics trumping investigation, was typical of a Fleet officer.

"What's bothering me," said Calvin, he paused for a moment and searched for the right words. "What I can't wrap my head around... is that Raidan is in every way the model captain. Perfect service record, great commission, he has three Silver Stars, several merit medallions, and even the Medal of Valor. Why would he throw all of that away to shoot down some civilian starships for absolutely no reason whatsoever?"

"It might not have been about *what* they were but *who* they were, have you thought of that?"

It took him a second to figure out what she meant. "Yes, I'd considered the possibility that it was some kind of hate crime, that he was attacking the Rotham for being Rotham, but that's not consistent with his character and record. He's worked alongside Rotham before without a single note of contempt. He even helped coordinate a joint action during the Great War against the Polarians in order to help the Rotham. So that superficial explanation doesn't tell me anything useful. Certainly not why he'd target these particular ships, or why now. And what about all that 'good of the empire' talk? There are details being missed here."

"Maybe he wanted to start a war. Whatever it was, his reasoning was clearly unsound and, like it or not, he *is* guilty."

This kind of obstinacy was why Calvin hated discussing investigations with personnel outside of Intel Wing. Regulars didn't think much past what could be seen immediately and they tended to latch onto the first, shallowest explanation that came down the line... but their theory felt wrong to him, Raidan wasn't an alien-hating racist who wanted to start a war. How could he possibly benefit from one? Certainly not enough to die for. Calvin also wondered why Raidan made no effort to explain his actions, except to say they were for the good of the Empire. His failure to elaborate implied, to Calvin, that he wanted the superficial explanations to stand. But why?

The next two hours were spent in the company of Admiral Harkov and fellow command officers. They went to an elegant restaurant and ordered an expensive meal, which the government paid for. They ate as slowly as possible and discussed everything from the trial to local politics. Calvin didn't know much about Praxis System so he let the others dominate the conversation, he took it as an opportunity to learn about his environment, since he was vacationing here for the next month.

Not much distinguished it from a typical colony outside of geography. The primary station orbited the only habitable planet, a typical medium blue, and the economy hinged on tech processing and mineral discoveries. It was smaller than most Imperial systems with only five-billion people, but saw a lot of traffic and kept in reserve a disproportionately large defense force due to its proximity to the DMZ—the Rotham border. The system, belonging to the Fifth Fleet's division, had jurisdiction over dozens of sentry ships, a few

frigates, and eighteen fighter divisions, but the coup-de-grace was a dreadnought called the Harbinger. The locals bragged about it like it was a legend and a small debate broke out over whether or not it was a match for the flagship Andromeda. Most believed it was not.

Once the conversation drifted to local elections and political parties, Calvin became bored and allowed his mind to wander. Elections in the Empire were only for local authorities and meant little more than popularity contests between Houses for status and prestige. Much ado about nothing, a matter of who ran the administration more than what the administration did. All local leaders had to conform to the edicts of the King and his Royal Magistrates, so, with a few exceptions like gambling and marriage laws, the Empire was the same everywhere.

When the trial reconvened, Calvin filed into the chamber between the Vice Admiral and the captain of the ISS Bounty and they took their seats along with the rest of the assembly. Once the chamber doors were sealed, the Judicator called on the Head of Council to read the verdict and sentencing.

"This Court, having weighed the evidence against the accused, including his own confession, is of the opinion that the accused, Captain Asari Raidan, is guilty of all charges preferred against him." The Head of Court looked up from his document.

"Captain Asari Raidan is hereby stripped of his rank and officership in the Royal Imperial Navy and is to be transported as a felon to Capital World," said the Judicator. "Where he will be put to death by Nitrogen Asphyxiation."

The Consul of the Rotham Republic stood up, raising a hand of objection. "The Republic demands the accused be extradited to Rotham space for the execution of the sentence, which must be performed according to Rotham laws and customs." Their methods of capital punishment were famously more brutal than executions in the Empire. For instance, the condemned might be slowly pressed to death inside a metal vice.

The Judicator looked at them. "The Extradition Treaty cannot be invoked because the incident occurred within Imperial Space. And the condemned is a full citizen of the Empire and is therefore immune."

The Consul looked disappointed but bowed showing submission to the standing rule of law. "The Rotham Republic withdraws its demand and instead requests that Rotham representatives be present to certify the sentence is carried out and, if possible, that a Rotham agent be allowed to activate the nitrogen machine."

"This Court is not authorized to grant or deny those requests. I remind the respected Consul that the accused, as a full citizen of the Empire, has the right to appeal this verdict to the Royal Supreme Court on Capital World, though they may not accept the case."



"I'm not going to appeal it," said Raidan from his seat. The Consul appeared satisfied by this and sat down. Just as the Judicator seemed ready to conclude the trial, Calvin bowed to his impulses and raised a hand of objection.

"The Court recognizes Lieutenant Commander Calvin Cross of the IWS Nighthawk," she didn't seem happy by his interruption, which was out of place, but allowed it to stand.

"I request a stay of execution until a full investigation is completed," he almost couldn't believe he was doing this. "As an intelligence officer I have reason to believe Raidan's motives, I mean *the accused's* motives, are more complex than what this court has found and should be uncovered as a matter of national security. And since the accused is the most valuable witness to such an investigation, losing him before we can investigate would be a terrible mistake."

His request met with dissonance throughout the room, especially in the form of hissing from the Rotham table. The Judicator had to smack her gavel to silence the chamber. "Further investigation is not necessary because guilt has already been established beyond a reasonable doubt."

"No, you don't understand," said Calvin, breaking protocol by speaking without permission. "I'm not interested in proving whether or not the accused is guilty. I'm interested in finding out why he did what he did. People don't do things without some kind of motive and we haven't established one... at least, not a convincing one. My instinct is to believe Raidan is involved in something larger, which may present a credible threat to the Empire."

The Judicator nodded, now understanding. But the expression on her face, and most of the faces in the room, was disapproving. "Lieutenant Commander, as only a half citizen of the Empire and lacking sufficient rank, this Court cannot consider your request. Unless such a motion is seconded by an officer of flag rank."

Calvin looked immediately to Vice Admiral Harkov, eyes begging her to take up his cause. But she refused to speak on his behalf.

"If there is no further objection this court is concluded and dismissed."

## Chapter 5

The day rolled forward in slow motion, even though it was the start of a much anticipated vacation.

The station had a large staff in addition to the 500 person crew that maintained it. The facility provided most of the conveniences a person might expect. Everything from diverse food options to commercial centers buzzed with activity on all public-access levels. But few of the diversions piqued Calvin's interest. He avoided the gambling hall, even though he was free to play as much as he liked now—he just didn't feel like it, and instead spent his time exploring the station, enjoying some alone time. He stopped from time to time to stare out the windows at the planet below. He'd been all over the Empire and was still caught off-guard by the raw beauty of a sapphire blue planet almost close enough to touch.

Eventually he returned to his room to read. But his books couldn't hold his interest and neither did the online nets, so he began sorting through papers relevant to the Phoenix mission, and scribbled notes. He began a list of every possible motive Raidan might've had to go rogue, no matter how unlikely, hoping he could put everything in perspective.

It was only a few minutes of this, however, before his ideas ran out and became silly to amuse himself, like "*his pizza was laced with amphetamines causing him to misbehave for several days*" and Calvin tossed his pen aside and crumpled the paper into a ball. What was the point? The case was decided. The sentence would be carried out. Asari Raidan would die, and the truth, whatever it was, would die with him. Calvin knew better than to hope he could figure out what Raidan's motives had been. Not without more information. So it was a waste of time. An unwanted distraction that was already ruining his vacation.

As a last resort, he turned on some music—a very old piano solo recorded hundreds of years before, and lay in bed. He wasn't tired enough to sleep, but as he followed the gentle rolling notes of the sonata in minor key, he was able to relax and push everything out of mind.

Until the comm panel started chirping at him. He resisted at first, covering his ears with a pillow, but eventually he answered the call. "Calvin here, what is it?"

"Heya there, Cal." It was Sarah and she sounded more than a bit tipsy. "It's me, you know. I'm with Shen here and we were just sayin' where the hell is that commander of ours?"

Calvin laughed. "In my room."

"In your room? At 1800 hours on a firstnight of leave? *Nooo...* can you believe that, Shen? He's in his room on the first night of leave!" Her voice was somewhat drowned out by the sounds of music and talking. "That won't do. Unless..." she giggled. "You're not alone over there are you, Cap'n?"

"No, I'm not alone," Calvin looked around his room; it was empty except for piles of his junk and a few books on the floor. "Okay, I'm alone."

"Then come on over here and have a few drinks with us, why don'tcha? Don't you know we're on vacation?"

He usually felt out of place in rooms crowded with people dancing, singing, drinking, and trying too hard to impress the opposite sex. But he didn't have anything better to do, and both Sarah and Shen, like many in his crew, had become trusted friends. People he enjoyed spending time with. "All right, sure. Why not. Where are you?"

"Mist-36..." The noisy song blasting in the background grew louder, making it almost impossible to hear Sarah.

"OK, see you," he turned off the panel.

Mist-36... he's seen it earlier that day. The larger of the two clubs on the station. He was pretty sure he knew how to find it again, there was no need to search for it on the computer. He dug out some fresh clothes and took a fast shower. He always told people he wasn't interested in meeting a girl and getting tied down somewhere, but really it was only the 'getting tied down somewhere' part that bothered him. And since he would be rubbing shoulders with other people his age, he felt compelled to make the best impression he could.

Once dressed, he splashed water on his face and checked himself over in the mirror. He even fussed with his hair for a few seconds. "Not bad, Calvin, not bad. You clean up pretty well for an Acting Captain." He grinned and dabbed on a tiny bit of cologne, very careful not to overdo it. This was one of those rare occasions where being only twenty-five was an advantage.

Unfortunately, finding Mist-36 was harder than expected, and he ended up on the complete wrong side of the station. He'd never been good with directions, ironic for someone who began his career as a pilot. He preferred being the one who decided *where* to go, not how to get there. And now, lost as he was, he still didn't want to ask for help. Not because of pride so much as a natural urge to solve the puzzle himself. He back-tracked and tried again. When that didn't work he found a kiosk and looked up a map of the station, memorizing the way to Mist-36.

A long line of people waited under the glowing blue sign. He took his place and shuffled forward thoughtlessly. They were able to glimpse the club's insides through a wide window along the wall. He tapped it with his knuckles and was surprised to see it was made of old-fashioned glass. He was glad starships didn't use such a fragile material for their windows.

With his hands in his jacket pockets, he let his mind slip away from the boredom of waiting. He daydreamed and, before he knew it, it was his turn.

"Yeah you look all right. Here, thumb against the plate. It's policy." One of the two bouncers in black suits spoke to him. Calvin fought his smile. Being judged by a couple of meat-heads to see if he was "pretty enough" to get inside seemed absurd. A paying customer with deep pockets, would they really turn him away? Apparently so, as about half the people had been refused.

"Hey, you listening, man?"

"Yeah, sorry, what?" He smiled, trying not to look rude, despite missing what they'd said.

"You gotta thumb the plate. It's policy. No non-humans, no criminals, and no non-citizens."

Calvin pressed his thumb flat against the plate before catching the last qualifier. He wasn't a non-citizen, he was a half citizen. But apparently that was enough to red-flag him.

"You're only a half-citizen?"

"Yeah," said Calvin. Full citizenship was hard to come by, so much so that even half-citizenship was often considered privileged.

"Sorry pal, full citizens only. Don't feel bad, we turn away hundreds a day."

"Okay, well, whatever," Calvin turned around. Being as established as he was in the military, he forgot how much harder it was to get by in the Empire without being a full citizen. Even in the military he knew his citizenship status was holding him down at Lieutenant Commander. A rank that was still quite respectable for a twenty-five year old, but what about when he turned thirty-five? Would he still be a Lieutenant Commander? Did they intend to keep him down forever? His service record demanded better, but he tried not to think of such things. He'd be a full citizen someday, when he inherited his mother's citizenship status at the time of her death. But, like any good son, he hoped that day never came.

"Hold up there, Calvin." One bouncer said turning to the other. "Eric, it says here he's a Lieutenant Commander. You know the rules, officers get in no matter what."

"What about the other rules? Like no non-citizens."

"Idiot. This rule is the number one rule. Otherwise the boss loses his contract. This ain't mainstreet. If we start turnin' away officers, we're done. The rent on this place will—"

"Ok, guys," said Calvin. "Make up your minds. In or out? I'm tired of standing here."

"In," the bouncer on the left said, pointing his thumb over his shoulder. The other eventually nodded and stepped out of his way. "The cover charge is 5q."

Calvin nodded and handed them the cash.

The club was a strange combination of bright and dark inside. Most lights were off but several soft lights of all colors and varieties were all over the place. Everything was a little obscured by a lingering cloud of smoke and people were everywhere, despite the efforts of the bouncers to keep most everyone out. Almost every person was standing, either in circles chatting with others, or dancing to the energetic rhythms of some live musicians who Calvin didn't recognize—probably a local sensation. He didn't really care for the style, being partial to a different genre. Anand sometimes joked that Calvin had been born in the wrong decade.

He slipped through the mess of people and stopped near the center of the room, letting his eyes search for the familiar faces of his bridge crew. But almost no one's face could be made out in the haze and he found himself wishing Sarah had given better directions.

Someone crashed into him, nearly throwing him off balance. But he kept his footing, wobbling a bit, and managed to catch the stranger by the forearm so she wouldn't fall. As he let her go he saw a pretty young face. Even in the dark she looked embarrassed while apologizing profusely.

"It's all right," said Calvin. "Don't worry about it, you're fine."

"Once again, I'm very sorry."

He laughed, stopping her as she turned away. "What's your name?"

"Sylvia."

"Well, Sylvia, maybe you can help me. I'm looking for where drinks are served."

"Oh there's a sectioned off bar right through there," she pointed to a door on the left wall. She brushed some of her light brown hair from her eyes and gave him a warm smile. It was hard to see her clearly in the darkness, her face was lit only by a blinking strobe light, but she was very cute.

"Say..." Calvin hesitated. Somehow girls made him uneasy in a way that aliens bent on killing him never had. "I'm meeting up with some friends, care to join me?"

"Thanks anyway, but no. I really have to go. Maybe some other time."

He nodded, thinking it was probably for the best that she'd brushed him off. If things had gone differently, and they'd really hit it off, what then? An empty one-night stand and then never seeing each other again? Or, even less practical, a relationship? His career wasn't suited for that kind of thing, with all the secrecy and traveling. And, in his eyes, he wasn't a good enough person to settle down with someone anyway. Not yet.

So he forgot about the girl and pushed on through the door she'd pointed out. He found several booths and a short bar sectioned off from the noisy main room. The lighting was a little brighter. The instant he walked in he heard "Hello, Calvin!" from his left.

"Hello, Sarah and Shen." He nodded and took an empty seat at their table. An attendant followed him.

"What can I get you, sir?"

Calvin hesitated—he didn't drink alcohol. "I'll have a glass of water," he said, adding, "on the rocks." He smiled like it was the funniest thing he'd ever said.

"Okay..." the attendant said, looking both unamused and disappointed as he left.

"The water's free but I hope you tip him anyway," said Shen from behind a large mug.

"I'm sure he'll live." Calvin tried to make himself comfortable, shifting on the stiff furniture. "So what have you two been gabbing about while I kept you waiting?"

"Mostly about how slow you are."

Sarah giggled. "And how you never ask for directions."

"We made a small wager to see how fast you'd get here. And you let me down, Cal," Shen folded his arms.

With a broad grin Sarah said, "if you want a drink, Captain. It's on me, I stumbled upon 70q somehow." She spun Shen's moneycard on the table, beneath her long slender fingers.

"70q, really?" asked Calvin. "That's almost a day's pay. You sure you haven't been drinking too much?"

Shen shrugged. "Probably. But what can I say?" He traced the foamy ring of his mug with one finger. "I'm on vacation, what's a little betting?"

Calvin shook his head. "I don't think betting's your thing, Shen. Seems like you're almost as bad as Miles."

"Actually," said Sarah. "We called him earlier to come up, but apparently he's *'on a roll'*. I guess he's made a pretty good profit so far and doesn't want to lose *'the magic'*, or whatever he calls it."

Calvin raised an eyebrow. "You're kidding me. He's actually winning?"

Shen laughed. "First time for everything."

"That reminds me," said Calvin. "And don't ask what one has to do with the other," he pointed a finger. "But we're getting a new XO."

"What about Anand?"

"Transferred, got his own command."

"That rat. What a backstabbing traitor," said Sarah with a smile. "And to think I'd always admired him."

Calvin knew Sarah had much more than admired him. The two would flirt shamelessly and yet, they'd still never managed to hook up.

"Yeah... hard to believe he's going," said Shen. "I'm going to miss him." Shen seemed almost pleased.

"So will I," said Calvin.

"So who's the new officer?" asked Shen.

"I honestly don't know."

The server brought Calvin his ice water and again asked if there was something more he could do. Calvin had intended to refuse but, remembering what Shen has said about the tip, decided he'd order a small meal. He was almost finished looking over the menu when Shen pounded his shoulder.

"Hey, look at this."

"What?" Calvin glanced down at the table's viewscreen. Shen had activated the news station and a large vessel could be seen leaving the dock, flanked by two other warships.

"A dreadnought with two corvettes. The Harbinger."

"So what?"

"It's our friend, listen," he handed Calvin a small ear piece.

He heard an articulate woman over the feed. She broadcasted from some newsroom off station. "It's unknown where he's being kept aboard the very large ship you see there. But former starship captain Asari Raidan is en-route to Capital World on the ISS Harbinger which is temporarily being used as a penal ship. It looks like the Imperial Navy has provided some extra escort as you can see by the presence of the two corvettes. No word yet on who ordered the extra precaution or how far the escort will go. But they're about to clear the defense perimeter."

Seeing their shift in attention, the attendant excused himself and wandered off to some other table.

Calvin ignored him and let out a sigh, "I was hoping to get my mind off all of this." He needed to accept that Raidan's behavior was a mystery that would go unresolved. Calvin removed the earpiece and began handing it back when flashes appeared on the viewer, lighting up the hulls of the two corvettes.

"Wait a second," he snatched the earpiece back and put it on again. As he did, the station went to full alert with emergency lights snapping on. A noisy klaxon filled the air and General Quarters was sounded. Most everyone in the bar jumped up and started screaming, Calvin had to plug his other ear to hear the broadcast.

"What's going on?" asked Shen.

Calvin shushed them and listened. Unfortunately, the noisy panic made it impossible to catch more than bits and pieces.

"Both corvettes have experienced localized explosions and are adrift. No word yet on injuries." The two escorting warships drifted away from the large Harbinger, which looked untouched. Calvin knew from the damages that the corvettes' main thrusters and engines were crippled. Both ships opened fire at the Harbinger with basic laser arrays but it was pointless. They couldn't hope to breach the dreadnought's shields, and it was quickly moving out of range. An instant later, the Harbinger changed direction and vanished.

"The Harbinger has changed heading and made an unscheduled altered-space jump. Moments ago, Imperial Military starships opened fire on the apparently rogue vessel—carrying the condemned prisoner, Asari Raidan. But the efforts of the Praxis Squadron did not contain the fleeing ship. The ISS Harbinger's current whereabouts and destination are not yet known. No comment from the Fifth Fleet yet."

The screen went blank and was replaced by the image of a military officer at a desk. He wore a standard blue-and-black uniform and on his lapel was the amethyst insignia for Second Commodore. "This is Second Commodore Miguel Shenkov, commander of Praxis Station," he said, Calvin looked up to see the message displaying on all screens in the bar, and was probably being broadcast throughout the entire station. "Everyone on board is ordered to go directly to their quarters and remain until further notice. I promise you, you'll know more when I know more. But for now, this station depends on your complete and orderly cooperation to ensure everyone's safety. All active crew will report to their stations and local commanders. This is an order." The message repeated over and over, drowning out the nervous chatter and panic.

"What do we do?" asked Shen, looking at Calvin with earnest eyes.

"Do as he says. Go to your quarters. And you'll know more when he knows more."

"Just like that?" Sarah asked.

"Just like that." Calvin nodded. Until he was given orders otherwise, or activated by Intel Wing, he and his crew were on shore leave and fell under the jurisdiction of the local authorities. "However, you might want to hold off on unpacking your bags. I'm willing to bet every warship within two sectors will be activated within the hour."

The door burst open and marines filed in, ordering everyone to systematically evacuate the club. Calvin lined up with the others and headed for his room. Already trying to decide whether Raidan had somehow been behind the attack or if it was a setup meant to appear that way.



## Chapter 6

The light on the comm panel blinked furiously and Calvin jumped out of bed to activate it. With a click, Jack Edwards' bearded face appeared. His eyes were alert but he looked exhausted. Behind him, the bluish-grey walls of his office held various plaques and honors.

"I was wondering when you'd be giving me a call, Director," said Calvin while taking a seat at his desk. "It's been three hours."

"I see you've guessed what this is about," said Jack.

"The Harbinger, obviously. A condemned ex-captain disappears along with an alpha-class dreadnought. That sounds like something Intel Wing is going to investigate. And I'm the closest agent."

"Very astute, as always."

"But it's been hours. Why'd you wait until now to contact me?"

"It's a logistical disaster." Jack cleared his throat. "The Fifth Fleet has jurisdiction over both the area where the Harbinger disappeared and the Harbinger itself. Because they lost one of their own, they wanted to hunt it down themselves."

"That's absurd. They don't have the resources to conduct an intelligence investigation. That's *our* job. Remember how they couldn't even find the Phoenix without our help?"

"I know, I know. Intel Wing and Fleet Command had to reach a compromise on how to continue the pursuit. And only after three interceptors and an interdicator lost track of the Harbinger did they start listening and turn their files over to us."

"So how do we handle this?"

"It's kind of a sensitive balance, Calvin. And, quite frankly, you wouldn't be my first choice to spearhead this op. You're skilled enough for the hunt, of course, but there's a diplomatic aspect here that you have no experience with. No offense."

"None taken."

"But, as you said, you're the closest. And we have to get after the Harbinger before the trail gets any colder."

"Say the word, Director, and we'll power up the Nighthawk and find it," said Calvin with a nod.

"That's another thing," Jack sounded angry. "They have the Nighthawk in lockdown and won't release it. Like they didn't want us to preempt their jurisdiction and chase after the Harbinger without their consent. I don't know why they thought we'd get in the way."

"Yeah, that's very... interesting," said Calvin. "Almost like they wanted the Harbinger to have a head start."

"Now don't get carried away. The Fifth Fleet managed to attack the Harbinger, but it slipped through their fingers. They don't want it to get away. Why would they?"

"No reason I can think of. But then why is my ship locked down?"

"Don't worry about that, it's being taken care of," said Jack. "So get your crew and get aboard. We're sending all the release orders and I think the Fleet and Intel Wing are mostly on the same page now. When I give you the go ahead, I want you to launch and get to work."

"What's the ETA on that?"

"Maybe an hour. Hopefully less."

"You're killing me. I could get my crew ready to launch in fifteen minutes."

"It's a bad situation, but we have to work with it. Remember, it's very important that you don't step on the toes of the Fifth Fleet. I'll work my angle from here to make sure they don't hamper the investigation too much. But stay out of their way, do what they want, and let me worry about the fine details, okay?"

"Yes, sir," said Calvin. He hated red tape, especially when it served no purpose but to get in the way. "In the meantime, Jack, can you send me everything you have on the Harbinger? I want to look it over? Manifest, personnel files, last known position and heading, everything."

"Yeah, we'll transfer everything we have to the Nighthawk's computer. Do you have the latest decryption software aboard?"

"I'd have to ask Shen, but I think so. They did some updates when we first made port."

"Good. And Calvin... don't let me down."

"I never do. But there's another problem. I'm short an officer; the Fifth Fleet stole my XO. Can I have him back?"

"No but thanks for reminding me." Jack cleared his throat again. "As part of our agreement with Fleet Command you're taking a Navy Officer aboard as your XO."

"*What?*" Calvin didn't even try to hide his surprise. "That makes no sense. He won't know anything about the ship or how our operations work."

"There isn't any available Intel Wing staff at Praxis to fill the role. And your new officer is a she, not a he."

"*Whatever.*"

Jack gave him a hard look. "I don't think I like your tone."

"Sorry, sir. I only meant that the more restrictions I have to deal with the harder it will be to conduct this investigation."

"Would you rather be tracking finance accounts from behind a desk on Capital World?"

"Point taken, sir."

"I understand your grievances but you'll just have to deal with them. Get your new XO up to speed so you can use her. As long as you keep her happy and involved, that'll make everything easier with the Fifth Fleet."

Calvin resisted the urge to complain again. The fact that Intel Wing had to cater to Fleet Command just to do their job was ludicrous. Intel Wing never went to the Fleet Admirals to demand they deploy their squadrons in different ways. Why should the Fleet get any say on how an intelligence investigation was to be conducted?

"And as the final term of our compromise, any reports you make will have to be simulcast to both me and Vice Admiral Harkov of the Fifth Fleet. She will be following the investigation from Fleet Command's side."

"I have to *report* to Fleet Command?"

"Yes. And it's very important that you send us the reports simultaneously and that they are exactly the same."

"Well that sucks," said Calvin. "So if I don't want Fleet Command to know something I can't let you know it either?"

"That's correct. And don't try to go around that. I know you. I know you'll try to think of some clever way to feed me information you don't want them getting their hands on. But they will be able to monitor any and all transmissions originating from your kataspace connector."

"That really, really sucks. Are there any concessions you *didn't* make, sir? You make it sound like Fleet Command is running this investigation."

"For all intents and purposes, they are. I'll try to keep everything out of your way so you can focus completely on finding the Harbinger. Let me worry about the politics."

"Okay."

"That's all I have for you. Get your crew ready and I'll send you all our data and see that your ship is released. Good luck."

"Thank you, sir," said Calvin and the terminal shut off. He let out a deep sigh of frustration, and then sent a message to his crew.

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The hum of the printer quit and Calvin grabbed the next batch of documents sent to the Nighthawk by Intel Wing. They'd sent the information to him electronically, but after his computer decrypted them he wasted no time printing hard copies. Technically he was not allowed to do this—but he just *bated* reading enormous documents on unsoftened screens. It bothered his eyes.

His desk had collected quite a pile and he didn't relish the thought of reading through it all in the kind of meticulous detail required. Most people thought being an Intelligence Officer meant you had access to all kinds of private information and military secrets. And to a certain extent that was true, on a need-to-know basis. But mostly what you'd be downloading to your brain were personnel rosters, account information, transaction details, rap sheets, anything and everything that might be pertinent to a particular case. Most of which turned out to be useless, peripheral junk. But for the sake of those few buried gems, every single scrap of information had to be considered; even the tiniest detail might be the difference between a solved case and a permanent mystery.

So, without any joy, Calvin returned to his desk and began scanning through the latest Intel. This batch was the service records of the engineering staff.

*Jon Kwalski received a demerit for missing a shift on 10.05.1212... that was six years ago, can't they let it go? He also won a blue-water service award for completing a spacewalk repair in record time... blab, blab, blab...*

A chirp interrupted his reading. He tapped the button on his desk. "Yes?"

"Captain to the bridge."

"What is it?"

"The main hatch has sealed and the commander is aboard."

"Thank you, Shen." He released the switch and locked the files in a desk drawer. He took only a second to smooth out the wrinkles of his uniform and clear his throat before marching to the bridge door. He wanted to make it clear to whoever his new XO was, some Navy officer, that *he* was in charge. And he wasn't going to be changing any of his active protocols to whatever they did in the Navy.

The door slid aside and he stepped onto the bridge and looked it over.

Sarah grinned from behind the helm and Shen sat at operations. But the defense post was vacant.

"Where's Miles?"

"Knowing him, still asleep on Praxis One," said Sarah as she shrugged. Calvin looked to Shen.

"He came aboard with the Commander's party. I'm sure he's on his way."

"All right," instead of taking his chair, Calvin moved to the back of the bridge where the main door was. "Patch me through to Director Edwards."

"Yes, sir. Just gimme a second," said Sarah.

A minute later the Director's face appeared on the screen. "What is it, Lieutenant Commander?"

"Have you freed my ship?"

"Affirmative. You're ordered to disembark as soon as you're ready."

"Any new Intel?"

"We've confirmed the Harbinger's heading is Aleator System. But you'll have to take it from there."

"Thanks." The transmission closed and the screen went dark again.

"Okay, Sarah, contact the control tower, let's get this show on the road."

"With pleasure." As she tapped away and spoke into her headset, requesting clearance, Calvin turned his eyes to the large window ahead, thinking how glad he'd be once he saw stars again instead of the grey, docking-bay walls.

The elevator door opened and he turned to face his new executive officer. Her blue-and-black uniform stood out like a sore thumb in an environment of black-and-silver, and her shapely form, radiant eyes, and bright hair were all too familiar. "*You?*" asked Calvin.

Summers Presley's expression became a mixture of both confusion and offense. He cleared his throat. "...should know you're welcome aboard. So... *welcome aboard,*" he faked a smile but didn't miss her raised eyebrow. "Your post is over here." He motioned toward the command seats in the center.

"Thank you, sir." She said. Her voice was pointedly neutral but he could tell she was irritated. Perhaps she was no happier about this arrangement than he was.

"We're good to go, sir," said Sarah. "We have clearance to launch along standard vector through gate one."

"Good, Sarah, disengage the docking clamps and, now that you're here Commander, we're ready to..." Calvin spotted the empty defense post again and cut himself off. He looked back at Summers. "Where's Miles?"

"I'm sorry, who?"

"Didn't one of my officers come aboard with you?"

"No one higher than a warrant officer."

He spun to face ops. "Shen, I thought you said Miles came aboard with the Commander's group."

"Miles was *supposed* to."

"Okay, Sarah, cancel the launch and re-engage those clamps. Shen, find out what happened to Miles." Calvin took his seat and ran a hand through his hair.

"I'll get a demerit form," said Summers from his side. Calvin spun his chair.

"A what?" He hadn't heard the term in so long it took him a second to remember what it was. "No, just... don't worry about it." He wasn't going to fill out some demerit form.

"With all due respect, sir," Presley said. "This calls for discipline."

"It's nothing. Look, I'm sure he's got a good excuse and he's probably on his way."

"Found him, sir," Shen piped in.

"See."

"He's in a detention unit. It seems our unlucky friend amassed something of a gambling debt and he's forbidden to go off world until he pays it."

"Dammit, Miles..." Calvin stood up. "Okay send them an order from Intel Wing to release him from lock up."

"No can do. He signed some kind of contract before playing those tables. Unless Intel Wing wants to foot the bill it'd be a breach of interworld regs."

"He sounds like trouble. I can get someone transferred over from the Fleet," said Summers.

"No, no," said Calvin sharply. The last thing he needed was another robot from the Fleet.

"Or I could take the White Shift myself. I used to be a defense officer," she said.

"It's all right, that won't be necessary, Summers. I'm not giving up one of my best officers."

"Commander."

"What?" He looked at her, confused.

"My rank, it's commander."

*Oh right*, he'd forgotten about that protocol. He'd have to let her know how he did things on his ship, but that was a battle for another time. Instead he ignored her and looked back at Shen.

"How much is the debt?"

"30,000q."

Sarah whistled. "That's more than he makes in a year."

Calvin thought about it for a moment. "All right, all right. I'll cover it. Let me wire the funds over to them."

"What?" the bridge exploded with surprise.

"*You'll* cover it?" asked Summers, her face was white with shock and massive disapproval, the very idea that a commanding officer would cover for an undisciplined inferior and pay such a fortune to do so probably went against everything she understood about the universe. But she simply didn't know how far back Miles and Calvin went, and she hadn't yet learned that, as good as Miles was at losing money, he was even better at his job—second to none.

Calvin shrugged. "He'll repay every q." But he knew Miles would never be able to. That, however, was unimportant to Calvin. He didn't have an infinite flow of wealth, but he made more than he spent. And the money really wasn't that valuable to him.

He moved to the ops station and logged into one of his bank accounts. After wiring over the money, they received confirmation that Miles had been released and was on his way over.

"What do you think it'll take, half an hour?" Calvin wondered.

"The detention center is on the fifteenth deck of the outpost, and since he can skip most of the security check at the terminal I'm thinking fifteen minutes," said Shen.

"As soon as he's aboard, get us out of here. And let me know the instant he's on the bridge. In the meantime, I'll be in my office doing a little reading." Calvin decided he'd prefer to be milling over the datasheets than idle on the bridge. As he turned for the door he caught sight of Summers whose face looked like it was going to explode with frustration. But, being the dutiful officer that she was, she kept her cool. For now.

"Commander, maybe you'd better come with me," said Calvin. He nodded toward the door and she stood up and followed him into his office. He sat down at his desk and she stood by the door, it closed behind her.

"Thirsty?" He asked nodding toward a stack of waterbottles.

"No thank you, sir."

He stretched his arms then folded them behind his head. "We got off on the wrong foot earlier, Commander." He fought the impulse to look her up and down. "In the terminal before the trial, I mean."

"Oh?" She raised an eyebrow. "I'm sorry I don't remember."

"Good," said Calvin, doubting her. "Then we should have no trouble starting over. Now, there are a few things you should know now that you're part of our family." He had trouble judging her reaction. "Please, sit," he said, motioning toward another chair opposite him.

"Thank you, sir, but I'd rather stand."

"Very well," he said. Was there something he was doing that made her annoyed? "The first thing you should know is that aboard my ship the most formal protocols go out the window." He didn't miss the flash of disapproval in her eyes. It made him want to smile but he resisted. "I don't care about them, they're inefficient and boring. Here everyone is always open to speak his or her mind; that way we're all on the same page. And I don't hand out demerits. If someone does something small then I don't care, but if they do something big then they're tossed out the airlock."

"*What?*" Her shock broke through her armor of unreadability.

"That was a joke. But they would be thrown into the brig. And there they'd have to deal with Major Jenkins, the commander of the Special Forces unit aboard. And trust me, that's not a blessing." He chuckled but she didn't even crack a smile.

"Is that everything, sir?"

"No," said Calvin. "I want you to speak freely. You're unhappy, I can tell. Let it out. If you have some advice or criticism for me, well, I'm always up for hearing it."

She was hesitant.

"Come on."

"Are you sure?" she asked as she folded her arms.

"Let me have it."

"Okay then..." she paused for an instant but when she spoke her lips wouldn't stop for anything. She ranted about how inappropriate it was for him to pay for Miles to be released from lockup, and how she had no confidence in an officer with such poor judgment he would gamble himself into an inescapably deep hole. And how by not disciplining him, Calvin was validating Miles' actions. Setting a bad precedent for the rest of the crew. Breaking the cohesion of a good, trained, disciplined starship. And how waiting for Miles only increased Raidan's head start.

Calvin listened quietly, actually considering everything she said. And, he thought, it made sense. But he didn't agree with her conclusions. The important thing was that he knew how she felt, and that she learn what his positions were, and adapt.

"...we're officers of the military, that's who we are. The least we can do is act that way!" she concluded.

She was cute while angry and Calvin gave way to a broad smile.

"And wipe that stupid grin off your face, Lieutenant Commander." She snapped, then suddenly closed her mouth and stood at attention, realizing she'd crossed a line. But her anger didn't bother Calvin. In fact, he thought she'd finally reached the heart of the matter. It hurt her pride that she had to report to, and take orders from, someone a full rank below her and three years her junior. Especially when that person seemed to break all the rules and do everything he wasn't supposed to. He wondered if she knew he was only a half-citizen as well. But Calvin didn't feel threatened. Everything he had he'd earned, and he trusted himself even if she hadn't learned to yet.

"Are you finished, Summers?"

"Yes," she said calmly, letting out a sigh of relief. "Except for one more thing. You really need to call me Commander, not Summers. That's a very important protocol."

Calvin resisted a chuckle and reclined in his chair.

"Didn't that feel good?"

"What?"

"Letting it off your chest."

"A little, I suppose. But it was a mistake."

"But it felt good?"

"A little."

"Good. I don't need any officers walking around with pent up anger like ticking time-bombs," he spoke gently. "I want you to know you can speak to me freely at any time. In fact, I hope you do. It's important for me to know what my crew's feelings are." He paused to let that sink in. "Now, as for your



concerns. I'm sorry that the transition from a disciplined Navy attack cruiser to an Intel Wing stealth frigate is hard because of my command style. But, you'll have to adapt to it. While I may do things a little... differently, in this squadron I'm allowed that luxury so long as I get the job done." He was only half telling the truth; he too was subject to protocols and regulations but he'd mostly convinced himself otherwise.

"Yes, sir." She was quieter now, but he still saw subtle defiance in her eyes.

"Now another protocol is to follow the orders of your commanding officer, and to do so absolutely. And I order you to call people by their given names instead of their ranks. If you don't know their names, you will make it your duty to learn them at your earliest convenience."

"What?" She was stunned.

"So now you have conflicting orders. Follow the protocol to maintain ship formality or follow the protocol to obey your commanding officer. Which commandment you break is up to you."

She looked irritated again but she hid it quickly. "Well, as you say, sir. Protocols aren't very important to you. That means I don't really have to follow your orders."

Was there a sense of humor inside her after all? Calvin smirked. "That's better. Now if you want a short break to see to your quarters and arrangements that's fine. But I expect you back on the bridge in an hour."

"That isn't necessary. I am prepared to carry out my entire shift."

"Oh, okay, good. Well then, you're free to go."

"Thank you, sir."

She left and the door closed behind her.

Calvin let out a small moan. *What am I going to do with her?* The last thing he needed was a protocol zealot, especially if she found out he wasn't entitled to nearly as many liberties as he took. And if she knew he had to make reports to Fleet Command she might send a few of her own and get him in trouble. For all he knew, that was the main purpose in giving her this assignment, to keep him in line.

"Blah..." he said, unable to get himself to pull the documents back out for study. Instead he turned on his desk and played a game of chess against the computer. And lost. As usual. "*Cheater.*" He glared down at it.

"Would you like to play again?" The computer asked.

"No. Shut up." He turned it off just as Shen's voice crackled over his speaker.

"We've pulled free from Praxis One and we're in open space. Also, Miles is on his way to the bridge."

"Good," said Calvin and he headed for the door.

He and Miles entered the bridge at the same time from opposite sides.

"Hey man, I'm really sorry. I owe you big, Cal. Real big," Miles's voice boomed as he hurried to his post. Calvin couldn't help but laugh. Seeing Miles' red face was almost worth the small fortune.

"It's fine, it's fine," Calvin made a calming motion with his hands.

"I'll pay you back, I swear!" He got to his station but didn't sit down.

Sarah spun her chair to face him. "So what happened to that 20,000q you were going to win, hotshot?"

"Hey," said Miles. "No sass from you."

"The word is you lost 30,000q. That's like buying four cars, brand new."

"No, no, no. It was much less than that. End of discussion."

Calvin smirked. "It was 29,905q. I just paid it."

"Well... the game was rigged anyway," Miles looked flustered.

Shen spoke up, "the controller told me you lost it on eight consecutive hands, increasing the bet with each one."

"Yeah eight hands, and all of them rigged. Isn't that unfair? I mean it's bad enough to rig one hand, but eight? Give a guy a break."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," Sarah rolled her eyes and spun back to her station.

"Miles, you never change."

Just then Miles noticed Summers Presley, who'd been silently disapproving of the whole thing. He pointed to her. "Who the hell is she?"

Calvin shrugged. "I dunno, I think she's a stowaway."

Summers cleared her throat. "I'm Commander Presley, your executive officer. Now take your station," she said, sounding unimpressed. Miles looked dazed so she snapped. "On the double, mister!"

His eyes darted to Calvin who nodded. Miles took his seat, looking disgruntled. "Aye, Commander."

"All right," said Calvin. "Now that everyone's acquainted, let's get out of here. Sarah, plot a course to Aleator and standby for a jump of eighty percent potential."

"Ready, sir."

"Now."

Sarah fired up the engines and the view from the windows became black.

"Accelerating, we'll reach eighty percent in just over two minutes—standard heading. ETA, six hours."

"Perfect. Now that that's done, I'll be in my quarters. Summers, you have the deck."

## Chapter 7

His room was cluttered with boxes, the same ones he'd delayed unpacking back on Praxis. But while his procrastination had paid off there, he had no reason to delay unpacking them now. Except for pure, simple laziness. Which was good enough for Calvin. He shifted the boxes out of his way and took a seat on his bed, resting his head in his hands.

"What am I gonna do?"

A thousand thoughts raced through his mind. He was the miracle boy of the Fleet, the youngest, brightest CO in Intel Wing. Second only to the legendary Lafayette Nimoux. But aside from him, Calvin's success got the most attention within Intel Wing circles. And some people, Calvin was sure, saw him as a real contender for the unofficial role of *best operative*. After all, his latest work had won him another gleaming Silver Star, command of a phantom-class stealth warship, and—best of all—the chance to handpick most of his primary crew. But all of those honors came with certain expectations... He *had* to deliver. That meant making sense of this Raidan situation. No matter how confusing it seemed.

Firstly, why had Raidan gone rogue in the first place? It didn't fit his background at all. He was a distinguished fighting captain with decades of loyal service. Why did he give it all up just to attack a handful of alien ships? How could he possibly benefit?

And then there was the matter of his miraculous escape. Evading custody was one thing but to also steal a first-rate dreadnought in the process was unheard of. The Harbinger had a crew of nearly a thousand men and women. No way Raidan could have charmed them all over to his side with clever words and a winning personality. Nor was it likely Raidan could have taken the ship by force. It would take a veritable army to storm and capture such a vessel. Where would the forces have come from? Where would they have been hidden? And how would Raidan have anticipated needing to capture the Harbinger early enough to make the preparations? Unless it hadn't been Raidan at all... perhaps someone who wanted to liberate Raidan, or maybe even take him captive for some other purpose.

The simplest explanation was that the Harbinger's crew was sympathetic to Raidan and they'd planned to rescue him all along. However the odds were not good that so many people in one place just happened to take Raidan's side by coincidence. More likely people joined the ship, officially or discreetly, after it became clear the trial was taking place on Praxis One.

According to reports, a third of the Harbinger's crew changed at Praxis One, which was neither uncommon nor enough people to guarantee a swift capture of the ship. Especially since, ostensibly, the newcomers were mostly technicians and engineers rather than marines and Special Forces. Not men and women trained in close quarter battle. Nor could Calvin find any significant connections between the new crew. Some were related to each other, however distantly, others came from the same schools, that sort of thing, but ultimately there wasn't much to implicate they were working together on any kind of grand scale.

So far the files Intel Wing had sent him hadn't proven very useful. Mostly just boring. But if there was even a shred of a clue buried somewhere inside them, Calvin was determined to find it. Because he *had* to know how Raidan and whoever else had managed to steal a ship like the Harbinger, and make it and all hands aboard vanish with hardly a trace.

As he continued reviewing the information available and chewing the facts over repeatedly in his mind, like a bad piece of steak, something else stood out to Calvin. The Fifth Fleet seemed unnaturally interested in the Harbinger situation. True, it had been one of their ships that'd gone missing and yes it'd happened on their watch in their space. But none of that explained why the Fifth Fleet seemed so bent on being the ones to re-capture Raidan rather than opening up the operation more widely for other fleets and Intel Wing to assist. Intel Wing had resources and training designed to deal with this kind of op. Why did the Fifth Fleet want to keep them pinned to as minimal a role as possible? Perhaps to recover some of the dignity lost by having a condemned prisoner steal one of their dreadnoughts. But Calvin doubted it was that simple. .

He found it difficult to concentrate with Summers Presley aboard. Yes, she was attractive and stimulating, but more importantly she was someone hovering over his shoulder. Second-guessing his every move. He'd never had to play defense on his own ship before. And since her eyes were the Fleet's eyes, he would have to tread extra lightly. If only he still had Anand...

He paced his room feeling restless as his mind spun circles, trying to make all the pieces fit together. He spent the better part of an hour guessing at possible explanations for Raidan's actions, his escape, and what his next move might be. For now Calvin chose to assume either Raidan had command of the Harbinger, or that whoever did have command was acting in line with Raidan's own interests.

So then, what would interest Raidan that was in Aleator? It was a system on the edge of the Empire, outside the jurisdiction of all major powers and governments. A haven for thieves, cutthroats, pirates, criminals, mercenaries, and swarms of people trying to make a quick fortune. Aleator was under no one's control, except the Roscos, a family of criminals Calvin knew all too

well. Too much of his own family history tied up with them. And because of that, Aleator was one of the last places in the galaxy he wanted to go to. But if that was where the Harbinger was going, then he had to go too. But he didn't have to like it.

Eventually he found himself unlocking his safe and withdrawing the bottle of equarius. As he did, he told himself he wasn't going to take any, he was just going to hold it, and look at it, and think about it. Deeper inside he knew better, but chose to ignore the voice of warning... which was more of a whisper anyway.

He sat back down after grabbing a bottle of water, then snapped a pill in half and downed it. Knowing the effects wouldn't be felt for about twenty minutes. Until then, he tried to empty his mind by imagining the void of open space all around.

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His breathing was slow and deep. Each exhale carried the urge to smile at everything, and nothing. Thoughts were scattered like shifting sands adrift on a playful pond. And he cared about nothing. The swirling joyful apathy filled every breath and second. He was removed from it all and couldn't stop smiling. He felt bodiless. And was amused by the silence for no reason at all. It was very pleasant.

Until the loud noises came.

What was it, gunfire? His mind ached as the thunder boomed again, like ancient cannons. He felt a wave of dizziness and, in his momentary free-fall, he lurched upright and saw the spinning fixtures of his room. A darkened shadowy blur of total vertigo. He was falling up. Desperately he grabbed for something, anything, and clutched the headboard of his bed. He wanted to scream but the sound caught in his throat. The sensation grew and he felt as if he were being pulled apart...

After a few seconds, which felt like minutes, the feeling passed and his environment normalized. Leaving him where he'd always been, atop his bed, tangled amongst his sheets.

The lights were on and burning hot, forcing him to squint. He rubbed at his eyes, trying to collect himself before standing up. Strange, he didn't remember falling asleep. *How long was I out?*

Another loud knock came followed by the chime ringing.

"Come," Calvin croaked, standing up and feeling dizzy.

The door slid open and Summers Presley stepped inside. As she did, Calvin spotted the equarius bottle on his desk. He snatched it up, panicking that he'd left it in plain sight. He turned his back to her long enough to smuggle the bottle back into his safe and lock it.

"What can I do for you, Commander?" He asked. His voice scratchy and dry. He pulled a shirt over his head and pushed his arms through the sleeves.

Summers pointed to the blinking light on his viewer. "The bridge has been trying to contact you. Are you all right?"

The effects of the narcotic must've put him into such a deep sleep he hadn't heard the alert notice. He picked up a nearby bottle and downed most of the water before wiping his mouth. "Yes, I'm fine." He set the bottle down and looked into Summers' eyes. "Shouldn't you be on the bridge?"

"We were concerned about you, Lieutenant Commander."

"Call me Calvin. And isn't it a breach in protocol for the XO to leave the bridge when she could easily send a team to check on the unresponsive captain?" Of course, he didn't care about the protocol. But *she* did.

"No, First Lieutenant Shen Iwate has the deck. And I thought, under the circumstances, that this would be best."

"It's Iwate Shen. In his culture the first name goes last and last names go first, kind of different I know," he smiled. "But we just call him Shen."

"Anyway, that's not the point," she said.

He saw some color in her face. Was she embarrassed?

"So what is the point?" he asked.

"I thought it would be best if I came to check on you myself."

"That's very thoughtful of you, glad to know you care."

She frowned. "Don't flatter yourself, I'm here because you have a priority one message coming in from an unknown location."

"What do you mean unknown?"

"I mean you're being hailed, sir. By name. The sender is using one of the most secure channels possible, encrypted, and with maximum priority. Someone wants to get ahold of you really bad, really fast."

"If that's not an excuse to be flattered I don't know what is." He felt his heart and mind race at the thought of this new mystery. "I'll take it in here."

Summers didn't budge. "Because this message may be related to the case, and quite likely involves ship's security, I thought it would be best if we heard it together."

Calvin laughed. "You're joking?"

Summers' face was blank.

"You thought wrong, sister." And with a jovial smile he motioned for her to leave. "I'll take it in here, Commander. Thank you, that'll be all."

She didn't look happy but she complied. Once the door slid shut Calvin locked it and tapped the intercom. "Shen, send the message in here. I'm ready. Give me visual too, if you can."

"You got it, Cal."

The screen flickered to life and he saw the silhouette of a woman standing before an empty backdrop. The source of the light behind her was

hard to discern. He couldn't make out her face or any clear details, except that she appeared to be alone.

"Lieutenant Commander Calvin Cross?" the woman asked. Her voice sounded young twenties and oddly familiar.

"Yes that's me," he said. "Who are you?"

"Are you pursuing former Captain Asari Raidan?"

"Who's asking?"

"It is very important that you are alone, are you?"

"Yes."

"And are you receiving this message in a secure place where no one else can listen?" Despite her youth, her voice carried a stunning amount of authority, yet it was still pleasant, smooth, and crisp, every syllable cleanly enunciated. She had no trace of accent and he guessed she too was from Capital World.

"Yes," he said. "Now do you mind telling me who *you* are?"

The woman stepped from the darkness and a light snapped on. Her olive skin, green eyes, raven hair, and elegant face would have been recognized on any of a hundred worlds.

Calvin was too stunned to bow. "Princess Kalila Akira?" She was from the Akira House, the most powerful of the noble Houses, and more importantly she was the third daughter of the royal family and fourth in line to the throne. The Akiras had held the throne for its entire existence—over a hundred years—and, like all Akiras, Kalila's influence was tremendous. Few Imperial worlds were outside her reach. Her commanding presence extended over the camera, despite the unknown distance between them. It was the first time Calvin had ever spoken directly with a member of the royal family.

"Yes, I am Kalila. But please do not say my name out loud."

"I'm sorry," said Calvin, focused now on her unusual clothes. She was dressed like a commoner and wore no makeup of any kind, and her flowing hair was tied back. She still looked cleaner and better groomed than someone from the peasant caste—non-citizens—but otherwise she'd gone to every effort to blend in with the commonest of environments. He found himself mumbling clumsily, "if you don't mind my asking..."

She cut him off. "I'm sorry, Calvin, but I have to keep this brief. I can't tell you anything over kataspace except to say that this is extremely important. And urgent. I need you to meet me in person. Can you do this?"

He felt a tingle. "Probably," he said weakly, curiosity burning inside him. "Where?"

"Meet me in Tau System. You'll see a fleet of freighters and a small outpost. Dock with the outpost and come aboard, alone and unarmed. Go to the main concourse and wait. I'll be in touch with you there. How soon can you do this?"

Tau System was only a little out of the way to Aleator.

"That's about a click from my present course," he said cautiously. He didn't like the way this was going. Why would a princess of the crown be taking such extreme and unusual measures to protect herself? Not to mention sidetrack him from his mission, which she'd already admitted she knew about. "It'll take a couple of hours."

"Be as fast as you can. This is urgent."

"Of course, Your Majesty." How could he possibly refuse her?

"Thank you, Calvin." Hearing *her* say his name made him feel warm and important.

"Is that everything?" he asked.

"There is one more thing. And I cannot emphasize this enough. It is absolutely imperative that you do not tell anyone about this message or our meeting to come. I can't go into details here but you must keep this completely between us. Don't inform any of your crew and definitely do not transmit any details to anyone about your heading, purpose, or destination. Do you understand?"

"Yes. Though my superiors may demand an explanation for my course change."

"Especially avoid telling your commanding officers."

He raised an eyebrow. "That's easier said than done."

She smiled. "Your record makes you out to be a clever officer. I'm sure you'll come up with something. Just do not transmit your destination until after we've met and you're back on your way to Aleator."

"Yes, I understand."

"Thank you, Calvin."

The transmission ended and the picture dissipated, leaving him alone to wonder. "This just gets weirder and weirder," he scratched his head.

She'd seemed threatened, maybe on the run. With whole fleets at her fingertips what could possibly be a danger to her? And why did she choose to contact *him*? He couldn't help her. Unless... The obvious conclusion. Her situation tied back to Raidan and the missing Harbinger.

"So Raidan, you're the link somehow."

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Summers sat in the CO's chair watching the bridge crew work, keeping tabs on the ship's systems. Everything seemed orderly and under control, now that she'd lectured them on proper conduct. A military starship was meant to be an efficient machine, and in the Navy such casual, inappropriate behavior was enormously unacceptable. She'd always assumed the Intelligence Wing held even higher standards, after all it was harder to get



into, but now she knew better. The Nighthawk was a disaster. More disorderly than a pirate ship.

The most insufferable of them all was the egomaniacal commanding officer. A rash, careless young boy who lacked the experience and wisdom of a professional captain. His cocky recklessness was exactly the kind of attitude that would put them all in danger, and his methodology was questionable *at best*.

How he'd won two Silver Stars and two merit medals was beyond her. Luck, or maybe he'd taken credit for someone else's work. Too bad she'd never know for certain. Most of the details of Calvin's missions were classified beyond classified, leaving her unable to reconcile the on-paper genius with the brash arrogant youth she saw in the flesh. Whatever he was, he was a real brat. And, unfortunately, a pleasant looking brat.

Strong jaw, bright blue eyes, sandy loose hair, she was even jealous of how it looked so perfect with—no doubt—zero effort. He wasn't pretty enough to be a model, but the slight roughness to him made him seem even more attractive. And something in his eyes glowed. He wasn't large or significantly muscular, but still firm, well-toned, and athletic. Enough to look good with a shirt off. Someone who kept himself in shape but didn't have to prove anything to anyone. He also had good height and hygiene. And he had this pleasant smell about him. To her, every man had a unique smell, and his was a good one. And she hated that. Because he didn't deserve to be attractive. She could imagine him stealing the hearts of young women because he was deceptively nice looking. And then turn around and break them. Why is it the jerks were always the good-looking ones?

She wasn't going to let Calvin charm her. If anything, she'd be even harder on him. Because Calvin knew he was attractive. And he let it, and everything else, get to his head. He was a spoiled young boy who'd been handed everything in life, including this ship, his medals, and his good looks.

No, no, no. She *would* stop thinking about him. Calvin was three years younger than her. A child. And she wasn't going to let a child manipulate her, or take advantage of her, or use her. Not after Asari Raidan's betrayal. Oh no, Summers would never allow a CO to keep her in the dark again. If only she'd been more vigilant then, she might've prevented the whole disaster. But she'd let her feelings cloud her better judgment, and now she bore the penalty... a guilty conscience... because she hadn't recognized Raidan for the snake he'd turned out to be.

And maybe that's what bothered her most about Calvin. He was too similar to Raidan. Both began their careers as young prodigies, shooting up the ranks with medals and awards heaped upon them. Neither were willing to compromise, and they both had egos the size of planets.

But they had their differences too. Raidan was older and more seasoned than Calvin, and more clever. He'd managed to keep his thoughts and plans far enough below the radar that even Summers had been completely blindsided by his betrayal. Calvin, however, seemed impulsive and without subtlety. He was like a younger, stupider version of Raidan. But enough similar to make Summers feel guarded around him. Like his blue irises could cut through her armor and read her thoughts. He was smart. But, she reminded herself, she was smarter. And despite having to work alongside this Calvin Cross, she would find Raidan and see that he got what he deserved. She was the swift, merciless sword of justice.

The elevator door slid open and Calvin came onto the bridge. He didn't even have regulation attire on, for goodness sake! Instead of his uniform he wore a T-shirt and jeans, and looked disheveled, having made no effort to clean up his appearance since she'd last seen him. And he looked distracted too. Whatever the message had been, it'd shaken him up quite a bit. She wished she'd heard it, and wanted to find out what it was. In a way, she considered it her duty to find out.

When Calvin reached her, she gave up the command position but he didn't sit there. Instead, he called out to the helmsman. A woman about Calvin's same age whose cropped uniform and relaxed posture implied she was as irresponsible as the rest of the gang of maniacs.

"Sarah," said Calvin. "Change course, new heading Tau System. Deepest safe jump."

The crew was surprised but they complied without question. "Sure thing, Cal," the helmsman said as she plotted the new course. It was like fingernails scraping slate to hear such casual chatter on the bridge.

"Lieutenant Commander," said Summers, both liking and hating the fact that she outranked him. "That's off mission."

"I realize that, Commander. But thanks for pointing it out," Calvin walked toward his office, dismissively.

"Sir, with all due respect," said Summers. "You owe us an explanation."

"No I don't; I'm the captain."

How *dare* he dismiss her like she was just some trophy 'officer' and not the XO! "We need to be hunting down Raidan. If this diversion is on mission then I need to know your latest Intel, and you need to make a report. But if it's off mission then it violates statute 36-C. Which more or less states, *nothing trumps the assigned mission.*"

"Almost nothing."

"Is this a life-or-death emergency?"

"Maybe," Calvin shrugged. "I really don't know."

"What do you mean you *don't know*? Breaking mission like this is a serious offense."

"Can't you put the rulebook away for two minutes, Summers?" said Miles, the idiot defense officer.

"Stay out of this, *Second Lieutenant*," she snapped at him. It was bad enough coming from the CO, but she definitely wouldn't tolerate sass from the likes of this oaf.

Miles muttered something under his breath that sounded like a pejorative. Very disrespectful. Calvin really didn't know how to keep his crew on a leash.

"Lieutenant Commander," said Summers. "We can't afford to give Raidan any more of a head start than he already has." She wasn't about to let Raidan slip through her fingers because Calvin wanted to make a tourist stop in the Tau System. And if he had a good reason to go there, some kind of new Intel—which he probably did—she wasn't about to be left in the dark. Not again. *Never again.*

"Summers, Raidan is long gone from Aleator anyway. We'll go there and search for clues, hoping we get lucky. But by now it makes almost no difference when we get there." He shrugged and reached his office, pausing to turn around and address the helmsman.

"Let me know the minute we arrive at the station." Even though his words were directed at Sarah, his eyes were locked with Summers'. "And, Sarah, don't let anything less than rockets from an enemy warship slow us down or change our course." He smiled cautiously. "And from now on, all flight paths must be approved by me. Standing orders."

"Understood," the helmsman said. Calvin nodded and disappeared into his office.

Summers stored this away in her mind, adding it to the running tally of things she would include in her first report. Admiral Harkov would not be pleased.

## Chapter 8

Calvin stepped through the jetway and into Terminal B of the Tau outpost. He staved off thoughts of breaking free and blowing into space but he didn't feel safe again until his feet were firmly planted on the spaceport's ground and the airlock had sealed behind him.

"Welcome aboard, sir," a worker said. Two guards saluted. Calvin wasn't in uniform but they knew a military ship had docked.

"Thank you," Calvin saluted back. "*Eric*," he read the name on the worker's lapel. "What is the fastest way to the main concourse?"

"It's all around you, but most everything is down that corridor and to the right," he pointed. "Can't miss the big room."

"Thanks," Calvin started walking away but turned back for a second. "Say, have you had any VIP's on the station in the last day or two?"

"Well there's the command staff and some execs from a few corporations. But nothing too special. Why? Should we be expecting someone?"

"No," Calvin paused. "I was just wondering what kind of traffic you get out here in the Hyperion Cluster." With a polite nod, Calvin walked away not surprised the princess had kept her presence a secret. But again wondered why she was here.

The security checkpoint was much simpler than most starports. A mining colony this far out of the way didn't see much traffic and rarely saw anyone outside of routine visits from commercial freighters and the occasional transport. The officers on duty were understandably chatty and curious. Calvin made up a story about how he was "in the neighborhood" and wanted to get a look at the place since his nephew was planning to move there for a business venture. A lame story that could be easily falsified, but it was the best he could invent on the spot. And the officers seemed to believe it. Had he worn his black-and-silver uniform they would've certainly had more questions.

The station's main corridor was narrower than most and it felt more like a starship than an outpost. When he reached the plaza, which had maybe a dozen people in it, he took a seat in the center and waited, thinking that was all he could do. He'd give it about ten minutes and if the princess didn't contact him, he'd leave. Sitting around and waiting to be surprised made him feel vulnerable. Especially since he was exposed to the whole room.

Not more than two minutes later, he felt something metal press against his back and a gravelly voice whisper, "Stand up and don't make any sudden movements."

"*Okay...*" said Calvin, feeling his heart quicken. He rose slowly.

"And don't say anything," the stranger said. "Just walk down the corridor to your left and turn right at the first door. It will be locked. Knock four times. You will be asked to give a password, the password is your name."

"The phrase 'your name', or my actual name?"

The pressure against his back disappeared. Calvin whirled to face the perpetrator but no one was there, and no one could be seen running away. The plaza looked normal and no one was within fifty feet of him. If not for a fresh scuff on the polished floor he would have thought he'd imagined the whole thing. Either the stranger was inhumanly flight of foot, or else he was an expert at hiding. Either way, Calvin thought it best to do as the stranger had advised.

*Okay... down the corridor and to the right.* He cautiously made his way, checking only briefly to see if anyone was watching him. A few people looked at him but they seemed disinterested. Most everyone in the plaza was engaged in conversation, going somewhere, or else waiting around quietly. None of them gave him more than a second glance and no one seemed to have noticed, or taken any interest in, the mysterious stranger who'd spoken with Calvin a moment before.

Once Calvin got to the door the stranger had mentioned, he knocked on it four times.

A panel slid aside. "What do you want?"

Calvin wondered if that was some cryptic way of asking for a password. He decided it wouldn't hurt to try. "Calvin Cross."

"You want Calvin Cross."

"Well who doesn't?" he asked. Not sure what to do next.

The door slid open and he was hustled inside. He resisted, out of instinct, but at least two pairs of arms grabbed his biceps and pulled him in. The door closed behind him. They patted him down for weapons then let go and the lights snapped on, forcing him to squint.

"Sorry to put you through all of this, Calvin," said Princess Kalila. He looked at her, feeling overwhelmed by her presence. She was half-a-head shorter than him, but her aura of authority made him feel like an ant before her. He knew that on a whim she could do anything from grant him titles and estates to have him secretly executed.

"I'm sure you understand, though, that it was necessary," she continued. "We have a delicate situation here. And one I expect your help with. The Empire needs you... and so do I."

"I'm flattered, Your Majesty. But I'm also confused."

She flashed him a smile of pearly-white teeth. "I do not want to get into all the details of why I am here and why I had to put you through such extreme measures to speak with me. But understand I went through all this effort for good cause."

He didn't interrupt her and instead let his mind try to process this new information. Wondering most of all *why him?* They'd never met before. And, aside from his medals, he was just another pawn in the Imperial war-machine. She had commodores and admirals in her delicate hands, what made him so interesting?

"This is a matter of internal security and the threat we're dealing with is, potentially, the deadliest in our history."

Calvin raised his eyebrows. "Well that sounds *wonderful*..."

"You tracked down Asari Raidan the first time, when he and the Phoenix disappeared. And now they are sending you to find him again. What you don't know is that when Asari Raidan attacked the Rotham convoy, his motives went deeper than the findings of the tribunal on Praxis One."

Calvin knew that already. But he wasn't going to contradict her.

"Fleet Command is giving an unusual amount of attention to this case, and they want Asari caught and executed as soon as possible. They want him out of the way badly, enough that tomorrow you'll be given the order to shoot him on sight."

"What?" he couldn't help himself. "How could you possibly know that?" He searched her eyes but she seemed used to such probing and revealed nothing.

"The Admiralty is already discussing that option," the princess said. "I'm certain they will approve it when they meet again in twelve hours."

"A shoot on sight would be suicide. The Nighthawk might be able to disable the Harbinger but that's a best case scenario, there's no way we could take it on directly. Even if we had the element of surprise and never missed a shot, we'd be shredded to dust!"

"But if you did manage to cripple the Harbinger's engines, Raidan would be a sitting duck. And if the Harbinger destroyed an Imperial vessel, say *yours*, that would be good enough justification to get other fleets involved and take it out, no questions asked."

"I get the picture. And for some reason you don't want that. You want Raidan to live."

"Maybe, maybe not. We want you to find him, track him down, and figure out what his next move is. He's part of something big and we need to know more about it. Finding him is the key."

"I'm already trying to find him."

"And when you do, don't shoot him. Not right away. Also please delay reporting his whereabouts to the Fleet. We'd consider it a personal favor."

"And, if you don't mind me asking, just who is *we*?"

"I'm not at liberty to say."

"So," said Calvin, trying to be polite. "Why don't you put in an order with Intel Wing? Or give an executive order to Fleet Command?"

"I can't get into that, Calvin. But the threat I'm talking about goes deep inside the Empire, and we're still sorting out who can and can't be trusted."

"And apparently I'm on the can-be-trusted list."

"Mostly because we have to trust *someone*. You're in a unique position; you can act where we cannot. You're not being watched as closely, and you won't draw any suspicion. You're *supposed* to be hunting down Captain Asari, so pursuing him won't seem unusual. And your ship has the kind of capabilities we may need. All we're really asking is that when you find him, let us know, and delay engaging him. Find out what you can, who he's working for, what his goals are, anything, everything. Then we'll give you further instructions."

Calvin let out a slow breath. "You know other ships can do everything my ship can."

"But those ships don't have *you*." She said softly, stepping closer, touching his hand very briefly. It was enough to put him in shock and he felt his innards melt. Did Princess Kalila really just touch his hand? Wait a minute... she was manipulating him... she was using her beauty and status to throw him off guard. Unfortunately, even though he was aware of it, she had such an effect on him that he was helpless to avoid being psychologically reeled in.

"Calvin, you've spent your whole life out of sight and out of reach of these threatening interests. And," she came closer catching him by the wrist as he took an involuntary step backwards. He looked at the floor but she lifted his chin so she could stare into him with her dark eyes. "I think you are a loyal subject of the Empire. Am I wrong about that?" She let him go.

"No, you're right about that."

"Is there any reason why I shouldn't trust you?"

"No," said Calvin. "Is there any reason why I shouldn't trust you?"

She smirked. "I like you. But I'm not naive enough to think that's reason enough for you to do what I want. I'll tell you what. Track down Mister Asari, find out what he's up to, and there just might be full citizenship in it for you."

"Is that a bribe?"

"Consider it a reward. Your mother is healthy with a good forty more years of life in her. Why wait for her to die to inherit your own citizenship, when I can give it to you with a pen stroke?"

"You know a lot about me, princess. I had no idea I was so interesting."

"Anyone who is in a position to help the Empire is interesting," she said. "And valuable."

"Valuable enough to ask for full citizenship before hunting down Raidan?"

The princess raised an eyebrow. "Don't push your luck. I'm not going to give you something for nothing. As much as I like you."

"Well, you can't blame a guy for trying." He tore his eyes away from her and looked at her guards. Something was odd about one of them. He was taller than the others and his face was concealed by his hood. Calvin couldn't get a good look at him but he could've sworn he saw a trace of blue-hued skin. Was a Polarian in the Princess's escort?

The rest of the guards were less interesting and wore common clothes like the princess, though Calvin spotted bullet-resistant armor behind a tear in one of their shirts. "You should patch that up if you don't want to give yourself away," he pointed out.

"Good eye," Kalila said. "Now, Calvin, you must get started immediately."

He hadn't yet decided how he wanted to handle this situation, he wanted to distance himself from her before evaluating how far he could trust her. But he knew better than to show hesitation in front of the princess.

"Yes, I will," he said. "But my superiors are going to need reports, it'll be hard to explain when I find Asari Raidan why I'm not acting against him right away. Or why I don't report his whereabouts immediately. Especially since I now have this Navy commander on my ship..."

The princess interrupted him. "Calvin... you're much more likable when you're not making excuses." She was irresistible. "You're very intelligent, I can tell. And clever. Don't doubt yourself. We can figure this out if we work together. You'll find a way. The Empire needs you, and so do I."

It was the second time she'd said she needed him. And it made him melt. She was so good at slipping past his armor and, seeing her face-to-face, it was impossible to say no. Even if she'd been a commoner instead of a Royal Akira, he still would have folded to her wishes. She just had that gift. Something about her presence, and voice, and rich dark eyes...

"I want to get to the bottom of this too," he said, mostly to remind himself he wasn't in this for her. "I will do everything I can for the Empire," he bowed, "but I don't have a way of contacting you."

"And you won't," she paused. "In time, *we* will contact you. Like we did today. Hopefully, when next we meet, you will have some meaningful information."

"And if I don't?"

"I'm sure you will, you're clever," she smiled at him. "And I'll give you enough time. Just ... don't let me down."



He nodded.

"Thank you," her smile faded and her voice shifted from sweet to sober. "And Calvin, do not tell *anyone* about anything we've discussed here. Or that we met. Don't record it in your log, don't call your friends and brag to them, don't even tell your officers."

"I understand," he said, realizing this conversation was wrapping up. "But for the sake of my investigation, can you give me more details about the threat you mentioned? I'll need your latest intelligence."

She shook her head. "I'm sorry, I've already said more than I probably should have. Not because I don't want you to know, but because I cannot be certain yet which of my information is credible. That and some information is deadly to know."

"Well if you've already said more than you should have, then where's the harm in saying a little more?"

"Nice try, but no. All you need to know is that Asari Raidan is not to be intercepted, interrupted, or interfered with. Find him, find out what he's doing, and report to me everything. I promise you it is both for the good of the Empire and continued human dominance in the galaxy." There was a dead-seriousness in her voice that was chilling.

*Good of the Empire... I seem to be hearing that a lot lately.*

"All right, I'll do what I can."

## Chapter 9

"What was that all about, a bathroom break?" asked Miles when Calvin returned to the bridge.

"Yeah I stopped at Tau Station to use the head. Nothing gets past you does it." He took his seat at the command position.

"Well how am I supposed to know what you did over there?"

"You're not. That's the beauty of it."

"Too long for a snack, too short for a booty call," Miles paused. "I *think*."

Calvin rolled his eyes. "Sarah, release us from the station and request clearance for departure." She acknowledged him and began speaking into her headset.

Miles spoke again. "I mean, maybe it was a bathroom break." Calvin could tell Miles really wanted to know why he'd taken their ship on such a tangent and gone aboard the station alone. They all did. But he wasn't about to say.

"You were right," said Calvin. "You backed up all the toilets on the ship forcing me to make a pit stop. But, now that that's behind us, we can keep going."

"Must we discuss this on the bridge?" asked Summers, repulsed.

"You'd rather discuss it somewhere else? Like the mess hall?" Miles laughed.

Calvin waved at him to be quiet. "Sarah, what's the word?"

"We're all clear, standard heading. Not even a floating bolt in our way."

"Kind of nice to be at a port with no traffic for once, isn't it?" asked Calvin.

"You said it," replied Sarah.

"As soon as we're clear of the station, engage the main engines then best jump to Aleator."

It wasn't the first time he'd used the phrase but Sarah still gave him an odd look. "What does that even mean, best jump?"

"It means use your judgment."

"I hate it when I have to use my judgment."

Calvin looked to Summers. "I suppose you want us to go as fast as possible."

"Yes. But it hardly matters now. Like you said, Raidan will be long gone from Aleator."

Calvin smiled. "You know, Summers, they say acceptance is a major step in the grief process. I'm proud of you."

She ignored this remark. "Of course Raidan's head start is no thanks to your *bathroom stop*."

He laughed and sat back. "What's our ETA?"

"Eight hours," said Sarah.

Calvin looked at the mounted clock. It reflected Standard Time. "Red Shift takes over in three hours. How are you guys holding up?"

"Just fine," Sarah and Shen said in unison. Summers nodded.

"I'm tired as hell," Miles bellowed from behind the defense console.

"Thanks for asking."

Calvin chuckled. "As long as you have the energy to complain, you have the energy to push buttons." He stood up. "Well guys, as much as I hate to say it, I need to get back to reading those files. And this time I'm actually going to do it."

"Sure you are..," said Sarah.

"I'm serious," said Calvin, sounding more defensive than he'd meant. He looked to Summers. "You have the deck."

Once inside his office, he grabbed a water bottle before crashing into his chair and scooping up a pile of printouts. "Where to begin?" The question he hated the most. Out of a mountain of boring materials he had to chew through, which would he tackle first?

He decided to look over the crew manifest again, beginning with the senior staff. But this time he was going to thoroughly research the histories of each officer in great detail. Everything from their economic backgrounds, conditions growing up, family situations, past employers, various residences, all the way down to their favorite childhood candy. To do this he had to get up once more, briefly, to grab his portable computer. And so began the very tedious task of constructing psychological profiles of everyone most likely to sympathize with Raidan.

"All right, Lieutenant Gates, let's start with you."

Since the Harbinger was an alpha-class ship, it had a dedicated communications officer. Calvin believed that was the best starting point since it was that person's job to alert Praxis of any mutiny attempt going on. If he could prove the comms officer was linked to Raidan somehow, that would go a long way toward explaining how the coup on the Harbinger had happened without any word getting to the station—assuming there had been a mutiny.

"Born in the Theta Belt to middle-income parents. Military father, unemployed mother. Moved around the outer colonies while aged six through fifteen. Attended small public schools, usually not for more than a year, eventually enrolled in the Arcadio School of Flight and Piloting. Wanted to fly freighters, eh? What happened to that dream?" He flipped through some more pages and did a bit more searching on the computer.

"Wow those are some bad grades. Then you transferred to a military academy with a focus on kataspace engineering and subspace systems. I'm surprised you got accepted. Hmm..."

Strangely Gates' grades at the second school were top tier. Not perfect, but close. A huge shift in very little time. "Unusual but not unheard of... did you have a coming of age experience that forced you to grow up?" Calvin mused. "I doubt it was joining the fraternity." He checked to see if anyone else on the Harbinger had been a member of that fraternity. A few had but he didn't see any meaningful connection there. He kept notes of the different angles he wanted to investigate Gates and would pass instructions down to his staff who would do the grunt work.

Before he finished, the alert on his desk flashed on and off, followed by a shrill whistle. He tapped the button. "What is it, Sarah?"

"You'd better get in here, sir."

"All right, I'm on my way." He tossed his papers aside and darted for the bridge. When the door slid open he marched inside. "OK, what are we dealing with?"

"Distress call, it's coming in ten minutes from our position at present speed," said Sarah. "It's repeating on all channels."

"What's it say?" Calvin moved to the command position but did not sit down, even though Summers relinquished the chair.

"It's generic and automated, repeating over and over. No details. But I recognize it. It's a standard feature on many civilian craft."

"Too bad it doesn't give us much to work with," Calvin mumbled.

"What's the nearest ship besides us?"

"The ISS Candle, but she's docked at Tau station with most of her crew ashore," Sarah looked up. "They might not make it in time."

Calvin looked to Summers. "Opinion?"

"Protocol is very clear. All Imperial ships, military or otherwise, must respond to any confirmed, authentic distress call if they are the nearest ship or within one click. We should respond."

"Even though it takes us out of our way and gives Raidan an even bigger head start?" He tested her.

"There could be people dying on that ship, Lieutenant Commander. This takes precedence."

"For once I agree with you. Sarah, lay in a course. Nice to see a human side of you, Summers. It looks good."

Her eyes narrowed. "What's that supposed to mean?"

He changed the subject. "I trust you to handle this, Commander. You need experience commanding this ship," he stepped aside and pointed at the command chair.

She nodded and took the seat. The moment she did, she snapped to action. "What can you tell me about that ship, helmsman?"

"It's adrift, engines and thrusters are not burning. It's also small, but I can't tell what it is yet."

"Ops, as soon as you can, get a good scan of it. Defense, engage the stealth system. Helm, slow to half a percent at one click's distance." She looked at Shen. "I want to know if that ship's damaged externally. If it is, there's a good chance a hostile vessel is out there ducking our sensors."

"Aye, aye," they acknowledged her and Calvin was impressed by her command skill.

"OK, we're within one click. Slowing to half a percent and changing approach vector," said Sarah.

"Initiate a Condition One alert on all decks, but don't raise our shields yet. I don't want to give us away."

"You got it, boss lady," said Miles, and there was a faint chirp.

"I *said* Condition One, mister." Summers stood up and walked toward the defense console.

"We *are* at Condition One!"

Calvin couldn't help but smirk.

"What, no lights?" Summers looked around, the bridge seemed exactly as it had been, calmly lit by soft white lights.

"Yeah there's lights," said Miles, pointing to the tiny blinking alert on his console.

"What about the ceiling lights and the klaxon?" Summers was dumbfounded.

"Calvin had them removed a long time ago," said Sarah.

Summers spun to face him. "You had them removed?"

Calvin shrugged. "Don't you think lots of red lights and noisy alarms are exactly the kind of distracting things you *don't* want on the bridge during a critical moment?"

She looked ready with a retort but Sarah cut in. "We're at five thousand meters and closing fast."

"All stop."

"Answering all stop."

"Ops, what do you have?"

"The vessel has no political markings of any kind and it's flying no colors—could be that their lights are out. No obvious damage to the outer hull, though. It's a Model B personal yacht made by a Polarian corporation out of Riyu Seven. Designed for two passengers but only one life sign is aboard which appears to be stable."

"One person?" asked Calvin. "Who'd be this deep into nowhere in a ship like that? That's like finding a speedboat in the middle of an ocean."

"Someone with stones," said Miles.

Summers looked at him. "Bravery and stupidity are two sides of the same coin."

Calvin went to the ops station. "What are we dealing with, Shen? A Polarian?"

"A human, actually." He tapped his console. "Err... now I'm not so sure."

"What do you mean, not sure?"

"It's a *modified human*, sir."

A chill traced Calvin's spine, rippling through his body while flashes of buried memories came to mind, images from his deepest, darkest nightmares.

"What *kind* of modified human?"

"Database lists it as a type three Remorii."

"Ok, helm, bring us into docking range and open a channel," said Summers.

"Belay that!" Calvin cut in.

*Everything felt exactly like it had on the Trinity... years ago.*

"Sir?" Shen looked back at him but Calvin shifted his attention to Sarah.

"Close the channel and accelerate to five percent until we're six hundred kilometers away then get us into a deep jump, at least eighty percent potential. We're getting the hell out of here. And, Miles, keep that stealth system engaged."

"Sir?" Summers asked, more demanding than Shen.

"Sarah, under no circumstances will you attempt to contact that vessel or go anywhere near it. Is that clear?"

"Yes, sir," she said, complying immediately. "One-twenty degrees yaw and heading about."

"We *have* to respond," said Summers. "As long as he's sitting there he's harmless."

"He's lucky I don't blow him up right now."

Miles turned around. "It isn't too late for that, Cal. I've always got a couple of aft missiles ready to go."

Summers stepped into Calvin's line of sight. "A word please, *Lieutenant Commander*." She nodded toward his office.

"All right," he said, gesturing for her to lead the way.

Once the door slid shut Summers erupted. "What are you doing? We have a duty to do!"

"Sometimes, for the good of the crew, a few rules have to be broken and hard decisions made."

"We have a duty as people, not just as officers!"

Calvin sat down at his desk, barely able to stand. As loud as Summers was, she was nothing compared to the resurgence of buried memories

twisting his brain. Everything about this whole situation felt so damn familiar, he could scarcely separate the Nighthawk and the Trinity in his mind. He could still see his friends' faces as clear as blood soaking paper, and the echo of screams spreading from deck to deck were even more intense.

He shivered, feeling unusually cold and as Summers ranted he just sat there in a deep stupor, no longer in the present.

"You need to pay attention to me!"

He snapped back to his whereabouts and, very calmly, looked her squarely in the eyes. "Summers, do you know what a Remorii is?"

"No."

"It's a creature that comes from a secret planet called Remus Nine. A type three Remorii is, effectively, a lycanthrope."

"Werewolves?" Her curiosity twisted to skepticism. "There's no such thing."

"Technically, of course, you are correct. Lycanthropes do not occur in nature. But neither do blue roses, and yet they have huge gardens of them on Capital World. You must remember the orange and blue grounds at Capitol Square, don't you?"

"Yes."

"Well, just as those flowers were engineered, animals have sometimes been engineered. And even though the Empire has broken its back to shut the science down, some fifty years ago the genetic experiments of Remus Nine gave birth to all kinds of modified humans. The most dominant kinds were types two and three, strigoi and lycanthrope. They are different, they aren't really vampires and werewolves. For example strigoi don't need to suck blood and they don't wear capes and live in coffins, and the lycanthropes aren't very wolf-like in appearance. Sure, compared to a man they're hairier, more muscular, have extendable claws, and are feral. But otherwise they're nothing like wolves. Some say their creation was inspired by ancient superstition and lore. I could believe that, man—as usual—isn't content until he's tried something crazy, so instead of finding The Lost City of Gold we decided to make one. And by the time the Empire caught on and put those scientists out of business, most of them were already dead—killed by their own creations. And now thousands of modified humans are still unaccounted for. Intel Wing estimates their numbers have grown."

"They can reproduce?"

"Not sexually. But, like a virus, they can transfer their likeness to a host. A whole, healthy human being with the right blood type does the trick. O-positive is most vulnerable. Which, unfortunately, I am."

"So our distress call sender is a werewolf and he can turn other people into werewolves? And that's why we're not going to respond to his distress call even though duty demands it?"

"That's correct."

"That's the stupidest thing I've ever heard."

His eyes narrowed.

She didn't back down. "What's the problem? We need silver bullets?"

"No, regular bullets work fine. You just need a lot of them. Although incendiary seems to work best."

"You're exaggerating."

He gave her a deadly stare. "You know nothing about it."

She raised a skeptical eyebrow.

He glanced away and stared at his desk for a moment, letting the memories flow unrestrained. Even after all this time they were still excruciating, in ways he could never describe and very few people could understand. Maybe no one could. Certainly not Summers who stood there, doing her duty, demanding to know why he'd ordered them away. She needed to know why. Even if she could never appreciate it fully. There are dangerous parts of the universe that no one speaks of, and she shouldn't be ignorant of them while serving as his second.

"Summers, have you ever heard of the ISS Trinity?"

"Yes, it was a command cruiser for the Seventh Fleet, but it had some kind of design problem and exploded a few years ago because of a coil leak. We were briefed on it when we were given new procedures for particle..."

He interrupted her. "That was just a cover-up."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that isn't what actually happened."

"And... you know this because of some kind of secret intelligence file?"

"No." He looked at her for a few seconds. "I know because I was there."

She folded her arms in an attempt to look skeptical but her eyes betrayed her curiosity; he had her full attention.

"Back before I was a member of Intel Wing I served on a Navy ship. I was a Third Lieutenant—barely had the copper emblem a month—and I was a pilot in training, the inexperienced green-shift officer who saw very little flying time but, regardless, had the helm when it all went down." He chose not to tell Summers about his relationship with the young ops officer. Thinking of Christine's warmth and kindness was far too painful, and none of Summers' damn business.

"I had only been on the ship for a few months and wasn't that well acquainted with most of the people aboard. But I knew the XO, he'd sort of taken me under his wing. He used to teach at Camdale, where I went to school, and he liked to talk about home. We used to play cards and stuff. Anyway, this particular day both he and the CO were on duty to help us train. We felt like we were really getting the hang of it until we picked up that distress call."



He paused and sipped his water bottle, letting his eyes stare past Summers and the walls around him until they disappeared. He was there again, sitting at the helm, feeling a surge of energy as the XO ordered him to change course and go to Condition One.

"We followed standard procedure," Calvin continued. "We did everything by the book, *you would have been proud.*" He shook his head. "And as we approached, the CO had us run some scans and assess the situation while trying to contact the ship. The distress call was automated, coming from a large civilian transport called the Starweaver. She was adrift with several main systems offline but showed no external damage. We identified the ship as one that had gone missing two days before, but her present position was more than three clicks from her flight plan. And the number of life forms aboard was much less than it was supposed to be.

"The ship answered our hails only once and the staticky, garbled response was impossible to make out for sure. But to me it sounded like *'don't come after us, there's no one left,'* but I wasn't sure and I didn't speak up. The CO was a by-the-book kind of captain and demanded we respond, and we did. Once we were within ten-thousand kilometers we did a deep scan and found that all 37 remaining life forms aboard were humanish... but there was something unusual about them. They had an elevated amount of certain hormones. The XO recognized what it meant and went into a ballistic panic. He ordered the ship to evacuate the region but the Captain overruled his command and told me to dock with the Starweaver. I'll never forget the way William—the XO—looked at me. He begged me to withdraw the ship to a safe distance."

"So what'd you do?"

"I obeyed my captain. I was a green officer and knew what I was supposed to do, and I did it without hesitation. Will looked so betrayed. At that point he got desperate and ordered the defense officer to fire on the Starweaver. Which she didn't do, of course. The Captain had Will dismissed from the bridge and confined to quarters. As the marines dragged him away he screamed that we'd all die if we boarded that ship. Of course, no one believed him." As Calvin spoke he looked through the window of his memories with such clarity he saw the ghostly lights of the Trinity's bridge.

"We docked with the Starweaver and the Captain sent over medical teams and a small security detail to help bring everyone aboard without incident. We got word that their ship was smashed on the inside—like there'd been a fight, but there was no sign of an enemy boarding party. We found twenty-nine survivors and almost a hundred bodies before we pulled away—that's right *twenty nine*, eight people had died since our original scan. The Captain had me set course for the nearest medical facility where we could drop off these refugees—it was twelve hours away. In the meantime,

the survivors were put into our infirmary and our med staff was put on full activity. But we couldn't get any information from our new passengers, they were in no shape to answer questions.

"For the first hour everything was fine but not long afterward several minor systems started to fail. Doors wouldn't work. Lights flickered and died. And communication between decks became spotty and unreliable. A team was dispatched to the infirmary to make sure their systems had adequate power, but we lost contact with them and they never returned. A second group was sent and they vanished as well.

"At first we blamed it on the failing comms systems, but when no one returned to report, we got more than a little concerned. The captain sent half a platoon of soldiers to the infirmary where they came face-to-face with what was left of our medical staff and those we'd sent before, our friends and colleagues—I didn't see them, but I remember hearing the description over the handheld radio. Bodies littered the floor, torn up and mutilated patternlessly. But the dead were the lucky ones. The living were in torturous agony as their bodies changed, transforming into vile murderous night creatures. And by the time we realized what we'd actually brought aboard, Strigoi... *vampires*, it was too late.

"The infection spread through the lower half of the ship like lightning and the captain sealed it off, forced to trap even normal humans in an effort to contain the threat. And those stuck below didn't have a chance. They screamed and screamed over the radio pleading for their lives and pounded against the doors until they succumbed to the contagion or died. After an hour we didn't hear them anymore. Just silence.

"At six hours out, the shield doors came unhinged and the creatures started pressing into the upper decks, their hunger and bloodlust barely abated. The captain ordered security checkpoints set up in every major corridor and he sealed off all the vital areas he could, like engineering and the bridge. Crews were ordered to hold their lines, hand to hand if necessary. But they had little chance. The fighting moved swiftly from deck to deck and when arms ran low we all realized we'd be dead soon.

Calvin stared past the wall, musing. "It's a strange thing, you know. To look death in the eyes and know there's nothing you can do. Like a cold scythe curling slowly around your neck, pulling you in. And do you know what my thoughts were?"

Summers didn't say anything.

"Selfish terror! I thought I was too young to die. And if I could save my skin I would, even if it meant leaving everyone else behind. I didn't care about duty or honor, I just wanted to live. But there was no chance for escape, and as our thoughts turned from fear of dying to the chance of becoming one of *them*... it was very tempting to use the last of our

ammunition on ourselves. One man even did. I didn't see him, he walked around the corner—then *crack!* Followed by the thud of his body, I ...”

Calvin paused for a minute, shaking his mind free from the images. “Anyway, what kept us going was the communiqué we received from an Intel Wing cruiser with two companies of Special Forces soldiers. They told us help was on the way. We just had to keep it together a bit longer.

“I was lucky I didn't see much of the action. But I could hear the screams echo in the shafts and down the corridors. Along with the eerie sound of fangs and claws scratching against bulkheads. The infection reached us just as we were making our emergency dock with the cruiser. The last strigoi who came at us...” Calvin choked. “I'm sure it was Will, or what was left of him. But the evil eyes glaring at us with prejudice weren't his. The real William was dead, and this husk that resembled him was a sick insult. My friend... with those sunken eyes... bloody, tattered clothes, taut pale muscles, and dripping fangs was something else... and it was my job to shoot him... I was the only one with ammo left.

“But I hesitated. The others beat and clubbed him, and the captain took my gun and shot William over and over. But, before he died, he managed to bite the ops officer.” Calvin's eyes burned but he masked his emotions. “She was... a friend.” Calvin shut his eyes, trying to block out the terrible image of dear Christine's face squeezed with agony as he watched her convulse and drop. And even worse than the crystal-perfect picture of her agony was the nagging certainty that it'd been his fault. He'd failed to act. And that had cost her everything.

He cleared his throat. “The uh... *Strigoi* managed to bite the ops officer's wrist and she went unconscious. We tried to make a tourniquet around her wounded arm but we weren't doctors and we didn't do it right, or else we didn't do it fast enough, either way the venom had spread too far by the time she could get proper treatment. Special Forces stormed the ship and took control, killing off every last Strigoi they could find and everyone turning into one. They cleared us one by one, checking us over thoroughly, before allowing us on board the other ship. My bitten friend was allowed aboard, because we believed an amputation could save her. That the tourniquet had trapped the venom. She was a fighter and didn't succumb to it, despite being unconscious. After we were evacuated they swept poison gas through the Trinity hoping to reclaim it, but new orders came down the line and they ended up destroying the ship. Shooting it until it was dust. By the time we got to the nearest medical facility there were only fifteen of us left from the Trinity, out of a crew of four hundred.”

“And what became of your friend at Ops?”

“They hooked her up to all kinds of machines that kept the poison from overcoming her brain, but they could never manage to rid her systems of it

or reverse her condition, even with a complete blood transfusion. She spent weeks unconscious as our very best medicine tried to save her life against the most savage of toxins ever designed. Because strong pain medicines hindered the process she had to stay in horrible, horrible agony. Eventually, when it seemed the stalemate would have no end, they revived her to ask her what she wanted. She begged the doctors to end her life. I saw her face just before they did," Calvin recalled how gaunt and grey it'd turned. "She looked old, like the ordeal had aged her decades." His heart was crushed anew but again he would not show it to Summers. He'd loved Christine, and it was because of her, more than anything, that he hadn't seriously pursued any romantic relationship since. "Well... suffice it to say I'm not going to subject my crew to that."

When Commander Summers spoke, her tone was respectful and genuine, but still duty-driven. "With respect, sir, that is a very moving story. And I'm sorry for your loss. But you're letting your past experiences affect your judgment. You're too emotionally involved here and you're blurring the lines between different types of Remorii."

"There is no line!" He stood up angrily. "They're all sick perversions of nature that have no right to exist!"

"You're saying that one modified human is exactly the same as another and they're all guilty by association. I don't believe in that and neither should you. Besides, the fellow stranded out there is only one person."

"He's *not* a person."

"He can't help what he is. We have a duty to perform and a chance to save a life here."

"What if saving him means condemning fifty others to die?"

"Think about this, Calvin, this lycan is out here in the middle of nowhere, and alone, he might have valuable information."

Calvin seriously doubted this one had any information worth even five seconds of his time, and he really wasn't interested in her moral argument. He didn't consider himself an amoral person, he'd simply decided long ago that Remorii weren't human beings and didn't deserve to be treated like human beings—they didn't even deserve to exist. But Summers was right about one thing, he *was* letting his emotions affect his judgment. And he realized now that if he didn't deal with this lycan, someone else would. Someone who wouldn't understand the danger. He should destroy the ship. But, if he did, Summers would report that to the Fleet. And he didn't want to think of the consequences of that. Which left him with only one practical option.

"All right, Commander, we'll respond to that signal. But we'll do it my way, and that means absolutely no objections from you—is that clear?"

"Yes. As long as you aren't careless I have no objections."

"Oh trust me," his eyes narrowed, "Careless is the last thing I'm going to be." He stood up and led the way back onto the bridge. "Sarah, full about and set a course for the stranded vessel's position, and keep monitoring that distress call. We're going to pick up the Remorii bastard after all."

Miles gave Calvin a look of surprise and made a whipping motion with his hand but Calvin ignored him and took his seat at the command position.

"E.T.A. nine minutes," said Sarah from the helm.

"Good." Calvin tapped the direct line to Special Forces headquarters at the bottom of the ship. "Major Jenkins, we'll be docking with a small craft in a little under ten minutes. There's only one person aboard but he's a Remorii so use every precaution. Incapacitate him first and get him into the lock up. We'll question him after."

"Affirmative," the Major's deep voice came over the small speaker. "Just say the word."

"Incapacitate him?" Summers looked bewildered. "Shouldn't we at least talk to him?"

"Oh yes, absolutely we should," said Calvin. "But only after he's behind a forcefield."

She opened her mouth to retort but Calvin was quicker. "No objections," he reminded her. She closed her mouth and looked frustrated.

Once they were in range, Sarah answered all stop and connected to the tiny vessel. "Clamps are in place."

"Okay, Major, execute breach."

"Affirmative, breach in progress." They waited and after what felt like the slowest fifty seconds ever, the Major reported. "We've got him and all hands are back aboard."

"Good work. Lock him up and I'll meet you in holding." Calvin jumped up. "Sarah, get us back on course to Aleator, best jump. Summers has the deck."

## Chapter 10

"He isn't talking," Major Jenkins said when Calvin arrived.

"You revived him already?" Calvin saw the lycan on the other side of the translucent forcefield, in his current form he looked perfectly human except for glowing red eyes.

"He came to on his own. Turns out a standard dose ain't enough to keep him down for more than a few minutes."

Calvin nodded and stepped up to the forcefield, hoping to get a good look at their new passenger through the blinking haze. He was a few inches taller than an average man with thick dark hair and smooth brown skin. Even through the blur, Calvin could see the lycan's twisted smile. "Hello, Captain."

"So what've we got, Major?" Calvin didn't take his eyes off the prisoner.

"No idea who he is, just a bogus name. Scanning his eyes is no good and his fingerprints are next to worthless. According to the computer his left hand is a sixty-five percent match with one person and the right is a thirty-percent match with someone completely different, both of whom are dead from natural causes."

"OK, *Lycan*, we'll start at the top. What's your name?"

"Now, now, you don't have to say it like *that*." The prisoner said, his voice had a rough, scratchy texture.

"Shut up and answer his question!" The Major inched closer and tapped the stunner holstered on his thigh.

"I'll take it from here, Major," Calvin motioned for the Major to step aside, which he did with a disgruntled look. Calvin had no jurisdiction over Special Forces, even on his own ship, so he couldn't order the Major to stand down. He just had to hope the man would cooperate.

"OK, Lycan, if you do not appreciate being called Lycan, you have to give me an alternative. How about your *real* name?"

"John Johnson."

"Right... okay, *John Johnson*, maybe you can tell me what you were doing in a two-person skiff in the middle of nowhere."

"And maybe you can tell me what I did to warrant being put behind this forcefield."

"So that's the way it's going to be?" Calvin paused, not sure where to take this. He was much better with puzzles than interrogations. "We answered your distress call and probably saved you from a very slow, painful death by asphyxiation. But, if you don't tell me who you are and what you were doing, we could always put you back."

"Is that a threat?"

"Oh you picked up on that?"

"I see this is a classy establishment." The lycan rolled his fiery eyes.

"If I don't know who you are and what you're doing here I can't really help you."

"Then it'll be pretty interesting to see what you decide to do. But I do have one recommendation, Captain."

"And what is that?"

"There's one thing you should know about me," his eyes narrowed. "I don't like to be caged. So why not drop this forcefield and give me quarters while we're still friends."

"I'll think about it," said Calvin, even though he had no intention of doing so. The lycan couldn't get past a forcefield unless someone else turned it off. "But a little cooperation from you would go a long way in the meantime, John Johnson."

"I doubt it. I know you've already made up your mind, Captain; regular humans are too easy to predict. I have nothing more to say here so, if you don't mind, I'd like some peace and quiet so I can sleep on this pathetic excuse of a bed you have in here."

Calvin shook his head in disbelief and left with the Major at his heels. Calvin waited for the door to close before speaking. "I want him under constant camera surveillance with a minimum of two guards on duty. Let them know they're not even allowed to blink."

"What are we going to do about him in the long run?"

"Dump him off on Aleator. I'll let the port authority know exactly what he is, and they'll take him off our hands. I won't take no for an answer. He's a nuisance to our investigation and we're not designed to keep prisoners long-term anyway. In half a day, he'll be out of our hands. After that I don't care. Just keep him under lock and key until then."

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Two hours ticked away but it felt like twenty. Calvin was sure time was going backwards.

To distract himself, he dug into his mountain of Intel. He finished a thorough read-through of the Harbinger's manifest but it yielded few leads. Some details seemed peculiar, and he would chase them as far as they went—for instance a few officers had served time for petty crimes like theft or vandalism—but almost every Navy ship had supposedly-reformed crew members with criminal records. Calvin's information gave him nothing more to go on and he had no reason to suspect one former criminal over another, and nothing more than prejudice to suspect them more than any of the other

crew. He returned to the communications specialist, convinced that if anyone was involved with Raidan it had to be him.

As his computer linked to the vast universal nets, he entered several passcodes to connect to the more privileged databases.

"Okay, Mister Gates, let's see what more we can learn about you." He waited for the search to complete but, before it did, the light on his desk started flashing. "What is it?" he asked, tapping the direct link to the bridge.

"Just letting you know Commander Presley has ordered a course correction, sir," Sarah's voice filled the room.

"What for?" He stood up and smoothed out his uniform.

"There's a major astronomical event occurring on our original path."

"What kind of event, Sarah?"

"From here it seems like the huge gravitational collapse of the TR-301 star, no planets or bases around it but a black hole may be forming."

"If it's not one thing, it's another," Calvin rubbed his temples. "Let me guess, it's going to delay us somehow."

"The gravity pull is affecting our altered space stability so we've had the navcomputer map a new path, ETA... sixteen hours."

He sighed. *That's just perfect... a dangerous prisoner and an even colder trail.*

"Thank you, Sarah, keep me informed if anything changes."

"Will do."

Calvin scratched his head and sat back down, trying not to stress about this news. A collapsing star was completely out of his control... but what were the odds? One in a billion? No, more like one over infinity that a major star would collapse directly between them and Aleator while they were in a hurry to get there.

Unless it was a forced collapse... Could someone destroy a star? And would they do it just to slow him down?

That was completely absurd and he knew it. But so was Raidan stealing the Harbinger, and that had happened. The more he thought about it, the more it bothered him that this star would choose to die at this most inconvenient of times.

He paused reviewing the data on Mr. Gates and sent an inquiry to Intel Wing, asking what it would take to destroy a star like TR-301. He had no astrophysicists aboard so he needed outside expertise, which meant Fleet Command would hear his inquiry too, and they might think it a waste of time. But to hell with them.

He called the bridge. "Hey, Sarah?"

"Yeah, Cal?"

"Point all our major scanners to the collapsing star and everything around it within a click. If so much as a piece of garbage is out there, I want to know about it."



"Yes, sir. Mind if I ask why?"

"Just a suspicion, Sarah. That's all."

"Aye, aye." The intercom clicked off and he resumed his investigation of Mister Gates.

Unfortunately, information about Gates was rather sparse. He had medical records, proof of birth and citizenship, family and next of kin, school reports, a dissertation, but nothing outstanding. Except for a strange gap in his education. For one year he was away from school for no apparent reason.

Finally, after much research, Calvin pieced together something huge. Gates had been sentenced to "four years imprisonment followed by three years at the reform center on Primeva Major." But the sentence was commuted after only one year and he was allowed to return to school with a record that'd been wiped clean. Calvin kept digging.

"For five years Jefferson Aldred Gates was part of the paramilitary organization CERKO." Calvin knew who they were. A small group of rebels that'd claimed responsibility for the terrorist attack that destroyed the Imperial Ship Lightfalcon B. For ten years CERKO attacked police stations and bombed government structures until the Imperial Military cracked down on them. Apparently, during the government raids, they found evidence linking Gates to CERKO, as a sympathizer who supplied explosives. He was captured, tried, and eventually imprisoned. Or so Calvin gathered; the picture wasn't very clear since he was piecing all of this together from several—somewhat inconsistent—sources, and someone had gone through and done a whitewash of Gates' files, albeit a sloppy one.

"Now we're onto something," Calvin started a new search, hoping to find out why a former convicted terrorist had been allowed aboard a major military vessel like the Harbinger, and why Gates' sentence had been commuted. But just as he got excited, his intercom light flashed again.

"What is it?" he asked, unhappy with the seemingly constant interruptions.

"Captain to the bridge," said Sarah, sounding alarmed.

Calvin jumped up and hustled to the door without another word. Not much in the galaxy worried Sarah. "What is it?" he asked, making briskly for the command position.

"The Major just apprised us of a situation below decks," Summers said, calm and well collected. Miles however wore his anxiety on his sleeve.

"The bloody werewolf has escaped!" he yelled.

Calvin looked at Summers who nodded. "He's escaped confinement and both guards are missing."

"What about the surveillance tape?"

"The Major's looking it over now."

"Condition One alert!" said Calvin and he pressed the intercom. "All off duty personnel must report to quarters immediately, and stay there until further notice—with the doors locked. An intruder is aboard, I repeat an intruder is aboard. Consider him armed and dangerous. Until I say otherwise, Code Fifteen is in place. All decks are locked down effective immediately and all active personnel are on continuous duty otherwise ordered. That is all."

"What does that mean, Code Fifteen?" asked Miles.

"It's a mystery to me how you ever passed the certification exam," said Summers.

Calvin opened a channel to the Major's office. "What's going on, Major? I need a report."

"Sometime within the last ten minutes the lycan disappeared along with his guards. The surveillance record shows nothing and we've just proven it's a fake, someone switched the tapes. And the audio feed we set up on that deck didn't pick up anything either. We've done a sweep of the decks immediately surrounding the confinement area... so far nothing."

"Oh that's just perfect..." Calvin let go of the comm for a second and looked at Summers. "We just *had* to bring him aboard... *duty demanded it*... well, I hope you're happy!" he pushed the button again. "I suggest you activate all your units and break them into teams. I want every inch of this ship searched until every room has been turned upside down, every panel opened, and every nook and cranny uncovered. *We're going to find him!*"

"I agree. I've already begun organizing teams."

"And, Major, send your upper-decks team to the bridge ASAP, I want to go with them."

"Acknowledged, they'll be there stat." Calvin let go of the comm and headed back toward his office.

"Go with them?" asked Summers. "Whatever for?"

"Because I made a mistake that put my crew in danger and I'll be damned if I don't fix it. You have the deck."

Once inside his office it was only a few steps to the weapons locker. He pressed his thumb to the plate and typed in the code—which took him a moment to remember. He'd never needed small arms on his ship before.

He selected an assault rifle from a set of five and took an additional pistol with thigh holster. He inspected the weapons then loaded their respective magazines, remembering to bring along extras. The pistol was as simple as they came, but the rifle was thoroughly upgraded and boasted much more firepower than what marines packed. The manufacturer bragged this rifle could "shred steel." And while that claim was certainly exaggerated, Calvin didn't handle the weapon lightly. He returned to the bridge with it firmly in hand, aimed at the floor.

The Special Forces unit had just arrived. Five soldiers in total, a little less than a fourth of the entire Special Forces complement on the ship. They brandished a variety of firearms, all impressive, and stood rigid, side-by-side, in dark grey camouflage with black berets. He only knew two of them by name, one was the Major's second in command, Captain Jason Pellew. His body was every bit the rugged and tough soldier he was supposed to be, but he had the face of a movie star and a suaveness about him that made him popular among the women on the ship. Sarah's eyes were glued to him, and even Summers seemed slightly distracted.

"Mister Pellew," said Calvin, looking him in the eyes.

"Yes, sir."

"We'll start at the bridge landings, split the team in half and work in a circle tossing every deck from ten to seven."

"Yes, sir," Pellew saluted then turned to his men. "Staff Sergeant Davis, take Nassar and Uzbek and search the landings and the aft sections. Alenko, you're with me and the captain in the bow, now let's move out."

They acknowledged and saluted. Calvin followed behind Pellew down the hatch and ladder while the other team took the elevator. Once on the steel landing they filed into the corridor of deck nine. As they passed a few quarters and offices they began to toss the rooms. Calvin stuck with Pellew and they overturned every inch of the quartermaster's office before moving to the adjacent maintenance closet.

"Are your men aware that we're not searching for a regular human intruder?"

"Sir, yes, sir."

"It's just the three of us, you can drop the *sir, yes, sir* stuff," said Calvin. Pellew didn't respond so he added, "that's an order."

"All right, then," said Pellew. "I know we're looking for the lycan we took off the shuttle a few hours ago. What else can you tell me about him?"

"Not a lot, unfortunately. The Major and I didn't get anything out of him during our interrogation."

They finished rummaging through the maintenance closet and locked it up again. "What I want to know," said Calvin. "Is how two Special Forces soldiers, *experts*, allowed him to escape in the first place. What can you tell me about them?"

Before Pellew could answer, one of his men jogged to them with a report. "All the men report nothing in this section, sir."

"Inform the sergeant we're moving to deck eight, then form up at the ladders," ordered Pellew.

"Sir, yes, sir!" the lance corporal jogged off.

"What were you saying?" asked Pellew, looked back at him.

Calvin decided he was more interested in something else. "Where do you keep the surveillance feed? I need to know who could have replaced the tape."

"HQ, on deck one." Pellew's answer was exactly as Calvin had suspected. The Head Quarters for the Special Forces staff was a set of small adjoining offices that were constantly staffed and busy. Penetrating it deep enough to replace a critical data tape undetected would be a nearly impossible achievement. Unless the perpetrator were an insider, or had special talents. Making the mystery of the missing tape another question he couldn't solve without more information.

They met up with the rest of their team and climbed down to the next deck, where they spread out and tossed rooms like before. The soldiers stormed through, keeping the alarmed crewmen in their quarters, and overturned tables and chairs, searched under beds, etc. But as Calvin had feared, they turned up nothing. Just as they finished combing deck eight, the Major gave them a report via Captain Pellew's radio. Fifty percent of the ship searched so far, and nothing found.

They continued their deep search to deck seven, opening every container, scouring every room, but they still found nothing. The Major's other teams reported no more success. They were quickly running out of ship to search and Calvin feared the werewolf's keen senses kept him a step ahead, allowing him to double back to sections they'd already searched, giving them the perpetual slip. He wished he could post soldiers in every corridor on every deck, but he lacked the manpower. And he didn't want to involve the crew who were neither properly trained nor equipped to handle a rogue werewolf. He knew he needed outside help before a major incident happened, so he radioed the bridge.

"Put out a distress call," he instructed Sarah. "But only use frequencies watched by Intel Wing. Inform them we have a two-nineteen and need to be boarded by a large, heavily armed unit."

Barely two minutes later she radioed back. "Intel Wing confirms the Avenger is inbound to board us, six clicks away. We've altered course to rendezvous. ETA... three hours."

"Three hours?"

"That's the closest ship capable of handling a two-nineteen."

"All right, burn the engines at full capacity and get us into as deep a jump as possible. Hopefully we can reach ninety-nine point nine percent potential. Keep me informed."

He gave Pellew back the radio with a sigh, knowing he could have expected nothing better. His ship was way out in deep space, a region inconveniently between the Empire, the Rotham Republic, and the Polarian

Confederated States, and mostly ignored by the major powers. Just as the radio had changed hands, a soldier's voice crackled over it.

"Team two found something in the port quarter of deck three."

"In the storage containers?" asked Calvin.

Pellew raised the radio to his mouth. "What is it, sergeant?"

"You'd better get over here, sir."

Pellew looked to Calvin for confirmation.

"You heard the man, let's go."

# Chapter 11

"It's the two missing soldiers," Major Jenkins said.

Two men lay on the ground near an open storage container where, apparently, they'd been stashed. Dr. Monte Blair knelt over one, a medical bag at his side.

"Are they dead?" asked Calvin.

"No, just unconscious," said Monte. "Being trapped in a crumpled position for an hour isn't good on the joints, but it's not the worst thing in the galaxy either. These men are lucky. I see no cuts, no teeth marks, not even bruises. I'm not sure how the lycan incapacitated them."

"If he was the one who did it," Calvin thought of the missing surveillance tape. And the fact that even a lycan shouldn't have been able to slip past the forcefield. It *was* a forcefield after all.

"You think it was one of ours?" asked Captain Pellew.

"Can't rule it out," Calvin bent down to look at the unconscious soldiers. "Either that or someone else was on the transport besides the werewolf."

"And the Nighthawk's scanners missed them? Impossible," said Pellew. "A craft that size in open sight? We have the best equipment in the Fleet and we sealed it shut after our last soldier was back aboard. We definitely would have seen someone."

Calvin shrugged. "At this point I'm willing to believe anything. And suspect anyone. Considering what's happened lately, I don't think anything's crazy anymore." He rose to his feet and smoothed out his uniform.

"Monte, get these men to the infirmary at once. I want them to stay there until we've had a chance to question them. Let me know the minute they come to." Calvin looked at the Major. "Jenkins, I need you to post some men at the infirmary for the time being."

"Agreed," the Major nodded. "Captain Pellew, see to it."

"Right away, sir."

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After apprising Summers of the situation below decks, Calvin released the very tired active crew. Once the replacement officers took their stations, and his Second Officer took the command position—with strict orders to inform Calvin if even the slightest thing happened, Calvin left. Moving with a pack of officers to the lower decks, fully armed, travelling in a group—like

he'd ordered. They dropped off a person at a time as his or her quarters were reached.

Summers had wanted to stay on the bridge but Calvin insisted she get some rest. She agreed, on the condition that Calvin get some rest as well. He doubted he'd be able to sleep but preferred to relax in privacy. And he knew if he let his stress overwhelm him it would impair his judgment.

They reached his quarters on deck five and he took his leave and locked the door. He wasn't sure if the triple seal would stop a werewolf, since he'd never encountered one before, but it would at least slow one down. He didn't undress except to remove his shoes, then he climbed onto his bed and stared at the ceiling, taking in slow, deep breaths.

"Lights off," he said and they turned off. Everything was quiet, except for the slight breeze coming through the air vent. Calm and peaceful. He shut his eyes, trying to close his mind to the many questions spinning inside him like a raging storm. But to no avail. He had too few answers and his mind was what it was. Compelled to chew away at every puzzle and mystery until it was solved. And there were far too many.

Raidan's choice to attack the Rotham freighters—sacrificing everything for the “good of the Empire”; the weird message Calvin had received on Praxis before the trial; the Harbinger's disappearance; the Fleet's unwillingness to cooperate with Intel Wing; Princess Kalila's strange visit and behavior; a randomly-exploding star right in his flight path—one that had otherwise seemed healthy; and now he had an insane werewolf running loose on his ship—doing god knows what—with no explanation for how he got loose and an AWOL surveillance tape.

It was way too much to process now. He felt like he was thinking in slow motion. Groggy, blurry eyed, and lightheaded.

He spent most of an hour eating away at these unsolvable riddles, jumping between them scatterbrained, frustrated to no end. Wondering how many of these puzzles linked together. And how many were just bad timing.

His job came with stress, he knew that, but somehow he felt worse than ever. He just couldn't get his mind to calm down. In frustration he lurched to a sitting position.

"Dim Lights," he said and the room brightened a little.

As he thought about the lycan, the nightmarish images of the Trinity's blood stained walls came to mind automatically. More vivid than memories of yesterday. And Christine... dear sweet Christine. His memories of her tortured him, her smile, her laugh, her hands playing gently with his, the joking, the tickle-fights... and those soft brown eyes—full of mischief and curiosity. He missed her. He missed her *so* much. And he hated himself for letting it all happen to her.

It wasn't until she died that he'd awoken to how merciless and unfair the universe truly was. Cold and cruel. Sparing no one. Christine had been the gentlest, kindest person he'd ever known. And what had fate dealt her?

The events leading up to the Trinity disaster flashed through his mind and he saw his old friends and comrades come alive like ghosts hovering all around. If only they knew what was coming. If only he could warn them... He wished he could go back and undo it all. He'd give anything...

Swimming upstream through his memories he was in college again. Anand, Miles, and other friends were together in their apartments talking about everything, anything, and nothing. Wondering about the uncertain future, idealists with high expectations. The galaxy was their oyster and nothing would keep them from their dreams. He smiled at the banter, the teasing, and the good times. Miles spiking Anand's drinks. Anand getting back at him by putting soap in his cup. Calvin longed for those days again... cutting classes and chasing girls. Those were the golden days, when everything seemed possible. Before real life crushed them and stole their naivety. Calvin had made so many mistakes since then... his eyes drifted to his safe where the equarius was kept. If only he could do it all over, he could do so much better, be so much more.

His thoughts took him through his bittersweet childhood growing up on Capital World without his father. Being called bastard by the bullies. He remembered his first fight, when he pushed the biggest bully into the lake without warning. He'd paid for that one with a black eye and bruises. But it had been worth it to see the other children laugh. And he remembered Sandy. His first girlfriend. How they used to make-out in the tree house, hold hands while walking the lake's edge, and talk about the future. He didn't realize then how different they really were. She dreamed of kids and family and making a difference. While all he cared about was action, romance, and adventure. He didn't think ahead like she did, he just expected everything to work out in the end. When she left Capital World with her parents, she never came back, and he didn't get over her for years. At least not completely. Not until he met Christine.

Once, a long time ago, he'd used his Intel privileges to look Sandy up, out of innocent curiosity, and discovered she was a Planetary Senator. Already established, making a difference, and successful. And she was married to a very prominent police inspector and she had three children. She knew her dreams early, worked for them, and now lived them. She'd fulfilled her own great expectations. Now that he knew that, Calvin couldn't help but wonder about his own.

Had he achieved any of his dreams? He'd never figured out what his dreams were, really. And he still didn't know. But it wasn't this, was it? He looked down at his crumpled uniform on the bureau... *Is this my legacy?*... it felt



incomplete. Everything was at his fingertips—money, status, power—things people spent their whole lives pursuing. But they'd come to him so easily that they meant almost nothing. Empty. Hollow. Leaving him wondering *what's next?*

He gazed out the window at the empty blackness and he felt devoid. A lost soul in a void of empty barren darkness. His beating heart a ticking time bomb, destined to stop eventually. And when it did... what was the point of anything? In time, there'd be no one left to remember him.

Then he started laughing... "What's the matter with me? I've got it great," he tried to smile but ended up with a weak grin. "Okay, this is ridiculous..." he climbed out of bed and unlocked his safe. A part of him resented himself for opening the bottle of equarius again but somehow that didn't matter. It seemed like nothing mattered. And he knew the pill would make the aching go away, at least for a while; it would stop the flood of memories that tortured him. It was both his lover and his enemy and he turned to it, dear sweet equarius.

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Faces blurred through the shadows like ghostly whispers. Children became adults and in the ethereal grey realms of everything and nothing, Calvin felt light like a feather as he moved everywhere and nowhere. But on his back was a heavy mountain of snow, cold and crushing, the flakes of a thousand yesterdays piled upon him.

He awoke with pain biting the insides of his head. He recognized the dim features of his room once he lurched to a sitting position, but he felt elsewhere—like it wasn't real. The world flipped upside down and he began to spin. Losing sight of everything—like he was falling in all directions, trapped in a psychedelic vortex.

He screamed in the darkness, clutching the foot of the bed—which he held for dear life, until, suddenly, his world calmed like a sea of glass. He was panting, heart thundering, but eventually his breathing became slow and deep. "Lights," he said, ripping off his sweat-drenched shirt.

As he stood up, his movements were ginger and almost off-balance. He couldn't remember having a worse nightmare. The dream was lost to him but he knew this wasn't just a simple night terror. He glanced at the bottle of equarius he'd again failed to lock up. He went to it, snatched it up, and peered into the orangey translucent bottle at the small white pills. "Could it be you?" he wondered then hurled the bottle against the wall.

"This is insane..." he took a shower in his cramped bathroom and changed clothes—it was almost 0500 and he knew he wasn't going to get back to sleep. He wondered if this was the first of many nightmares to come,

if so, eventually, he wouldn't be able to command the ship. He needed a medical opinion and decided to find Dr. Blair.

Since the lycan had gone missing, he'd forbidden anyone from moving around the ship alone. But he made himself an exception, deciding it was worth the risk. And if he did run into the werewolf, he wasn't going down without a fight. He clipped on a sidearm, picked up the assault rifle, and set out—quick and silent.

He avoided the elevators and climbed down the ladders, even with such a powerful weapon he knew stealth trumped force. Every creak and noise of the ship jumped out at him, and twice he resisted the urge to shoot his own shadow. But he reached the infirmary without incident. He pressed his thumb against the plate and unlocked the door. Three soldiers and the doctor on shift saluted as he stepped inside.

"Are you all right, sir?" the young medic asked.

"Yeah, I'm fine. I just need to see Monte."

"He asked not to be disturbed unless it was a real emergency."

"I insist." Calvin stepped past and knocked softly on the door to Dr. Blair's adjoining quarters. When no one answered, he pounded the door with the flat of his hand. It slid open to reveal a very groggy, unhappy looking Monte Blair. "What the Sam hell?" He squinted and shielded his eyes from the infirmary lights. Calvin stepped into the bedroom and the door slid shut.

"Lights," said Calvin and they snapped on.

"Holy Pete's tap-dancing sack of crap... *what in the name of a Rotham's murderous red ass are you doing here at five in the morning?*" his hoarse voice made him seem even older than his fifty-five years.

"I see you're as charming as ever, doctor," said Calvin.

"Is that Calvin?" Monte rubbed his eyes and grabbed his glasses.

"The one and only."

"Well how about that...?" The doctor's tone softened as his eyes adjusted and he went over to his tiny kitchen. "You could've rung the chime, you know."

"You would've hated that even more." Calvin noticed a stack of dirty magazines on the doctor's table. "I see you've been keeping up on your reading."

The doctor came back with a steaming coffee. "Oh give an old man a break."

"Old man? You're still in the prime of your life."

"Tell that to my bad lung. I sucked the prime of my life through a pipe long ago and now I'm an old man," he wagged a finger at Calvin. "And it'll happen to you."

Calvin nodded. "That's actually why I'm here"

"You're finally seeing the light and want to quit? Well thank god."

"Now, I didn't say that." Even the thought of life without equarius gave him withdrawals.

"I should have known," the doctor shook his head and sat down, motioning Calvin toward the other chair which he declined.

"You know, Monte, I hope the Khans don't catch you talking like that."

"Oh that reminds me, the Khans say the price has gone up. I guess the police busted one of their rings so it'll be harder to get stuff in."

"How much?"

"Up to 7q per gram."

"I'm good for the money." Calvin shrugged.

"So I hear, bailed Miles out for what, 30,000?"

"You would've done the same thing for me."

"But I couldn't afford it, not with my debts. And not everyone makes a captain's paygrade, you know."

"Yeah and not everyone gets a dealer's paygrade. What are the Khans paying these days?"

"It's not as much as you might think since the guys under me take more than their share without me to keep an eye on 'em. But... I could probably hook you up if you want to deal."

"No chance. It's bad enough that I buy the stuff."

"Whatever you say. So why *are* you here?" Monte took another sip.

"Oh right, ok, I had this bad dream—"

"I'm fresh out of nightlights."

"Very funny, mister desperate dirty magazine."

"That's low, junior. I think the price just went up to 11q per gram."

"*Anyway*... I woke up from this dream, I don't even remember what it was, and I had this crazy feeling that the whole world was spinning out of control. I don't know how to describe it, like I knew I was in my room and everything was fine but I couldn't block out the feeling that I was falling and turning. It was horrible and I woke up all sweaty."

"Hmm..." the doctor rubbed his chin. "How long before the feeling passed?"

"I don't know, thirty seconds maybe."

"Was there any pain?"

"My head hurt really bad at first but that went away."

"Any symptoms other than dizziness?"

"Panic, I felt really panicked and all my muscles were really stiff."

"Do you have any history with vertigo?"

"No. Is that what it is?"

"Maybe. Or possibly an inner ear infection. Did you use any equarius before bed?"

"Yes, but I've done that dozens of times. Is there something I can take to counter it?"

"Drugs aren't that simple."

"Do you think that's what it is?"

"Hard to say for now, but it's very possible. I recommend you lay off it for a while. Indefinitely if possible."

"I'll tone it down."

"That stuff's gonna kill you, Calvin," he hesitated. "As your dealer I've always got more stuff for you... but as your friend, I urge you to quit as soon as you can."

Calvin nodded. "Thanks. And I will. Just not yet."

"Now go see the medic out there and have him check for an inner ear infection."

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He'd almost reached deck five when a scraping sound caught his attention. He let go of the ladder and tracked it to the observation deck. From the other side of the door the noise could be heard in intervals, softer now. Like tapping on glass. He pressed his ear against the door but didn't hear it again and wondered if it had been his imagination after all. He unlocked the door with a command override on the panel and it whisked open to show a dark empty room with huge windows showing off the black void. Nothing stood out.

He stepped into the room anyway, shouldering his rifle. "Lights," they snapped on and the door closed behind him. In the far corner stood the missing lycan, except now he looked perfectly human. Even the red of his eyes had softened to a more normal grey and his brown hair and dark face looked almost ordinary. But Calvin knew better.

"Ahh, Captain, I'd hoped we could get a chance to talk privately."

Calvin raised the rifle and pointed it at the lycan, who bent—ready to spring. "Try it, Captain, see what happens."

Calvin hesitated. He doubted the werewolf could dodge fast enough to prevent being hit—and Calvin liked to think he was a pretty good shot, but what worried him was that he couldn't fire enough bullets to drop the werewolf before his claws were upon him. And if he didn't take him out, there'd be no second chance.

So, with some regret, Calvin lowered his rifle. "All right, let's talk."

The werewolf relaxed and stood up straight like a common human. "Finally, some civility."

"What do you want?"

"I want to thank you for saving my life," the werewolf said with a smile. Calvin wasn't sure what to make of that. A ruse to throw him off guard?

"You're welcome. Maybe you can demonstrate your gratitude by going back to the brig. I know I'd appreciate that."

"I didn't really care for those accommodations, to tell you the truth."

"Escaping them was a mistake, Lycan"

"How do you figure?"

"Every man and woman on this ship has orders to shoot you on sight. Nowhere is safe for you."

"I don't know," he said coyly, "I've been pretty safe so far." He flashed a bold smile. "The truth is, you only found me because I wanted you to."

Calvin raised an eyebrow. "And why would you want that?"

"I want a deal."

"You don't give me many reasons to trust you, werewolf. Why'd you give me a fake name, for starters? Mister John Johnson."

"I didn't want to come up on your computers."

"Let me guess... shady history, criminal background perhaps?" Calvin was not surprised.

"Something like that."

"Withholding information and lying to me isn't a great start for someone who wants to cut a deal. So how about we begin with your real name?"

"All right. It's *Tristan*."

"Tristan what?"

"That's it. Just Tristan."

"What are you wanted for, Tristan?"

"Well it seems the municipal government on Aros Five and I had something of a disagreement."

"Aros... that's in Rotham space?"

"Yes."

"Then I don't care about that."

"What about the extradition treaty?"

"What about it? I'm not going to pay attention to that. Firstly because this is an intelligence ship, secondly because Aros is a helluva long way from here, and lastly because the treaty only applies to people."

"That's cold, Captain. Why would you say that?"

"I spent some time on the Trinity, the details of which are none of your business."

"Oh the Strigoi attack," the werewolf noted Calvin's surprise. "Yes I've heard of it. And your hatred for Strigoi is justified, but I'm insulted that you hate me because somehow you can't tell the difference between my people and theirs. We're no more Strigoi than you are. Those blood-sucking, deceitful, two-faced bastards. We share nothing in common with them."

"Maybe," said Calvin, somewhat unsure of himself. "But in a few hours it isn't going to matter."

"And why is that?"

"I'm going to turn you over to either the Imperial Fleet or the port authority, whichever is faster. Whether or not they extradite you is up to them."

"Which brings us back to the deal I want."

Calvin didn't trust the lycan enough to make any kind of meaningful deal, but he would squeeze what he could out of him. "OK, Tristan, you want a deal, I need a sign of good faith. How about you tell me how you escaped the brig."

"If you're good at cards, you know I can't just tip my hand right away."

"Then why should I trust you?"

"Because we have so much in common."

"We have nothing in common."

"Oh come on, Captain, you think I don't know you're a fatherless bastard just like me? I might not know everything about you, but where I'm from the Cross clan is well known. Lucky for you I don't care about petty blood-feuds."

Calvin had no idea what Tristan was talking about and he didn't want to think about it. He didn't know much about his own father but it would fit his profile to be involved in some *discreet* politics, even with werewolves. "Okay, you know my family history. That still doesn't tell me who you are and what you want out of this, Tristan."

"All in good time, Captain, that's our deal. I'll tell you anything you want to know, *quid-pro-quo*."

"And you get... what?"

"Freedom. I want to be set free on Aleator, no questions asked, no records, no police and *no* extradition."

Calvin's eyes narrowed. The werewolf shouldn't have known where they were going. "Why Aleator?"

"Isn't that where your ship is ultimately headed? I think we both agree that the sooner I'm off your ship the better."

"And no extradition? You know the government on Aleator—if you can call it one—is neutral and they don't have to honor the extradition treaty. They weren't even invited to the signing."

"I'd rather not take that chance."

"I see..." Calvin paused, then nodded "Okay, we can work something out." It was a lie. There was no way he would endanger that many lives by letting a werewolf run loose, but he had to pretend he might—because he wanted the werewolf's information. "But I want a few things up front."

"State your terms, Captain."

"I want you to go back to the brig voluntarily, and I want your word you'll stay there until we arrive. And that you'll not harm any more of my crew."

"Agreed," the werewolf smiled. "And for the record, *I* didn't harm anyone."

Calvin felt a chill. "Hang on, I'm not done," he said. "I want to know how you escaped, what happened to the surveillance tape, and how the guards ended up in a containment unit."

"Oh no, no, no, Captain, that's asking too much. All of that is my secret for now, but I promise you—the moment you free me—I'll answer your questions. I'm a lycan not a strigoi, my word is my bond. For now, though, I'll surrender peacefully and go back to the brig, so long as I have your word you'll let me go."

"Deal," said Calvin, making a mental note to cancel the two-nineteen, "Now if you don't mind," he waved his gun toward the door. "The brig is waiting."

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"Approaching at sixty-thousand mc's per second," said Sarah from the helm while adjusting her controls. "Burners at five percent and holding."

The large red planet wasn't yet in view through the windows and a projected image hovered over the main display.

"That's good, thank you," said Calvin.

"How long are we going to be at Aleator?" asked Miles.

"Not a second longer than we have to." Calvin turned to Sarah. "Contact the port authority, let them know the package we discussed earlier has arrived."

"Yes, sir," she began speaking into her headset.

Shen flipped his chair around from the ops terminal. "Are you sure this is the best idea? I mean, if he could break free from our hold then he'll have no trouble giving the Aleator people the slip. And this kind of betrayal might enrage him, you know, provoke him into doing something deadly."

"Duly noted, Shen," said Calvin, irritation pierced his voice but he was more annoyed at himself than his officer. He hated breaking his word to anyone, even a Remorii, but there was a lot more at stake here than his honor. Unfortunately, by handing Tristan over to the port authority, he'd lose out on any valuable information the werewolf had withheld—although Calvin expected the werewolf would have just lied to them anyway.

"It's just that a lot of people could get hurt, sir."

"Yes, Shen, people could get hurt. Which is why we're giving up the chance for more information to better ensure public safety. Even in this nest

of crooks and cutthroats there are still people who deserve better than a death at the claws of a lycan. And the last thing the galaxy needs is more werewolves, should our friend spread his poison. Aleator deserves to know what it's inheriting, then they'll at least have a fighting chance of dealing with it."

Even though Shen had questioned him, it was the kind of thoughtfulness he liked from his officers. He needed them to keep him in check and often their eyes were as good, or better, than his own.

"I think you're doing the right thing," said Summers from his side.

He looked over at her. "You do? Then maybe I'm doing the wrong thing after all," he said with a slight smirk.

Her smile faded.

Sarah spoke up. "Now at sixty million km and still no sentry ships. Just a third-rate freighter refit closing in on our position."

"Project it," said Calvin. Shen acknowledged and, a moment later, a hovering 3D model of a rebuilt freighter appeared, replacing the image of Aleator.

"*That's* the sentry ship?" asked Miles.

Calvin laughed. "Welcome to Aleator. I take it some of you, aside from our secret jaunts into the DMZ, have never set foot outside of the Empire."

"Aleator just looks like a bunch of outposts orbiting a planet," said Shen. "What makes it so different?"

Miles' reply was almost a shout. "It's anything goes! No laws. You can do whatever you want so long as you follow one rule—don't piss off the Roscos!"

"I've spent some time across the Polarian border a few years back, but even there everything was patrolled and civilized," said Summers.

"You'd especially hate this place," said Calvin and he turned back to Sarah. "Open up a channel to the sentry ship and set up rendezvous coordinates. Let the captain know we're bringing the werewolf aboard his ship and none of his personnel will be allowed to step even one inch onto the Nighthawk once we dock."

"Can do."

Calvin tapped the intercom. "Okay, Major, we'll be docking shortly. Get the package ready to go and make sure your men don't leave him until the Aleator crew has him well in hand."

"You got it, and frankly, I'll be glad to be rid of him."

"You and me both," he let go of the comm just as Sarah waved for his attention.

"Slowing to match approach vector and docking in... just over two minutes."



As the ship docked and the seconds ticked away, Calvin tried to mask his anxiety. A part of him wanted to see to the werewolf's eviction personally, but this kind of operation was the Major's purview, and if the werewolf did break free somehow, and saw Calvin there... things could get ugly. He waited on the bridge, letting the slow minutes disappear in silence until the Major's voice came back over the intercom.

"It's done. The werewolf is in Aleator custody now and all hands have safely returned."

"I trust you had no problems," said Calvin.

"None, he didn't even try to fight back. In fact, he *claimed* he knew this was going to happen."

Calvin chuckled nervously. "I bet he did. Very well, Major, good work," he turned off the comm.

"That was too easy, you know... I'm kind of disappointed, in a weird way," said Miles.

Calvin looked at him. "That's usually a good thing."

"The uh... *sentry ship* has disengaged and is pulling away," said Sarah.

"Very good, Sarah, set course for Aleator One. And, Shen, project the image."

The primary station appeared in orbit around the planet. Calvin would have described it as more of a conglomerate of containers and retired spaceships than any kind of platform. But apparently it did the job, despite looking like garbage.

"Wow, what a piece of sh—"

"*Miles*," Calvin interrupted him. "Come with me, we're going aboard so it's time to suit up."

"Me?"

"Yes, *you*. Go get your mission clothes from the quartermaster and meet me on deck five. The rest of you will be staying aboard. The minute Miles and I disembark, have the Nighthawk withdraw from the station and engage the stealth system. Then sweep the sector for even the slightest trace of the Harbinger, but do not approach Aleator One again until I give you the order, is that clear?"

"Yes, sir," said Summers.

"Good. And Shen, tap into the local databases and mine whatever information you can. I want to know if the Harbinger ever arrived, if it docked, if it took on or let off any passengers, I want to know everything. And flag every name on the Harbinger's manifest, see if anyone had any history here—coordinate your efforts with the deck two analysts as needed."

"On it," said Shen.

"Excellent. Summers, you have the deck."

## Chapter 12

"I'm not gonna lie, I'm not too excited about this," said Miles as their elevator zoomed for the deck two airlock. "I mean, in the Empire if you get behind a few q and can't pay your debts they garnish your wages or lock you up or something, but here, word is they blow your head off in a public place."

Calvin laughed. "You really haven't been to Aleator before have you?"

"No, but I've heard my share of stories."

"And they're all just ridiculous stories, don't believe them."

"Oh good," Miles smiled.

"The Roscos would never be so careless as to blow your head off in public, they'd much rather torture you first then blow your head off somewhere private."

His friend's smile faded and Calvin couldn't resist continuing. "Drag you off in your sleep, take you to some warehouse basement and light you on fire, or maybe run a nail through your head nice and slow."

"Really, that's very comforting."

"I'm only half joking, you know. So be careful." Calvin had heard of even worse punishments inflicted by the Roscos to their enemies, but he also knew they claimed to have a sort of code and would never hurt anyone who hadn't crossed them first. And if they saw someone abusing a woman, child, or the handicapped, they might kill him on the spot. If you were an outsider, who didn't piss them off, you'd get very little attention. Unless you had a lot of money. Then you'd be treated like a king, but you'd pay more than full price for everything. And if you were a traitor to the family, an insider gone bad, you'd get the worst of all punishments—which Calvin didn't even care to imagine.

The elevator came to a stop and the doors slid open. "Here we are," said Calvin, stepping out with Miles in tow.

"I still think someone else should go instead, maybe Summers or Sarah."

Calvin spun around. "Are you scared?"

"No, no, no. It's just... we're too valuable, me and you, for such a risky mission."

Calvin laughed. "And I suppose Summers and Sarah are expendable? As much as I'd love to see our delicate XO try to blend in with the thugs and cutthroats and try to keep their hands off of her, the mission would be a disaster. She could never pass for an outcast. She's too uptight, too disciplined, too unable to improvise; she's got no street-sense. As for Sarah,

without her no one is flying anywhere. There's no better pilot in the whole Empire and when the missiles start flying, evasion and escape can be more important than even your sharp shooting, Miles."

"What about some of the junior officers?"

"Relax, you're staked. You have 1200q to drop a little at a time and no credit to go any deeper. All your accounts are frozen and your cards are staying here. Your fake ID is convincing enough it would fool Customs at Capital World. Besides, you look great—like the perfect Imperial reject. We both do." Calvin sported a worn jacket over a casual shirt and loose-fitting jeans. Miles' attire was similar. "And if that's not enough, here comes the rest of our party."

Two soldiers from Special Forces met them at the main hatch. They too wore casual clothes with handguns and radios well hidden.

Miles looked both pleased and irritated. "Why didn't you tell me we have backup?"

"What, you thought it'd be just us, two disguised Imperial agents setting foot aboard Aleator One by themselves?" Calvin laughed. "That's crazy talk."

The lead soldier spoke up before Miles could reply. "Uzbek and Jackson reporting as ordered, sir."

"Okay, Uzbek and Jackson, once we step through that hatch you're no longer Uzbek and Jackson. Remember your fake ID's and use street lingo. Stick to your mission and act like fugitives. Anything less will compromise everything. Keep your distance but don't lose sight of us. And whatever you do, don't exit the set without us."

"Sir, yes sir."

"Miles, Uzbek is going to be your ghost. Once we go aboard we're going to split ways; Jackson will tail me. You take the Crystal Mist Casino and whatever is above it. Scope out shops, restaurants, whatever you find. Be thorough but don't ask too many questions. I'll take the Rodeo Den and make my way down the lower decks. We'll meet up at the Crystal in four hours, got it?"

"Yeah."

"And at least *try* to be inconspicuous."

"I know the drill, I trained for Intel Wing too you know."

"Good," said Calvin. "Then you have nothing to worry about."

"What if I lose my ghost and accidentally piss off a Rosco?"

Calvin grinned. "Then you do what they teach at the academy."

"And what is that?"

"Close your eyes and kiss your ass goodbye."

The hatch opened and Calvin motioned toward the jetway. "After you."

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The Rodeo Den Casino was everything it claimed to be. Bright lights, lots of noise, smoke everywhere—all kinds of explicit drug use—and crowds of people representing every culture and kind of alien. Calvin heard so many different languages he couldn't tell them apart, picking up bits and pieces from a few but not enough to get by on. Fortunately, most everyone spoke human since the Roscos did their business transactions exclusively in human.

He didn't draw much attention as he strolled past the tavern and around some of the game tables. Several of the games were electronically projected but most weren't. For some reason physical dice and cards seemed, to most gamblers, harder to rig than software, and since most of the players here were swindlers anyway they demanded nothing less.

Calvin hoped to pick up gossip about the Harbinger's visit. He hung around groups of people long enough to catch the drift of their conversations, but not long enough to be noticed. If their topics were uninteresting or he felt he'd overstayed his welcome, he'd slip away and get lost in the crowd.

He liked the bars and lounges most because they were natural gathering points and no one would raise an eyebrow if he stayed for long periods. But, unfortunately, not much interesting gossip was making the rounds. Mostly these areas were trolled by liars who spent their time arguing over bets, complaining about losses, or bragging about their supposed conquests. Many of the details, if believed, were sickening.

Calvin rarely spoke unless spoken to and when people realized he was alone they'd sometimes come over and badger him for money, either by begging or trying to intimidate him. It reminded him of the backstreets of Capital World back home. He knew how to look a thug squarely in the eyes and seem deadly; mostly they left him alone. He relied on body language and cold expressions to avoid drawing attention rather than arguing back or making threats of his own. Once in a while he'd reach into his jacket pocket—as if to draw a weapon. This seemed to work, even though it was a bluff. Firearms and knives were banned on Aleator One by the Roscos, and if caught with one the perpetrator would be beaten and locked up. But since the environment was so dangerous anyway, it was no secret that many people here—and probably most—had a weapon stashed somewhere on their person, like his two ghosts did. The Roscos and their soldiers didn't do pat-downs or searches, so smuggling was easy.

Calvin was about ready to leave for the lower decks when he spotted someone in an Imperial uniform enter and take a seat at a card table. The blue coat and black sash were ripped in places and severely dirty, and it hung too loosely on the man's wiry body to have been fitted for him. But it *may* have come from the Harbinger, Calvin thought.

The uniformed man bought his way into the game and waited for the hand to finish. Calvin approached cautiously and scrutinized him. He seemed very chatty with the player to his right who didn't hesitate to reply. They knew each other and made no effort to mask that fact, Calvin suspected they were passing information in code. He approached the table and took the only available seat.

"What's the buy in?" asked Calvin.

"200q with a max of 1,000."

"Put me down for two hundred," Calvin took the bills from his wallet, which he'd kept in his front pocket on a chain—otherwise it would've run off by now.

"Two hundred it is." The hand finished and the dealer passed out new cards. Calvin kept his cards face down, aside from a quick peek. They were terrible. Good thing he wasn't here to make a profit.

From his position, he had some trouble listening in on the conversation because of the casino's noise. But he caught bits and pieces.

"They said it would be all day," the uniformed man said.

"I told them it wouldn't," the player on his right replied.

The dealer spoke up "Jacobi, it's to you." The uniformed man nodded and passed in his chips, calling the bet.

*So his name is Jacobi...*

Everyone called after the initial raise—keeping the bet relatively low, at 9q to call. Calvin decided to stay in even though his odds of winning the pot were less than one in a thousand. He didn't want to draw attention by being the guy who folded early. Overly cautious gamblers didn't fit in at joints like this.

The next set of cards was passed out and Calvin's odds of winning decreased even further. But that wasn't what disturbed him; it was the fact that Jacobi and his friend hadn't resumed their conversation. Calvin stayed calm, perfectly placid on the surface, but inside his head spun circles trying to figure out whether or not he had some kind of tell, like he seemed too interested in them or that he didn't belong. Maybe he was trying too hard to avoid eye contact.

"Fifty to call," the dealer said. The player just ahead of Calvin had raised the stakes dramatically.

"I'm out," Calvin pushed his cards toward the dealer. Folding right after a huge raise wasn't unusual, the other player had done him a favor.

Jacobi looked up from the table and turned to Calvin. "You," he said. "I know you."

Calvin's stomach turned over. "I doubt it," he replied, smoothly as ice.

"What's your name?"

"Depends who's asking?"

"Don't you know who I am?"

Calvin hesitated; it was hard to see Jacobi's expression behind his mat of long, greasy blond hair. But he doubted he was a Rosco. "Should I? It's not like you're a Rosco." Every Rosco he'd ever met dressed sharp, wore expensive clothes, and kept a clean appearance. If a member of the family dressed and looked like Jacobi it would be an embarrassment to them, and they'd correct it.

"You still haven't told me your name," said Jacobi.

Calvin raised an eyebrow and sat back. "Why should I? I don't owe you anything."

The dealer raised his arms. "You girls take this outside. I'm cashing you both out, you're interrupting the game."

"Fine," said Jacobi. Calvin just nodded as his cash was passed back to him. Jacobi shot him a look of death as they both stood up.

"Look, man," said Calvin. "I don't exactly go around telling Imperials my name," he pointed to the uniform, even though it clearly didn't belong to him. "Bad for business." Calvin shrugged and turned away, not wanting to draw any more attention. Jacobi might be his best lead but he couldn't blow his cover. Especially if a real Rosco spotted him—that was the last thing he needed.

"Hey wait," Jacobi called from behind. "You're Rex Malone, aren't you?"

Calvin stopped dead in his tracks. That was his undercover name, which he hadn't told anyone since he'd boarded the station. Maybe Jacobi had seen his fake ID somehow... *maybe when I opened my wallet to pay the buy-in?* But that seemed unlikely.

Calvin turned around slowly and spoke cautiously. "That's right. And if you think you're going to take me in, you've got another thing coming." For authenticity, Calvin had his staff fabricate several crimes on Rex Malone's record, since he was a fictitious person anyway, might as well make him look like a crook in a crook's nest.

"No, no, easy, easy." Jacobi said, walking closer. Calvin slipped a hand into his jacket, again pretending he had a pistol. "I know you're just reaching for a lighter, aren't you, Rex?"

"Something like that." He didn't like where this was heading.

"Let's just keep it civil okay?"

"Who are you?"

"My name's Jacobi. And I think I have something of yours."

"Is that so?"

"Yeah. Why don't you come with us and we'll take you to it." Jacobi motioned and three other men approached Calvin from all sides, keeping their distance. His heart quickened but he forced himself to appear calm.

"Maybe another time, Jacobi. I have some money to make."

"I'm afraid we must insist," Jacobi said and the men closed in. One put a hand on Calvin's shoulder.

"Why don't we go for a stroll, what do 'ya say?"

Calvin glanced to the side and spotted his ghost, who was now standing up. He'd blended into the throng of people looking on.

"Okay, let's go," said Calvin.

"That's more like it." Jacobi led the five of them across the casino floor, through a back door, and down a few narrow hallways. Eventually they came to a stop.

"What's this about? I know you guys aren't Roscos, not even close."

Before they could answer, gunfire sounded from around the corner. As Calvin turned to see, Jacobi grabbed him and threw him against the wall. He tensed, throwing his arms out defensively as he tried to wrestle his way free from the other men. But their hold was too strong and they quickly pinned him against the wall with such pressure he could hardly breathe. Jacobi faced him down.

"I know you're military," said Jacobi. "And I know why you're here. Let's just say you never should've come." He pulled out a pistol and Calvin struggled more, wondering how he'd been compromised.

"Don't you want to make a deal?" asked Calvin, his mind racing.

"No chance," said Jacobi as he screwed on a silencer. "I'll see you in hell."

So this was the end... cold sweet death... something Calvin had tried to ignore his whole life. He closed his eyes and waited, thinking at least now he'd be able to solve mankind's greatest mystery.

Three shots whistled. He felt nothing.

The arms around him slackened and let go. Calvin opened his eyes to see the three thugs dead on the ground; Jacobi stood opposite him with a smoking pistol.

"Hurry up, let's go, Calvin," he said. "We don't have much time." He grabbed Calvin by the shoulder and ushered him back the way they'd come. Calvin followed instinctively, and their jog became a sprint.

"What the hell just happened?" Calvin's mind went into shock.

"Those men were working with CERKO. They want you dead." As they turned the corner and bolted down another hallway, Calvin caught sight of three more men on the ground, dead by all appearances... one was his ghost, who'd apparently managed to kill the other two. It wasn't a pretty sight.

"Come on," Jacobi urged.

Calvin bent down and scooped up his ghost's pistol. "Looks like six shots left."

"Hurry up, we're in serious danger here." They sprinted again.

A noise ahead made Jacobi stop dead in his tracks, about face, and bolt the opposite way. "They're faster than I thought, come on!"

Calvin followed close behind. "Who is? And who are you? What's your interest in all of this?"

"I'm not Intel Wing or Navy," Jacobi led him to an adjoining hall. "And Jacobi isn't my real name, either."

They turned the corner just in time to see a man and woman open fire at them with submachine guns. Jacobi was shredded immediately; he collapsed without so much as a scream. A stray bullet tore Calvin's shirt and grazed his arm, burning his skin. He was otherwise unscathed because Jacobi had taken the bullets for him, like an involuntary human shield.

Calvin raised his handgun and returned fire blindly while scurrying back around the corner. He heard the sound of reloading and a part of him thought to go back around the corner and engage them, maybe take them down before they could finish. But his limbs wouldn't cooperate and the urgency of self-preservation took over. He sprinted down the corridor trying to remember his way back to the nearest public place. But, before he reached the end of the hall, another pair of unknown soldiers appeared.

He went prone, somewhat concealed by the darkness as their muzzles flashed, peppering the walls with holes. He raised his pistol to shoot back but all that happened was the click of an empty magazine and his slide stuck back.

"There he is, he's on the ground," one of them said. The soldier barely finished his sentence before screaming and dropping to the floor. Something large was on top of him, digging at him with claws. Then, in a flash, it flew past Calvin and knocked the other soldier down with a powerful swipe, tearing him apart in seconds.

Two more soldiers—the ones that'd slain Jacobi—they opened immediately at the monster's silhouette, which seemed as much creature as man. It roared in pain but managed to duck their next volley and sail across the corridor in only a few leaps. These soldiers also died in the same gruesome, lightning fashion.

In the faint light, Calvin made out the red eyes of a lycan as it finished clawing through the last gunman. Impossible. It was Tristan. He could see the resemblance now. Sure the man was somewhat hairier and he'd grown claws that'd been brought to bear, but otherwise he looked the same. No snout or true wolf features showed.

Several men with handguns came from the other side of the corridor and opened fire on the werewolf. Calvin guessed there were ten or more. Tristan's eyes locked with Calvin's for a brief instant, as if to say something, then he vanished away into the darkness, leaving a trail of blood.



The newest arrivals ran up to Calvin and lowered their weapons. Calvin recognized a bulbous middle-aged, goateed face that he hadn't seen in a long, long time.

"Grady Rosco."

"*Calvin Cross*, why didn't you tell me you were here?" They helped him to his feet.

"It wasn't exactly convenient."

"You can gimme the details in a minute," Grady said, then to his men, "Let's move!"

The mob of sharply dressed soldiers formed a ring around Calvin and rushed him down the corridor and up the stairs to a protected office where four large guards with automatic weapons stepped aside and opened a door to a small lobby.

"Wait here," Grady told the others. He unlocked a second door which revealed a small but luxurious office. He waved Calvin inside and shut it, leaving them alone. "Please, take a seat."

"All right," said Calvin cautiously; he pulled a chair from the table. Grady sat opposite.

"You know, I'm disappointed," Grady shook his head. "That a friend of my family would come to my home without paying me a visit."

"Like I said, it wasn't convenient." Calvin's father had had past dealings with the Roscos before he disappeared, but Calvin's mother had kept him as far away from them and their underworld as possible, so he'd rarely interacted with them face-to-face.

"You know, you almost died. I'm embarrassed, Calvin. Embarrassed that you were attacked in *my* house. Someone will die for this, I promise you."

"Someone already has. Lots of people."

"Do you have any idea how much that would have dishonored my family?" Grady paused to offer Calvin a cigar, when he refused Grady lit one for himself and continued. "If a most honored guest were murdered here? Do you have *any* idea? You really should have told us, then we could have protected you."

"I didn't expect I'd need protection."

"Any idea who's got it out for you?"

"No."

"People smuggling automatic weapons into my house and several dead in my hallways... This isn't the way we do business on Aleator One! My family is going to get to the bottom of this and any information you have would be worth a lot. A lot of q if you catch my drift."

The way Grady was talking, asserting his ownership over Aleator One, made Calvin assume he'd moved up the chain. He was a Rosco cousin, one of the family but not one of the bosses, putting him maybe twelfth on the

totem pole, or so it had been last time Calvin had been here. He could only guess what Grady had done or whom he'd rubbed out to climb the ladder to third or fourth.

"I'm sorry, I don't have any information. Maybe you can tell me how that many people could have such powerful weapons on Aleator One."

Grady shrugged. "I have no idea. But I promise you, when I do, I'll let you know. It's the least I can do."

"Good," said Calvin, hoping to wrap this up. "I'll be in touch."

"Wait," said Grady, sitting forward with a sense of urgency. "There's still a matter of unfinished business."

This was exactly the reason why Calvin hadn't told the Roscos he was coming... that and it would look bad to the Fleet if they found out he had underworld connections, especially if it was Summers Presley who pieced it together.

"I already told you," Calvin insisted. "We're even. You just saved my life, if anything *I owe you*."

"Don't insult me," said Grady. "We barely manage to protect you from a bunch of two-bit punks on *my* station, in *my* own house, and you call that a display of our gratitude? Oh no, no, no. That's an embarrassment. It's shameful that we didn't get those guys first. Shame. You hear me? Not thanks. And if it were, it still wouldn't be thanks enough, not even close. Not after what *he* did for us. The family is very much indebted to you."

"Indebted to my father, not to me."

"We can't do anything for him now, the debt passes to you. We owe him, so we owe you. He would want what's best for his son. And we don't like being in debt. Name anything and it's yours. *Anything*."

Calvin wasn't comfortable. He didn't know the extent of his father's dealings with the premiere criminal family in the galaxy and he didn't want to be associated with them. He could be clever and underhanded if he needed to, like his father, but he had too much of his mother in him to relish those talents. He'd also grown up resenting Aleator and the Roscos for stealing his dad from him. When his friends spent time with their fathers, he hadn't even known his. The last thing in the world he wanted was to validate that by benefitting from his dad's mistakes. But he couldn't explain that here, and even if he found the words to try... the Roscos would never understand or accept that.

A part of him wanted to name something random just to placate them, like a book collection, but he knew they'd never accept his offer unless it was something grandiose, and anything grandiose would draw too much attention. Plus there was nothing in the galaxy they could give him that he couldn't already get for himself.

"Okay, I know what I want."

"Anything."

"I want you to stop feeling indebted to me. I want us to call it even. I forgive you the debt."

"I can't do that."

"You said anything."

"Don't insult the Rosco honor, Calvin. Let us do you a favor. Need us to muss someone's hair? Get someone out of the way?"

"I'm sorry, there's nothing I need."

"What about..." Grady lowered his voice. "I understand you've developed a taste for some magic."

About a year before, Calvin had stayed two nights on Aleator during a shore leave to meet an old friend who was now an Imperial fugitive. During that stay, he'd accidentally left a bottle of equarius in his room. Apparently the Roscos had done their housekeeping.

"What would you say," Grady continued. "To a lifetime supply of that stuff?"

"No thanks." It would be bad enough if Calvin were caught using equarius for recreational purposes, but to have his drug-use linked to a well-known criminal outfit would be profoundly worse. "I already have a guy for that."

"We can take care of that too." Grady took out his pistol and set it on the table. "Just say the word."

"The word is no."

"I'm sorry to hear that, Calvin." Grady sat back in his leather chair. "But I'm sure when you do think of something, you'll let me know."

"Well there is one thing," said Calvin, after a moment's hesitation.

Grady perked up and leaned forward.

"This is off the record," Calvin's eyes narrowed.

"This whole place is off the record."

"I'm looking for a ship. I want to know if it spent any time here in the last few days."

"What ship?"

"It's called the Harbinger. A big ship, first-rate, Imperial crew, you couldn't miss it."

"Harbinger, you say..." Grady stroked his goatee. "That would be Asari Raidan's ship, would it not?"

Actually the real Captain was a woman named Jane Simmons, but Calvin pretended otherwise. "Yeah, that's right."

"Big spender, on time, uses cash, doesn't ask questions. Not the kind of customer I'd have anything to say about. We don't like to pry into people affairs, you know."

Calvin resisted the urge to roll his eyes. *I bet you don't.*

"But you don't waltz into our system with a first-rate stolen Imperial ship with a thousand crew and not escape our notice."

"I thought you'd know something," Calvin wagged a finger at him.

"You understand that normally I wouldn't be at liberty to say," Grady smiled. "But, seeing as you're a friend of the family," he lowered his voice. "The ship entered the system yesterday. It kept its distance and didn't make port, but it launched a small shuttle with maybe twenty people aboard. They spent some money, met up with some other people discreetly, and left long before you arrived."

"Can you tell me where they went?"

"Their heading was the Brimm System, but if they changed course there's no way I could know."

"You didn't follow them, or anything?"

"There was no need. Their money was good, they kept the peace, followed the rules, and left without any trouble."

Calvin knew the answer to his next question, but wanted to see Grady's reaction. "You knew the ship was stolen. Had you reported its arrival the Imperial government would have paid a handsome bounty."

"Reported it?" Grady laughed. "Not interested."

It was like Calvin had expected. Aleator wouldn't get involved, not because the Harbinger was too powerful to deal with—which it was, but because someone on the station had a vested interest in Raidan's welfare, or more likely, Raidan's money. But knowing Grady as well as he did, Calvin doubted it was Grady himself.

"What can you tell me about the people the Harbinger crew met with on your station? Can you give me their names?"

"Yeah, I could, but it wouldn't do you any good. They're all fake. Most of the people who come here don't exactly have bona fide paperwork. That's *why* they come here," he shrugged. "But I *can* tell you this, they were all ex-Imperials. No aliens, no outer kingdom humans from god-knows-where inside the DMZ, and—of course—no Roscos. Just former Imperials."

"Thanks," said Calvin as he stood up. "Does that make us even?"

"No. But it's a start."

## Chapter 13

When Calvin stepped back aboard the Nighthawk's bridge, Sarah applauded. "Welcome back, sir, I heard you took out a hundred men."

He laughed. "More like a thousand," he turned to Miles. "And how many did you tell her you took out?"

"A million."

Miles had been sent ahead so Calvin could discreetly obtain a datadisc from Grady Rosco containing all the information they had about the Harbinger's mysterious visit and, after Calvin had asked for it, everything the Roscos had on CERKO—which wasn't much. Calvin had held out for more, but Grady insisted that was all he had to give—so Calvin took it for what it was worth. But, not wanting to give away his association with the Roscos—which would appear greater than it was, Calvin kept the disc in his pocket intending to analyze it himself later.

"Are you all right, Lieutenant Commander?" asked Summers. She almost sounded concerned.

"Just a scratch," Calvin rubbed the bandage he'd received at an Aleator medical clinic. He took out a separate datadisc and tossed it to Shen. It contained all the information they could extract from the corpses of his attackers. "Scan through that, run those prints, and get me what you can on these guys. I want to know who they are, where they came from, and how they knew we were Imperials."

"How'd you get digital images of their prints?" asked Summers after Shen had plugged the disc into his terminal.

"Cleverly," Calvin left it at that. He wasn't about to admit they'd been handed over to him by the Roscos. Part of him wanted to withhold that disc too, but he knew running the prints and checking into the backgrounds of his attackers was too much to handle in addition to everything else he was investigating.

"We need to send a report to Fleet Command," said Summers, "telling them about the attack against you."

"We don't know who was behind it yet or why. So there's nothing to report." Calvin didn't want the Fleet to start digging for information regarding him on Aleator.

"I think it's pretty obvious the Rosco family is behind it," said Summers. "I've been reading about them and nothing happens on Aleator without their knowledge and permission. Especially something this big."

"I'm going to have to agree with her," Miles chimed in. "For once." He gave her a glare.

"It does seem likely," Shen added.

"I'm not convinced," said Calvin. He searched his mind for some excuse to give. He wasn't about to explain that he knew the Roscos weren't involved because he knew them personally. "I saw the attackers. They had custom weapons and didn't seem to know the area very well. That and they didn't behave like Roscos. They had to be outsiders." Calvin did think they were outsiders, but everything else he'd made up. Part of him didn't want to hurt their investigation by providing bad information, but he needed some excuse to delay reporting to the Fleet. "So we're going to look into it some more before making a report."

"Are you sure?" asked Miles.

"What part of what I said makes me sound unsure?" Calvin became annoyed.

"Whatever you say."

"Summers," Calvin turned to his XO. "Did your survey of the system find anything?"

"Yes. The Harbinger was definitely here. Engine signatures about five million mc's out. Also, the ship's name was logged on the arrival manifest. But that's all we have. We couldn't get a good enough footprint to determine where they were headed for sure. Our best guess is somewhere in The Corridor."

"The Corridor, you say?" Calvin took his seat at the command position. "Let's try Brimm."

"Any particular reason?"

"Just a hunch."

"Based on what, Lieutenant Commander?"

"We have to start somewhere and that will do. Now, Sarah, set course and get us underway."

"Yes sir," she input the new course.

"ETA?"

"Ten hours."

"So what do we do in the meantime?" asked Miles.

Calvin looked from him to Summers. "We check up on our friends in the infirmary."

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When Calvin arrived, he found the infirmary locked down. He approached and the two soldiers stood down for him to pass.

The door whisked open and he stepped into the infirmary. It was a medium-sized rectangular room crowded with beds, computers, and all kinds of technology he didn't understand. In the far corner, Dr. Monte Blair was stroking his thin grey beard while looking over an X-ray monitor and giving out sporadic orders to some of the other medics.

"Hello there," said Calvin.

Monte looked up and, upon seeing Calvin, ambled over. "What brings you here?"

"I want to know about our injured soldiers," he noticed them on two of the beds. One still had his eyes closed and appeared to be sleeping but the other was sitting up, bent over and running a hand over his buzzed hair—he seemed distant, almost unaware of his surroundings. They both looked much better than they previously had. "They seem to be doing okay."

"They've both regained consciousness—don't let that one fool you, he's not asleep just resting," Monte shook his head. "Neither are ready to return to duty yet, however. Mitchell has some swelling and they both have head and neck pain. Nothing serious, no spinal damage or anything. They're going to be fine."

"Are they up for some questioning?"

"I think so, just go easy on them for now. In an hour or two they'll be free to leave and return to Special Forces HQ."

"Okay," said Calvin. "I'd like to interview them in a more private environment," his eyes shifted from the noisy machines to the busy staff.

"How about my quarters?" offered the doctor.

"Perfect, and I'd like you to come along."

"Of course I'm coming, it's my quarter."

Once they were all together behind closed doors Calvin got right to the point. "I'd like to know how you were incapacitated and put into that container." He said, looking one of them in the eyes—the name "Adams" was stitched to his fatigues and he wore the emblem of master sergeant.

"I don't know," said Adams.

"Dr. Blair told us what happened, how you found us and all," said Mitchell—the other soldier. "But we don't remember any of that. It's not like we would've let someone put us there by choice. I mean, what if we ran out of water or air or something?" Mitchell sounded edgy, almost defensive.

"I'm not implying you *let* yourselves be overpowered, soldier. I just want to know what happened. When a prisoner escapes and surveillance footage disappears, *and* two of the Empire's finest soldiers get taken down on *my* ship, I want to know why and how."

"Makes sense," said Adams. He shot Mitchell a look that made him hold his tongue. Calvin wondered if he were sending him instructions on how to handle this conversation, perhaps to keep a secret.

"Okay let's take it back a step. You don't remember being put in the container, what about before that? Were you in a fight? Did you catch a glimpse of your attacker?"

Adams shook his head slowly. "No we weren't in a fight. And no, I didn't see anything; did you?" He looked at Mitchell who shook his head.

Calvin kept pressing. "Did you hear anything? A footstep? The crackle of the forcefield powering down? Anything at all?"

"No."

It really did seem like they were sending each other signals on how to answer. Shifty eyes, nervous glances, subtle body language, Mitchell's defensive posture...

Calvin ordered one of them out of the room so he could talk to them individually.

"Okay, Adams," said Calvin. "What is the last thing you *do* remember? You were guarding the brig, the werewolf was behind the forcefield, then what happened?"

"We stood guard as ordered, sir."

"For how long?"

"I don't know. Until I woke up in the infirmary."

"So you have no idea how the forcefield was deactivated?"

"No, sir."

"Did the prisoner say anything to either you or Mitchell?"

"No, sir."

"How long were you standing guard before your memory gets all fuzzy?"

"I don't know, sir."

"Dammit make a guess, *son*," said Monte.

"Umm... I dunno. Maybe ten minutes or so. I'm sorry, sir, I really don't know," he paused. "I was standing there, gun in my hands, and that's the last thing I remember."

Calvin looked into the man's face, particularly his eyes. He was perfectly calm, eyes steady, face placid. Even his voice was smooth and crisp. Calvin couldn't decide if that meant he should trust him or not. Either he told the truth or his lie was masterfully practiced, perhaps overly so.

"Thank you, Adams, that'll be all."

"Aye, sir."

"Tell Mitchell to come in on your way out."

With a salute, Adams left.

"What do you think?" Calvin looked over at Monte who now had his feet up on his coffee table.

"He might be telling the truth. It is possible for someone to lose consciousness and not remember the moment when it happened. Like the instant when you fall asleep, you can't remember that."



The door opened and in stepped Mitchell. Calvin ordered him to take a seat.

"Mitchell, what is the last thing you remember before waking up in the infirmary?"

"I don't know, I don't remember."

Calvin sat up. What a strange response. "You mean you don't remember the last thing you remember?"

"I don't know." He said abruptly—not nearly as well-composed as Adams. But he wasn't sweating or trembling. Just sharp, abrasive, and a bit thoughtless.

"It's very important that you listen to me carefully," Calvin spoke slowly. "And answer truthfully and completely. Do you understand?"

"Sir, yes, sir."

"What is the last thing you *do* remember?"

"I don't know."

"Maybe you're not hearing me, soldier," Calvin's voice sharpened. "But that's not what *remember* means. When I ask you what the last thing is you remember, you tell me the last thing you can think of. Do you remember being put on duty in the brig area?"

"Yes, sir."

"Do you remember the prisoner there?"

"Yes, sir."

"Describe him for me, please."

"A man, early thirties, brown hair, red eyes, light brown skin."

"Did you notice anything peculiar about him?"

"Yes sir, his eyes were red at first. Glowing bright red."

"How red?"

"Red sir."

"How red?"

"Very red."

"I said, *how red?*"

The soldier shrugged. "Red like... an apple that's on fire."

"That's better," Calvin relaxed. "Now, what is the last thing you remember?"

"I was on duty with Adams. We were standing guard by the prisoner. And that's all I remember."

"How long were you on duty?"

"I don't know."

"How long..." Calvin paused, "before the prisoner made his move."

"I don't know. Maybe five minutes, maybe ten."

"Did he say anything to either of you at any time?"

"I don't know."

"What do you mean you don't know?"

"I mean, I don't remember, sir."

"And if you had to make a guess?"

"I'd say no. I don't think he did. Or, if he did, I didn't hear him. He really didn't seem like the talkative sort."

"Did anyone else come onto that deck or walk by?"

"No sir."

"No or you don't remember."

"No sir, they did not."

Calvin drummed his fingers on the table beside him. "Okay, thank you, Mitchell, you're free to go."

Mitchell saluted and left.

"One person with amnesia is one thing," said Calvin, looking at Monte once more, "but *two* people forgetting the exact same thing at the exact same time, doesn't that seem improbable?"

"Yes, it does," Monte admitted. "Unless neither of them were looking the right way. You can't remember something you didn't see."

"Could be," said Calvin, wondering. "Or maybe they were tricked into lowering the forcefield and they're both too ashamed to admit it. So they conveniently don't remember."

"Our soldiers are trained better than that."

"I would hope so. The only other logical conclusion that I can see," said Calvin, "is that someone *let* the lycan go. How else could the forcefield be powered-down *and* the surveillance footage go missing?"

"You think these soldiers let the prisoner go on purpose, and then tried to hide it?"

"Maybe, maybe not," said Calvin. "They weren't in any position to switch out the surveillance footage," he paused. "But someone did that. Either that someone was working with Mitchell and Adams, and had their full cooperation, or else arranged for them to be taken down and stuffed away in that container."

"Don't you think, if they were co-conspirators, the odds of them both being randomly assigned to guard the prisoner is a bit slim?" asked Monte.

"Unless the person who assigned them to guard the prisoner was in on it."

"Major Jenkins?" Monte laughed. "No way!"

Calvin agreed that sounded absurd. He'd known Jenkins long enough to be sure of his character, and he would never, under any circumstances, compromise his own unit to let a dangerous prisoner roam free. But, Calvin realized, there was always the slim chance he was wrong.

"You Intel Wing types are always seeing too much into things. Sometimes a cigar is just a cigar."

"Sometimes," said Calvin. "But not always." Silently he agreed with the doctor. None of these suspects had motive to let Tristan go. And none of them could have known in advance Tristan would be on the ship. It was a dead end.

"It could be amnesia," said Monte. "What's important to establish here is, what is causing them to forget?"

Calvin rubbed his chin. "Could it be some kind of drug?"

"I don't know. I have mixed feelings about that hypothesis," said Monte. "Giving someone a drug intended to take effect later in the day can be rather imprecise, especially when you want it to affect two people of different sizes at the exact same time and the exact same way. It's not as simple as it looks in the movies. Most likely, what would happen, is that one soldier would go down before the other. And the one still standing would have plenty of time to alert someone."

"What about when the dentist put me out to take out my wisdom teeth? I was out like a light after only a few seconds."

"That's a really strong general anesthesia. With something like that, total unconsciousness can be achieved in no time with guaranteed loss of memory. But it would have to be administered shortly before the patients—I mean *soldiers*—became unconscious, and there are all kinds of complexities. For instance, the person could easily stop breathing, or if they're under-medicated they could have dangerously high blood pressure. Not to mention the anesthesia must be maintained, to keep someone out for an extended amount of time. It would be dangerous and complicated."

"What about blunt injuries?" asked Calvin. "You know, blows to the head."

"Their bruises and trauma weren't severe enough to suggest that," said Monte. "And that would risk neck and spinal injuries. Maybe the culprit wouldn't care about our soldiers' long term health, but whether or not he did, neither Mitchell nor Adams experienced any kind of trauma that would have risked a long term injury. So, considering that, maybe the culprit did have some motive in keeping our men intact. If so, then knocking them out with blunt force, that carefully and precisely, seems as likely as the lycan using some kind of magical lycan ability to do all of this."

"So what is your working theory?"

"I don't have any working theories. I just patch people up and figure out ways to make them feel better. How they end up in one of my hospital beds is their business."

"Okay, thanks," said Calvin with a sigh. Unsure how to keep investigating this angle.

# Chapter 14

Calvin stared at the results of his database search, regarding the fingerprints the Roscos had given him—belonging to Jacobi and those who'd attacked him on Aleator.

Jacobi had not been the man's true name, which Calvin already knew. Jacobi's prints matched one Titus Antony, a young rebel, even younger than Calvin, with a full criminal record. Apparently, before mysteriously arriving on Aleator One and helping Calvin, Titus managed to break free from prison and flee the Andricus Penal Colony, there was an open warrant for his arrest. Most of his crimes were petty: larceny, theft, vandalism, assault, that sort of thing. The only real black mark on his record, the one that'd landed him in prison, was Titus' membership in CERKO. But since the organization was officially considered defunct, no Imperial Marshals were currently pursuing him.

After reviewing Titus' information in full, Calvin moved on to each of the dead. Some of the prints were useless because the Roscos hadn't been very careful getting the samples—as thugs they lacked proper training—so he made do with what he had.

The personal backgrounds of the mysterious dead were not as similar as he had guessed; many of them came from different planets, and their ages varied by a range of eleven years, but one thing was consistent. They'd all served time at the Andricus Penal Colony for connections to CERKO, and their sentences had overlapped. Some were paroled and others had escaped along with Titus. Prior to imprisonment, they'd all been rounded up during the anti-CERKO sting operations on Tarmosis Beta.

Titus had said these attackers were members of CERKO and, judging from how well-equipped they were, it seemed CERKO was not so defunct after all. Maybe even better organized than before. That such a high-profile terror organization could be active again without Intel Wing's knowledge was disturbing, almost as disturbing as the fact that they wanted Calvin dead, at least ostensibly. He seemed like such a random, arbitrary target. Yet they'd known in advance he was going to be at Aleator, and who he was. Maybe Raidan and his mysterious allies had planted them there to kill Calvin and slow down the pursuit...

Something else stood out. The attack, despite how well prepared and funded it was, had been sloppy. It fit CERKO's profile to botch an operation, but it still didn't make sense how they were well-enough positioned to take him out yet manage to fail so completely. Their

information had been good. They'd known he'd be there. They'd known who he was. They'd had the hardware to kill him. So why had they done such a poor job of it? For the first time since his brush with death, Calvin doubted they'd ever intended to kill him at all.

But what else could they get out of it? Why attack an Intel Wing agent if not to kill him? Scare him off the chase? No, that would never work. Maybe it was someone who wanted it to look like Raidan had tried to kill his pursuer?

Or maybe CERKO really had tried to kill him and just botched it.

Titus was the key to this riddle. He'd worn an old Navy uniform, probably to get Calvin's attention. And he, like the others, was linked to CERKO. And he'd been involved in the prison break that had liberated a good dozen ex-CERKO soldiers. He was as much a red-handed CERKO operative as the rest, at least at one point in time, which helped explain why Calvin's would-be assassins seemed to trust Titus...

*No...* Calvin realized something about the memory. The first set of CERKO soldiers who escorted him away from the casino, they had trusted Titus. Up until the moment when Titus killed them. But the second group they ran into, the woman and man around the corner, had opened fire without a word and killed Titus—their own man! Did they intend to kill him all along to help clean up the operation? Or did they somehow know Titus had betrayed them? Perhaps they fired because they saw Calvin still alive? Calvin tapped his desk wondering. *Always more questions than answers...*

After several minutes of getting nowhere, he opened a secure connection to Aleator One, encrypted using Aleator's own operating codes which Calvin had access to and his crew didn't. He gave the appropriate key phrases to connect directly to Grady.

"What can I do for you, Calvin?"

"I've reviewed some of the package you gave me," said Calvin as he ejected the datadisc from his computer and locked it in a drawer. "And I discovered that everybody involved was connected to CERKO. The only dead guy who wasn't was my soldier whose body, I assume, is on its way to his family."

"Yeah it's on its way first class. The Empire forwarded the money a few hours ago. As for CERKO, that doesn't really surprise me. We've been hearing that name thrown around here and there. So far I don't have anything for you, except for a couple of leads on how those guys got here. Unregistered private vessels, they came on at least two different ships. We've locked them both down. There might have been a third but, if so, we haven't found it yet. That's all I've got for you."

"Any idea who owns those ships?"

"No, they were found abandoned."

"Too bad."

"Anything else?"

"Yeah, it's pretty likely one or more of their operatives survived. Either by escaping your men or else by not being involved in the attack outside the casino. Maybe he was an accessory rather than a soldier. Someone who housed them, or gave them directions, or information. If so, that person—or group—might still be on the station, especially if you're watching all the ships that leave. Backtrack and find out where these guys stayed, who they talked to, review whatever security footage you have. And see if you can find anything."

"Yeah, yeah, I know how to run my outfit. When we find them, and we will, we'll nail the bastards to the wall."

"Try to get some information from them *before* you nail them to the wall."

"Yeah, yeah."

"One last thing. I want to know if any of these CERKO operatives, at any point, had contact with the team that came aboard from the Harbinger. Even for just a second. Or if they could have contacted the Harbinger from your station. I have to know if they're connected."

"Okay, for you, I'll check thoroughly."

"Thanks. Let me know when you find something."

"Likewise."

The transmission ended and Calvin rested his head in his hands. He was still somewhat rattled from the firefight but it was nothing he hadn't seen before. He'd probably never get used to seeing violence like that, but he knew how to compartmentalize and deal with it.

He resumed analyzing the data in front of him and, just as he finished looking over 'Titus' file again, the name 'Tarmosis Beta' stood out.

He tapped the comm. "Summers, would you please come in for a minute?"

"Yes, sir."

A moment later his door slid open and she stepped into his office. It was all he could do to keep his eyes from combing her over top to bottom. Instead, wanting to keep his dignity, he glanced away, back at his reports. "Please, sit down."

She did, right across from him. "What is this about, Lieutenant Commander?" He caught a whiff of apple-scented lotion.

"You're from the 'Tarmosis System, right?"

"I am. I was born on 'Tarmosis Alpha."

"What do you know about 'Tarmosis Beta?" he asked, finally looking at her. "Specifically, CERKO activities there."

"I don't know much," said Summers. "I only lived in that system for two years before my family moved."

He frowned. "Okay here's what I'm looking at. My attackers were CERKO operatives. Never mind my source on that," he kept her from interrupting. "Now, I know CERKO had its primary outfit on Tarmosis Beta. And that's where the Empire cracked down on them hardest. I want to know who their ring leaders were, where their strongholds were, and most importantly how they financed their operations."

"Well, according to the military records your own agency gathered," said Summers. "They were a loose, disorganized alliance of small groups, not a large outfit, and their strongholds were city basements and warehouses. Their money came through extortion, kidnappings, theft, and the occasional private donation. And the ring leaders were all rounded up and executed."

"Hmm..." Calvin scratched his head. That description of CERKO may have been accurate a decade ago, but it seemed lacking now. It certainly didn't explain how they'd managed to arm a dozen people and get them halfway across the Empire into neutral space to attack a low-profile, hard-to-find target like Calvin... *that* required some serious organization and funding. If nothing else, the information of who Calvin was, what he looked like, and where he'd be wasn't easy to find and therefore wouldn't be cheap. Calvin wondered if the person who'd organized the hit had an informant inside Intel Wing—a truly disturbing thought.

"Who is your source?" asked Summers.

"It seems," said Calvin, ignoring her question. "That we're dealing with a new CERKO, one that is more centrally unified and has access to a lot more money."

"So you're not going to answer my question?" she looked irritated.

"One of the men on Aleator didn't attack me, he helped me. He killed a couple of my attackers before he himself was killed."

She sat up.

Calvin continued. "He didn't get a chance to say much, but he mentioned CERKO. I don't think he said that to throw me off. And his fingerprints match those of an ex-CERKO operative and so do the fingerprints of all my attackers. They're all connected to CERKO. I take that as a pretty strong sign that CERKO is, to one degree or another, thriving. And that it had its hand in the attack on Aleator One. Wouldn't you agree?"

"Assuming your information is correct," she said very carefully, "then yes, I think your reasoning is sound. Why didn't you tell me this before?"

"I didn't know before, I didn't run the prints until half-an-hour ago."

Summers raised an eyebrow. "Wasn't that supposed to be Shen's job?"

Calvin shrugged. "Yeah, but I got curious. Anyway, he's doing the deep research. I just wanted a quick glance to see if there was an obvious connection."

The connection seemed too obvious, Calvin wondered if someone had meant it to be found. Perhaps trying to plant a false flag. Or maybe CERKO was trying to announce a come-back

"This just gets more and more interesting," said Calvin.

"You're over-thinking it, I can tell." Her eyes challenged his.

"Excuse me?" he asked, brought back to the moment.

"You think you're so smart because you see things other people don't. A conspiracy, a plot, whatever. But sometimes a cigar is just a cigar."

He scratched his head. "You know... that's the second time someone's told me that expression today."

She shrugged. "Maybe it's fate's way of giving you a hint."

"So you'd rather I not look for all the information and just answer the question anyway. Jump to some conclusion and be done with it. That's called guessing. You'd be a terrible math student."

"You're not *looking* at all the information. You're inventing information in your head that isn't there. Adding to the problem, making it more complex than it actually is. And just so you know, I'm great at math. It was my minor at university. What about you?"

Maybe the math quip hadn't been such a brilliant idea. "What would you know anyway? You're in the Navy. You're not trained to investigate; you're trained to shoot stuff."

"I'd put my powers of deduction against yours any day," she folded her arms. Seeing her challenge him like that, it made him smile.

"All right," he said. "It's a long flight anyway," he tapped a command and the table between them displayed a virtual chessboard.

"You're kidding. We don't have time for this."

"That's what I thought," said Calvin. "You're all talk."

"One of us should be on the bridge."

"Who has the deck?" asked Calvin.

"First Lieutenant Iwate Shen."

"He's a good officer; we're in good hands," said Calvin. "So what's the matter, chicken?"

"Do you have any idea how childish you are?" She looked unimpressed.

"No," said Calvin. "So I'll say it again, are you chicken?"

The hint of an amused smile cracked her lips but she forced it away. "All right, I suppose I can spare five minutes to prove a point."

"Only five minutes," said Calvin. "Where's your confidence?"

Her eyes narrowed. "You really are a piece of work."

They began. Calvin let her play white and make all the first moves. He was curious to see how she'd develop, what kind of position she'd create. He could learn a lot about someone by fighting them. He made moves to match her tactically. Not going out of his way to be aggressive or wrestle away



control of the board. Mostly he just wanted to see what she'd do, how her brain worked, what her tendencies were.

He found her boring and unimpressive. She was smart and her decisions were solid, but too cautious and safe. She lacked creativity and her moves, although good, were rarely surprising—and never dazzling. She built her attack patiently and her side of the board was a granite wall of well-placed pieces.

Calvin was another story. At first he made his moves quickly, partially because he was familiar with good openings and partially because he didn't take her all that seriously. But, when it became evident she was no rookie to be walked over, he had to focus a lot harder. And the slight mistakes he made at the beginning haunted him throughout the game. In his hurry to compensate and counter her threats, which were building like a slow avalanche, he kept himself alive only through a great deal of cleverness.

But he was no professional. And though he was skilled at deduction, he had a difficult time keeping focused on the game. His mind tended to wander free from the shackles of the board and he'd catch himself thinking about Summers, wondering what was going on in her head. He was more gifted at playing the player than the game, and though he found her style easy to predict, this talent was more useful in real life than it was on a 64 square playing board with only a handful of options available at any given time.

Eventually, when it looked like the game would either end in stalemate or in her favor, he took a large risk. Believing that sometimes the best move can be a heterodox one, something unpredictable that throws the opponent off her game. Messes with her head, makes her unsure of herself. Defeats her psychologically.

"Are you sure you want to put your bishop there?" asked Summers.

Calvin nodded, looking as arrogant as he could, even though his eyes were jumping all over the board to see if she could counter his idea. His ability to see ahead was only about four moves in such a complex position. "Trust me I know what I'm doing," he lied.

"Whatever you say," she took the bishop like a mouse snatching cheese.

The next several moves were slow but intense. Both players stared at the board for long periods of time before dragging their fingers across the table-screen to move their pieces. Calvin had no mercy as he unleashed a combination of attack after attack, keeping the pressure on, routing Summers' pieces, and threatening her king. It felt good to say "Check, Check, Check," and watch her pieces dance accordingly. But, since he hadn't been able to see more than a few moves into this position, he'd assumed that, given all his attacking power, he'd be able to force a win. This was not so. What had seemed like an endless ocean of checks and attacks was just a pond, and it dried up quicker than he'd expected.

Calvin knew his options had evaporated. He kept the pressure on, as best he could, going for more and more desperate jabs. Sacrificing pieces when he had to. But as Summers held him at bay she was readying an attack of her own which, Calvin knew, would not fail.

So he offered a draw, still trying to look smug. "How 'bout it?"

Her eyes laughed. "No chance, egomaniac."

"Maybe I'll just sit here then and think," he took out a book and pretended to read.

"Your clock's ticking."

If he moved, he'd lose the game soon and if he didn't move he'd lose on time. But not for ten minutes. He considered making her wait the whole time to see if she was impatient enough to accept the draw but, ultimately, decided that was bad sportsmanship and he resigned. "You're a very good player, much better than I thought."

She smiled. "And you're... about what I expected."

"Too bad chess isn't a real game anyway," he said shrugging her off.

She chuckled. "You're right. Maybe you should stick with bingo, it's more on your level."

"*Ha ha...*" He turned off the table-screen and leaned back in his chair.

"Now poker, *that's* a game."

"You were doing fine until the end," she said. "Then you just blew it."

"See that's why chess isn't a real game. It lets you be clever but not creative. In real life all the best moves are unorthodox, unexpected, and unpredictable. There are literally infinite 'moves' you could make at any time. But in chess there's what... like twenty?"

"All the worst decisions are unorthodox too. They defy common sense. That's what makes them unorthodox, everyone knows they're stupid to do. Walking on your hands instead of your legs is unorthodox, because it's slower, harder, and stupider."

"But it *is* something you could do, if you ever found a situation where it would be useful. It's just one more strategy in your repertoire. For that rare moment when it *is* useful. No reason to limit yourself because something seems stupid most of the time. May as well keep it in your bag of options."

She cocked her head. "And when would that ever be more useful than walking the regular way?"

Calvin was known for being quick on his feet, but even he couldn't come up with anything. "What if there were a walking-on-your-hands contest and the winner got a million q?"

She folded her arms. "Are we done here?"

Calvin knew he'd picked a bad example of what a good "unorthodox move" would look like.

"Okay," said Calvin, thinking back over the last several days. "Take Raidan." She visibly shuddered at the name. "No one expected him to surrender without a fight and plead guilty, but it also made it harder for us to notice his escape plan. The predictable thing was for him to resist arrest and resist the sentence of the court, fight his battle there. Instead, he sped things along so we wouldn't have time to unravel his behind-the-scenes planning."

"And sometimes doing the unpredictable thing ends up being stupid and you get the death penalty for it. And for what? So he could blow up some alien transports out of irrational hate? What a stupid, stupid waste!"

Her strong reaction only added to Calvin's suspicion that her and Raidan's relationship had been more than just professional.

"But was it really stupid?" Calvin sat forward, anticipating her reaction.

"Are you taking Raidan's side now, Lieutenant Commander?" Summers' eyes glowed.

"No," he said. "But sometimes someone can do a bad thing in a smart way."

She gave him a strange look.

"Raidan did commit an international crime, which carries a serious burden of consequences. But what did he do it for? Maybe, somehow, the benefits outweighed the costs. I'm sure Raidan must think that's so. Otherwise he wouldn't have done it."

"Sometimes people aren't as rational as you think. Sometimes they act blindly, quickly, and emotionally," she said. "Like a father beating his child, or a gambler diving deeper into debt so he can *win it all back*, or an addict returning to the same bottle of pills even though he knows he'll hate himself for it afterwards."

That stung even though Calvin was sure Summers had no idea about his equarius habit. And she was right. Rationally he hated the pills and knew the costs outweighed the benefits, but he came back to them all the same.

"And people end up making decisions they regret later," Summers continued.

"Yeah," Calvin admitted quietly. "Sometimes they do."

She folded her arms and nodded smugly, like she'd won something. Calvin dismissed her.

## Chapter 15

"Cap'n on the bridge," said Miles. "What's up, chief?"

"I've been reviewing the details of the engagement between the Phoenix and those Rotham freighters," said Calvin. "And I've found something interesting."

"What is it?" asked Shen; they all looked curious.

"First let me ask you, if Raidan were willing to give up everything, including his life, to destroy those ships, what does that imply?"

"That he hates Rotham and possibly wanted to start a war," said Summers.

Calvin shook his head. "No that's too simple and isn't consistent with his past behaviors. Any other ideas?"

"That the ships were carrying important cargo that he needed destroyed," said Sarah.

"Exactly."

"But we know what they were carrying," said Shen, now reading the report. "The Ortahn had eighteen thousand crates of alcohol. The Guinn had a cargo of predominantly exotic spices, salts, and preservatives at approximately 80,000 kilograms. The Qiun'ha had a cache of nine hundred personal computers and seven thousand type C power cells. And the Ursa, which escaped, carried two million liters of purified water. Net worth of the combined cargo losses is registered as just over 2.5 million q. A lot of money."

"But not a lot for four freighters worth of cargo," said Summers.

"What if it's a lie. What if the ships carried something else, perhaps smuggling something illegal, we'd never know."

"That's a bold indictment," Summers frowned.

"Is it?" asked Calvin. "Then maybe you can explain why the Ursa ran back to Rotham space rather than docking at a closer outpost for repairs? There were three Imperial stations on the way to N-175 but it ignored all of them. Why?"

"Obviously they didn't trust us after being assaulted by one of our attack cruisers," said Summers.

"Maybe," admitted Calvin. "Or maybe they were hiding something. Something Raidan found out about and tried to stop."

"If they had any *secret cargo* then how did Raidan find out about it? And why would he destroy it—keeping his motives secret—rather than report it? Why not try to board the ships and seize the cargo?"

Calvin wasn't sure.

Summers continued, "And what kind of cargo could be such a threat? Something he'd throw his life away to destroy? Probably not narcotics."

"Slaves?" asked Sarah.

"Weapons, perhaps," said Calvin.

"It could be information," suggested Shen. "Either on harddrives or in the minds of some VIP passengers."

"In any case, this is all pointless speculation," said Summers. "And doesn't further our goal—which is to find Raidan."

"It's not pointless speculation, there is more evidence for my theory," said Calvin.

"Tell us what you found," said Miles.

"Anyone else wonder how an attack cruiser like the Phoenix got as damaged as it did fighting nothing but freighters?"

Silence.

"The civilian convoy had military-grade armaments and shielding, heavy armor, and professional pilots," he said, his crew looked as surprised as they were curious.

"Really?" asked Sarah.

Calvin looked at Summers. "You were there, tell them. Those were not ordinary freighters you engaged."

Summers looked embarrassed. "I was ordered elsewhere at the time and wasn't on the bridge."

"How could you know they were upgraded, aside from seeing the damage they inflicted on the Phoenix?" asked Shen.

"The report the Ursa crew submitted after the engagement, the one that incriminated the Phoenix, included some footage from the action. Details are sketchy but not too hard to put together. Shen pull up 'Beotan A-2' on the display and play the footage."

He complied and five ships appeared on the projector. Four freighters and a sleek-looking attack cruiser which closed in and exchanged fire.

"Stop," said Calvin. The image froze in place and he walked closer to it, where he could point with his hands. "See the position the ships are in?"

"Doesn't strike me as unusual," said Shen.

"The ships haven't broken formation. Usually when civilian pilots are attacked they break off individually and route in all directions. But there is no panic, they're trying to escape as a unit, discipline intact."

"Maybe they're just experienced," said Summers.

"Think so?" Calvin resumed the display and paused it a few seconds later. "Now look."

"I don't see anything interesting," said Summers.

"I do," said Sarah. "That's a kilo-six evasive pattern."

“Right,” said Calvin. “A complex evasive maneuver that the Rotham used several times during the Great War.”

“Maybe they learned how to do it on their own,” said Summers.

“Sarah, in your opinion, could someone learn how to do that on their own?” asked Calvin.

She shook her head. “That’s years of military-training to learn something like that. And those kind of ships shouldn’t even have the maneuverability to execute it.”

“Yet they did,” said Calvin. “They all did. Which brings me to my next point, not just military pilots but improved thrusters and engines. And, look at this,” he played another segment which showed the Phoenix firing a barrage of rockets at a ship, eventually destroying it. But what stood out—after careful scrutiny—was that the projectiles were being intercepted by a point deflector system. A countermeasure that was so expensive to install that even most Imperial warships didn’t have one, including the Nighthawk.

“Amazing,” said Miles. “No way some corporation could have outfitted their cargo carriers with point deflectors!”

“And that’s not all,” Calvin said, resuming the clip once more. The Phoenix cut in close and opened up a full broadside—its mounted m90’s eventually shredded the freighter’s hull but not nearly as quickly as they should have.

“That’s some solid armor plating,” said Miles.

“Yes,” said Calvin. “Clearly someone spent a lot of money upgrading those ships. Probably to protect whatever they were carrying. Raidan was not the only one who thought the cargo was important.”

“So why were the ships destroyed, if someone went to all that trouble to protect them?” asked Shen.

“Even with all those defenses, those kind of ships are still large with several hull weaknesses and systems vulnerabilities,” said Calvin. “The Phoenix is an attack cruiser—more than capable of destroying a convoy even tougher than this one. But what *is* interesting,” Calvin paused. “Is that the Ursa still managed to escape. Based on its escape velocity and trajectory, relative to the pursuing Phoenix, it never should have made it out of the system with standard engines. But it *did* clear enough distance to jump and made the altered-space calculation in practically no time. Achieving a depth of eighty-eight percent potential within three minutes. Now I *dare* you to find any standard freighter that can do that.”

“How do you know someone didn’t doctor all of this footage?” asked Summers.

“I’ve had the computer analyze it for any signs of tampering and haven’t found anything. The data agrees with what the Phoenix’s computer recorded.”

"Okay," said Shen. "I think we've established the ships were upgraded, but where does that leave us?"

"We need to find out who upgraded them and why," Calvin smiled. "Shen, I want you investigate what corporation sponsored this convoy, who owns the ships, who pilots them, find out everything you can. Since they were heading to Capital World, that means humans purchased their cargo. If the shipment was something sinister, some humans must be in on it. Find out who they are."

"Consider it done," he set to work.

"As for you, Miles," said Calvin. His defense officer turned his chair to reveal a disappointed look. He was as good of an investigator as the others but hated doing it. "Look into Tristan. Search every database for his name and check with any Rotham Police Records that are available, specifically on Aros Five. Tristan told me he had issues with the law there, probably a lie but maybe not. I want to know who he is and where he came from. As part of that, look into the proliferation of Remorii from Remus. That system is shut down and nearly impossible to enter or exit. I want to know how he, and everyone like him, got out into the galaxy. That shouldn't have been easy."

"Why?" asked Miles.

"Because it's surrounded by a huge minefield," said Sarah.

"No I mean why do *I* have to do it," said Miles giving him a wounded look. Then he grinned. "Just kidding, I'll get on it ASAP."

"Good," said Calvin. "And there is one more thing. I've been looking into the time logs, trying to make a chronology of all the events, and there is something that just doesn't add up to me. The Harbinger left Praxis at approximately 1010 hours Standard Time and made for Aleator. It detected interceptors from the Fifth Fleet and changed course to outmaneuver them. Something like that might add another three hours depending on how far it had to move, maybe even as many as five. But the Harbinger arrived at Aleator eight hours later than expected. That leaves between three and five hours unaccounted for. The question is, what could it have been doing?"

"Repairs?" suggested Sarah.

"Putting down a mutiny," Miles shrugged.

"Docking at a station," said Summers.

"Meeting up with another ship," said Shen.

Calvin shrugged. "I don't know. My working theory is that Raidan went to Aleator to meet with someone. Perhaps Raidan had to conform to that person's schedule. Maybe they'd prearranged for the Harbinger to get there at a designated time."

"Could be," said Shen.

"Sarah, we know the ship's speed, general position, and the window of time they had, we should make a range of possible places the Harbinger

could have been. Try to narrow that down and see if there are any systems, bases, or structures within its reach. If you don't find anything like that, check the shipping records and see if any vessels had a charted route through that region and could have passed the Harbinger."

"Will do," she said. "But what if it met up with an unchartered ship?"

"Then there's nothing we can do about that."

"So what are *you* going to do?" asked Summers.

"I'm going to look into CERKO."

Just then the comm started flashing and Sarah heard something through her headset. She turned to Calvin. "Priority message from Intel Wing. They have some results of a query you made. Something about what it takes to destroy a star."

"I'll take it here, put it on display," he said and sat down in the command chair.

A pre-recorded message of a man talking directly to the camera popped up. He had a professorial look about him: receding hairline, neat beard, glasses, and greying hair. "Message start. To Lieutenant Commander Calvin Cross. I read your request for information on what it would take to destroy a star, specifically TR-301. That's a pretty strange request, but an interesting question. TR was a class three star and, after reviewing the information your sensors picked up about its collapse, it's not unlike other star collapses that happen every so often. What usually happens is a change in mass. You could think of it as... all of the star's energy sources being exhausted. I'll send you over more specific notes on this but let me just say that collapsing a star artificially is not within the practical limits of known technology.

"However, there is a theoretical way this could be done. A star could be compressed using magnetic fields. Ships of high magnetism could orbit the star opposite its polarity and spin, but such a process might take a million years—if it worked at all. It's never been tested. Intel Wing's opinion is that TR-301 collapsed of natural causes, despite its relatively young age and seemingly healthy ratio of hydrogen to helium. End Message."

The screen blinked off.

"You heard the man," said Miles, "nothing suspicious."

"Magnetic ships..." Calvin stared at the blank display, as if seeing past it. "I wonder if that's possible." For some reason, even in the face of good scientific reasoning, he couldn't get past his nagging suspicion that the star's destruction had not been a random event. He decided to look into it a bit more anyway when he had the chance. If nothing else, to put the issue to rest in his mind. "Shen, launch one of our probes to do a deep search of the region. Maybe a volume of two cubic clicks."

"You're chasing after ghosts, Cal," said Shen. "But I'll do it."



"Maybe..." said Calvin, deep in thought. "Make sure it gets a good look at any stellar formations in that region."

"That's a pretty wide volume," said Shen. "But the probe should be programmed and ready to launch within the hour. Although, it'll take some time to get there."

"That's fine. Just make sure it doesn't stray too close to the black hole, if there is one now."

Shen smiled. "I'll keep that in mind."

"There's just one other thing," said Calvin and he tapped his direct line to the Major's office at Special Forces HQ. "Major," he said.

"I'm here," the man's gravelly voice replied through the comm.

"Even though the lycan isn't on our ship anymore, I'm still concerned about his escape from the brig and what happened to your two men who were guarding him. I asked them several questions but neither seemed to remember anything important. And let's not forget the swapped surveillance tape. I need you to get to the bottom of this."

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Calvin was asleep in his quarters when the alert came. A blinking red light on the panel with an obnoxious chirping. He rolled out of bed and crashed onto the floor. "Oh dammit," he said, his voice a bit hoarse. He got to his feet and answered the call.

"Yeah, what is it?"

His Second Officer, Lieutenant Commander Vincent Rose, spoke from the other end. "Distress call from Brimm Station, sir. Along with a report."

"Are they under attack?" asked Calvin, feeling his heart quicken. He grabbed for a shirt and pulled it over his head.

"They were. I think you'd better get up here."

Rose was a good junior commander and he knew how to handle his crew, the Red Shift, but Calvin had always gotten the distinct impression that Rose had little confidence in himself. Part of Calvin wanted to give Rose as many opportunities as possible to command the ship in difficult situations, but an Imperial Station under attack wasn't going to be one of them.

"On my way," said Calvin and he darted for the bridge.

When he arrived, his junior officers saluted him. The Red Shift was "second watch" and mostly composed of petty officers and junior grade lieutenants, none of whom had even the full bronze of First Lieutenant except Rose whose uniform boasted the same silver bar Calvin wore. Their group had been on shift since White Shift was relieved five hours ago and Calvin didn't miss the eagerness on their faces.

"Captain on the bridge," one said.

"Okay, Rose, what've we got?"

"The Harbinger entered Brimm about six hours ago. The station sent out several patrol craft and ordered it to stand down. When the Harbinger didn't respond, Brimm launched fighters, but only fifteen were on standby and they didn't have weapons that could pierce the dreadnought's defenses.

"The Harbinger attacked, disabled, and boarded a Rotham starship, which was there on an exchange program. Its crew of nineteen was captured and taken aboard the Harbinger. The alien ship was then destroyed. After that, the sentry ships engaged the Harbinger but it ignored them and maneuvered straight for the station, boarding it. There was a small arms battle and the Harbinger's crew broke into the station's computer systems and copied several terabytes of data. They returned to their ship before more security forces could arrive. Then the Harbinger left the system. Brimm had no ships able to mount a pursuit."

"Okay," said Calvin, taking his seat. "What kind of casualties did the station take?"

"Three dead and six wounded. Eleven others were incapacitated but received no major injuries. Mostly the Harbinger's assault team used non-lethal weapons. Some of the deaths are reportedly from friendly-fire."

"Did the station's security forces take down anyone from the Harbinger?"

"At least two were shot but the Harbinger didn't leave anyone behind."

"Okay, contact the station and tell them their security teams need to carefully comb the area where the fight occurred. Have forensics check it over, and tell the base to review any surveillance footage. We need to know if these people—presumably working for Raidan—are the Harbinger's crew or if they're outsiders who commandeered the ship. Also they should identify what data was stolen specifically and give it to us so we can look it over." Calvin looked to the helmsman, a second lieutenant named Jay. He was an experienced forty-something year old ex-marine more than capable of being a ship's primary pilot—held back only because Sarah was the best in the business.

"I'm on it, sir," said Jay and he contacted Brimm Station.

"Now, about that alien ship that was attacked," Calvin turned his attention back to Rose who still stood rigidly at alert nearby. "What do we know about it?"

"It's the T'orma, a Rotham sloop working in our territory under the joint jurisdiction of the Republic and Brimm Authorities. As I said, part of an exchange program. We have one of our own in Rotham space operating under similar conditions."

"Is its crew Rotham, human, or both?"

"Rotham, sir, to the last man."

Calvin scratched his chin wondering if Raidan had attacked the ship simply because it was Rotham owned and operated or because it was engaging in some kind of activity Raidan didn't approve of, perhaps carrying something he didn't like.

"Rose, I want you to run a check on all the individuals who were aboard the Rotham ship—the ones captured and dragged away onto the Harbinger. See if anything interesting pops up."

"I can't do that, sir," said Rose.

Calvin tensed. "Why not?"

"Brimm Station won't release the identities of the Rotham crew or any information as to their cargo, operations, past activity, or current mission."

"That's... interesting," Calvin found it very unusual that an Imperial Station would refuse to assist an Imperial investigation. "We can force them by inciting the Intelligence Privilege Laws. They're obviously hampering our investigation and that's illegal."

"I already tried that, sir. It seems they have special circumstances. The Rotham ship is still property of the Rotham Republic. The exchange treaty allows for complete anonymity and lets the Rotham Republic withhold information about their ship from us as per their request. We can do the same thing with our ship in their space. It's a gesture of good will."

"It's a gesture of bullshit. Did you check with Intel Wing to see if they can circumvent that treaty?" asked Calvin, even though he knew the odds were not great.

"They said their hands are tied."

"Of course..."

"Sir, we're approaching Brimm System in one minute," Jay said from the helm.

"Shields are up and weapons hot," the Red Shift defense officer said. He was the rookie of the bunch, hailed as a prodigy at the academy and only nineteen. Patrick O'Conner, a red headed, hot-tempered, unbridled, albeit talented, sometimes defiant midshipman.

"Keep the shields up until we know the area is secure," said Calvin. "But power down the weapons."

"With all due respect, *sir*," said Patrick. "The Harbinger could still be out there, and we need to play it safe."

"The last thing we want to do is spook Brimm Station by flashing our teeth. Now power down our weapons, that's an order."

"Yes, sir," he didn't seem happy but he complied.

"Jay, bring us out of altered space ten million mc's from the planet. Cassidy, put us at alert condition two, all hands standby." The trim woman at ops acknowledged him and her lithe fingers fluttered over the controls. She was a quiet one and since Calvin spent most of his time with White Shift—

his senior officers—he hadn't yet gauged her skill or picked up much about her personality. He didn't know how far he could push her so he didn't completely trust her yet and suspected she might not trust him wholeheartedly either.

"Coming out of altered space... now," said Jay. The windows were still black except for the burning yellow sun in the distance which obscured all the stars. "Proceeding on direct course to the station at standard heading, the planet should be visible soon."

"Display it," said Calvin. A projected image of a simple blue and white planet appeared. It had very little land and seemed almost completely oceanic. In a simple orbit was a medium-sized station. If it was damaged from the Harbinger's attack it didn't show it.

"Incoming message from Brimm One."

"Play it on the main speakers and display visual if we're getting that feed."

The image of a middle-aged blue-and-black uniformed man, with the sapphire emblem of full commodore, materialized on an alternate display. His light hair was carefully styled and the room he was broadcasting from, a private office, looked immaculately clean and organized.

"IWS Nighthawk, you're sure a sight for sore eyes."

"I understand you've been having some trouble out here," said Calvin. "Any information you can give me will help us greatly."

"We already transmitted our official report to you, Intel Wing, and Fleet Command. But if you have some questions, I'm happy to answer them."

"The Rotham ship," said Calvin. "Who was on it?"

"I can't release that information, I'm sorry..." he seemed to squint. "Lieutenant Commander."

"I understand," Calvin lied, still thinking the treaty was stupid. "I hear the Harbinger stole some of your data. It would help us immensely if we could analyze it."

"I'm sorry, Lieutenant Commander, that data is sensitive in nature and I'm not authorized to release it."

"Who is?"

"I can't help you there either."

*Typical...* "You understand," said Calvin, "that the less information we have, the less likely we are to track down the Harbinger and prevent any future incidents. We also won't be able to return the abducted Rotham crew."

"I *can* tell you this, the information taken from our computers is not relevant to where the Harbinger is going. In fact, we can't seem to figure out how it could possibly be valuable to those criminals at all. Shipping reports. Personnel manifests. Personal logs. That sort of thing."

"If it's so trivial why can't you release it?"

It's complicated and I'm not at liberty to go into the details. Has to do with international politics. But our sentry ships have studied the Harbinger's exit signatures and know it is heading toward the Iota System."

"I'll have to verify that escape vector for myself."

"I assure you it is correct."

Calvin smiled. "Nevertheless."

"Any other questions?"

"Yeah I have a few more. Your security garrison consists of what, a few hundred marines and other officers?"

"Six hundred and ten."

"How large was the party that boarded your station?"

"About fifty men and women."

"So if you knew the Harbinger was headed for your station and about to board, why couldn't your men contain them in the hangar platform? Clearly you have the firepower."

"That was just it," the Commodore looked embarrassed. "We sent all available units to hold off the hangar platform but the Harbinger didn't dock with us in a conventional way. It hooked itself to the port arm of our base, near where our computer hard drives and main terminals are stored, and more-or-less cut its way in. I've never seen anything like it and somehow they managed not only to cut through the hull of our station but they also sealed the hole to their jetways so their own people could board without pressure suits."

Calvin did not find this surprising. As an Intel Wing member he'd known about recent progress in ship-to-ship breaching technologies.

The Commodore continued, "when they cut the hole, we evacuated that deck, not knowing they would keep everything from being blown out into space, letting them come aboard unopposed at first. By the time we could scramble some teams to engage them it was too little too late. They got what they wanted and left. What's really strange is that they set up a portable forcefield to keep our broken hull intact without losing too much pressure or more than fifteen percent of our atmosphere on that deck."

"So they didn't actually want to hurt anyone or cause any permanent damage," said Calvin.

The Commodore frowned and said nothing.

"How did the Harbinger get past your shields?"

"They fired a barrage of high-impact missiles. We fired back but a lot of our defense systems have been undergoing maintenance this past week."

"I don't see any damage to your station."

"They used pulsar torpedoes."

"That's a technology meant to disable and not destroy," said Calvin. "Almost like they meant you no harm."

"I wouldn't say that, they did injure several of our people and three of ours are dead from the encounter."

"I heard that was friendly-fire."

"I admit," the Commodore paused for a deep breath. "The circumstances of the soldiers' deaths are unclear and there have been accusations of friendly-fire, but nothing has been confirmed officially. The report you're referring to is the opinion of the commander on the ground and isn't necessarily representative of our station's findings."

"I see," said Calvin. "And the invaders used non-lethal weapons?"

"It appears that way, though three of our soldiers did die."

"You said that already."

"Well, it looks like we're done here," the Commodore said.

"One more thing, sir," said Calvin. "Can you transfer us the coordinates of the Rotham ship's wreckage?"

"Our ships have already combed through it trying to recover the cargo, and before you ask—no, I'm not authorized to tell you what the cargo was. We recovered what we could, the rest is debris. You won't find anything."

"So is that a yes you'll give us the coordinates or a no I'll have to sweep the system for it myself?"

"Yes, we'll send them over, but you're wasting your time."

"Maybe, maybe not. Thanks for your help, Commodore." Calvin nodded to Jay and he terminated the call. "Set a course to those coordinates. Cassidy, get a deep scan ready."

"Yes, sir."

"Why are we going there if it's just a waste of our time?" asked Patrick. He turned the defense post's chair to show his disapproval of Calvin face-to-face.

"Because we need to know what was on that ship," said Calvin. "And our scanners are more precise than anything they have on their system patrol craft. If they did miss something, we might find it."

"Shouldn't we be chasing after the Harbinger?"

"It's got a four hour head start. Iota is what, eleven hours from here?"

"Thirteen," said Jay.

Calvin continued. "Even at top speed we couldn't overtake them. At best, we'd shave off two hours from their head start. And if we did catch them what could we do? We couldn't dream of taking on a dreadnought that many times our size."

"Intel Wing seems to disagree," quipped Patrick.

"What are you talking about?"

"I should have informed you immediately, sir, I apologize." Lieutenant Commander Rose said. "We got the order a little while ago. If we find the Harbinger we're to shoot it on sight. No waiting for reinforcements and no

attempts to contact it and bring it in peacefully. We're to send a report to Intel Wing and Fleet Command and then engage the ship immediately. Focusing on its altered space initiator engines."

So Princess Kalila had been right. The Admirals had decided losing the Nighthawk was worth it if it meant a shot at disabling the Harbinger. "If we find it we'll do what we have to do," said Calvin, but he had no intention of attacking the Harbinger. Suicide didn't sound very appealing. "But until then, our first duty is to investigate and you'd do well to remember that, Patrick," he eyed the young defense officer sternly. "So put your trigger finger away and use your brain for a bit. If you were Raidan, why would you attack a Rotham ship in Imperial space?"

Patrick shrugged. "Any number of reasons. There's not enough information to make any kind of informed conclusion, especially if you consider the fact that Raidan's reasoning skills are probably not as good as my own. So he's more likely to make irrational decisions, and irrational decisions are the hardest to predict since they border on randomness. Bottom line, I have no idea."

"Good, then you have something to keep busy thinking about," said Calvin. "In the meantime, since I'm awake anyway, I'll be in my office. Cassidy," he looked at the ops station. "Make sure you scan the debris thoroughly."

"Yes, sir."

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When the bridge contacted him, saying they'd found something, Calvin had them send a copy of the information to his office. Buried deep in the Rotham ship's debris were two things. A tiny datadisc and traces of isotome—an extremely rare, unstable compound found in only one place in the galaxy.

Since he was no physicist, he would let his lab ponder over the relevance of the isotome while he accessed the data from the disc on his computer. It was a recording and he played it over and over.

"If you're hearing this message, then you haven't disappointed me, Calvin Cross." It was a software-disguised voice, exactly like the one he'd heard in his quarters on Praxis just before the trial. "But I must warn you," it went on. "If you come after me, as some hope you will ... *They* will come after you. And they will find you. They always do. If you're smart, you'll go home now and live a long peaceful life. Because if you don't, and you see what I've seen... that's one step too many. And there's no going back from that. Believe me, I know."

It changed to a man's voice with flat intonation. "*I stop shiny sunsets. I find pale blue lights, always.*"

The first part, the warning, was bone-chilling. But didn't really tell him anything, except someone—other than Raidan—wanted Calvin dead if he kept going. Someone, Calvin assumed, who was connected to CERKO, and the attack against him on Aleator. For all he knew he'd crossed that line already, whatever it was. And, regardless of risk to himself, it was more than just duty that drove him to keep pursuing Raidan; it was who he was as a person. He *had* to know.

The second part of the message was even more interesting than the first. Perhaps because it made no immediate sense.

He took the clip of the man's voice and ran it through the database. He wasn't sure what the limits of the software were but knew, sometimes, voice recognition was possible. This man, who sounded vaguely like Raidan, had no official match in the database. Or rather, fit a list of over three hundred thousand potential matches. Calvin searched the results for "Asari Raidan" and found him. He wasn't the closest match but he did make the list. The voice could belong to him. The computer listed the probability at less than thirty percent but Calvin's intuition told him it was closer to a hundred.

"What are you trying to tell me, Raidan?"

Calvin thought of the statement itself, "I stop shiny sunsets. I find pale blue lights, always." And tried to solve it like a riddle. "Something that stops sunsets and sees pale blue lights..." He turned this over in his mind.

The obvious answer seemed to be *the night*. It came when the sunset was over, perhaps 'stopping it', and the "pale blue lights" could be stars. Night from the point of view of a planet.

Or maybe it could be a moon. A moon would stop the sunset briefly during a solar eclipse and it might be a good vantage point for seeing stars, depending on its position relative to the local sun... but that answer seemed even weaker than the first. And it also depended on "pale blue lights" meaning the stars, which was a weak supposition at best.

"Night time," he said aloud, tapping his fingers on his desk. Even if that were the answer, it didn't buy him anything. Night-time could be anywhere in the galaxy, and there was nothing specific about it to link it to Raidan.

Maybe Raidan had left this clue to throw him off. Give him something distracting to slow him down. But that didn't feel right. If Raidan had wanted to distract Calvin, he would have offered him a false lead. Something to chase. Not taunt him with a riddle. No, Raidan was definitely trying to tell him something. But what?

He wondered if the exact phrase itself was useless and the real message was buried in the pattern of the words, like a code.



So he wrote out the words and played around with them for some time. Re-arranging the letters. Searching for patterns.

"I find pale blue lights, always..."

A normal person, Calvin thought, would probably phrase it "I always find pale blue lights," not "I find pale blue lights, always." The order of the words felt more awkward this way. Therefore the order probably was deliberate and might then be the cipher.

He started at the top by taking only the first letter of each word, the simplest way he could imagine burying a code. "I,S,S,S,I,F,P,B,L,A." The ISS at the beginning seemed like a prefix identifier for an Imperial starship, which excited him. But disappointment set in when he realized *ISS SIFPBLA* didn't really fit the Empire's naming conventions. He tried turning the latter part around and was equally unimpressed with *ISS ALBPFIS*.

He considered the possibility that it was scrambled but, ultimately, decided using the first letter of each word in the clue wasn't the correct cipher. He tried using the last letters, which came up with an equally worthless answer. *IPYSIDEEESA*. Again he wondered if it was scrambled but couldn't come up with anything better than SAY DIE PIES.

"This is a waste of time," he realized and tapped his intercom. "Deck four auxiliary," he said, unsure who was manning the post at this hour.

"Yes, sir. Midshipman Hughes standing by."

"I'm sending you a short code for textual analysis. I don't think it's very complex, either you or the computer should be able to find a coherent message inside it without much trouble. When you do, send the result to my computer and contact me either in my quarters, my office, or on the bridge."

"Yes, sir."

Calvin typed the message and transmitted it to Hughes, adding, "let me know once you've figured out what the deal is with that isotome we picked up from the debris."

"I already have some preliminary results on that, Captain."

"Go ahead."

"Isotome is an extremely rare compound stable only in the Xenobe Nebula region. It cannot be synthetically produced and no one has devised a way to retrieve it without it breaking down into simpler elements, until now."

Most of this went over Calvin's head, who hadn't studied chemistry beyond the *What is an atom?* course. That and two classes on how to weaponize chemical compounds. At any rate, the fact that the Rotham ship was carrying isotome was more interesting to him than how they managed to keep it stable outside the nebula.

"What I want to know, Mister Hughes, is why someone would be transporting isotome in the first place. Isn't it supposed to be useless?"

"There's no known utility for isotome. It's violently reactive, unstable, and until now it's never been retrievable. Honestly... anti-matter is more stable."

"So nobody buys it or uses it for anything?"

"Correct."

"That we know of..." Calvin muttered to himself. "All right, what about as a novelty. It's extremely rare. Maybe someone would purchase it as a trophy or part of a collection or something. Or it could be vital to some kind of scientific study."

"I really don't know, sir."

Calvin realized he wasn't getting anywhere with this, he dismissed Mister Hughes and terminated the call with, "If you find out anything else, or decode that message, let me know right away."

Now only one piece of evidence remained—the data the Harbinger stole from Brimm Station. If only there were some way to get it.

He tapped his comm again, this time to his Chief Engineer, First Lieutenant Andre Cowen's quarters. "Andre, sorry to wake you up but I have a quick question for you."

"Go ahead, Calvin, I was awake anyway." The croak in his voice betrayed his polite lie.

"Is there something on our ship that, if broken, would take about an hour to repair? A repair that might be easier to do while docked than afloat in open space?"

"Well there are thousands of systems on the ship and almost anything is easier to fix at port, but all our systems are operating perfectly, why?"

"I was just thinking it'd be very *convenient* if we had to make a pit stop at Brimm One. You know, so their resources could help diagnose and fix our problem."

"Are you asking me to sabotage our beautiful ship?"

"Would it be too much trouble?" Calvin was glad he was thoroughly trusted by most of his crew.

"Come to think of it, I thought I noticed a few shorts in the electrical wiring and some trouble with a few of the superconductors. Or, at least, there will be as soon as I get dressed and down to engineering."

"Good, just don't let anyone know it was you."

Andre's laugh crackled over the speakers. "Of course, I have my reputation to maintain."

"Thanks." He redirected the comm to the bridge. "Mister Rose," he said, waiting for a reply.

"Rose here, sir."

"I just heard from engineering," said Calvin, adding to his devious plot, "that some of our fuel cells are tainted."

"Our instruments indicate everything's fine."

"Just... take my word for it," said Calvin. Rose got the hint.

"Now that you mention it, the fuel cells could be better."

"I want you to make a pass around Brimm's most distant moon and dump sixty percent of our fuel on the far side."

"Why there, sir?"

"It's very important that Brimm doesn't see us dump the fuel. They must think our fuel is low anyway."

"Their sentry ships will notice it."

"But not for awhile."

"Should we stop our scan and get to that right away?"

"No, finish the scan, and then go around the moon at a slow pace, nice and cool. Tell Brimm we're doing a complete scan of the system. In the meantime I'll contact the Commodore and let him we need to dock soon for a resupply and repair."

"I'll see to it."

Calvin knew the senior staff of Brimm One wouldn't want the Nighthawk to dock with their station, especially if it put their "sensitive information" at risk. But he figured he'd created enough reasons to demand a short link-up with their docking bay and, hopefully, he could get someone inside.

Now it was just a matter of selecting the right person for the job.

## Chapter 16

Shen sat at his desk in his quarters clicking through a slideshow of pictures on his computer. Next to him sat the remains of a microwaved cheese sandwich experiment that had turned out to suck. Not far away were a litter of pastry crumbs and candy wrappers. The *coup-de-grace* was the half-empty glass bottle of soda that was so orange it almost glowed in the dim light.

Shen wasn't *too* overweight, in his opinion. After all, if he were, he wouldn't be allowed in Intel Wing. But, despite the yearly fitness exam, he knew he fell into the barely-acceptable BMI range by only a razor thin margin.

But he found food comforting and had never been particularly satisfied with his appearance even when he'd been thinner. As he continued clicking through pictures he stopped on one of himself with Sarah. The contrast between them was glaring.

She was beautiful of course, attractively thin with nice thick lips curled into a smile under shining chocolate-brown eyes. Her hair poured down her face stylishly and he couldn't help but imagine the sweet scent of whatever it was she put on every day.

And then there was him. Untucked shirt, unkempt hair, a little more belly than he'd like to see, and the pale round face of someone uncomfortable in front of a camera. His goofy expression didn't help things either. He looked like an obese deer frozen in headlights with about as much personality as a ghost. For the millionth time he wished he were as witty, sharp, and attractive as Sarah was, so she could see something in him, something more than friendship. Though that seemed laughably impossible.

At least they were friends; he did have that... if nothing else. But that just enabled him to be close enough to her to realize what he was missing out on. He couldn't get her out of his head and some loud, masochistic part of him demanded he make his intentions clear. At least let her know he was interested. Then, when she inevitably rejected him, he could maybe find some closure to his burning emotions. But he couldn't think of how to do it.

*Send her flowers, maybe? Women like flowers, right? Too bad flowers aren't exactly standard on a military starship.*

He considered giving her a card or, perhaps best of all, a letter. But all of these seemed like inadequate gestures and though the thought of doing something tickled him inside, it also terrified him. And because of that fear, talking to her directly was out of the question.

He closed the slideshow and stood up to sweep his food mess into the garbage. He wanted to be a neat person, but somehow his room just got away from him. Like the eleventh wonder of the universe, he just couldn't figure out how it happened.

His panel started flashing and chirping so he hustled over to answer it. "Shen here."

"It's Calvin," his CO's voice filled the room sounding scratchy. The low bit comm system always irked Shen who knew it wouldn't be *that* expensive to put in something better. "I have an important mission for you."

Shen was intrigued. "What is it?"

"We're cruising near Brimm Station and not long ago the Harbinger forced entry and stole a bunch of data off the station's hard drives. I want you to make a copy of all that data and get it aboard our ship."

It took Shen a second to catch up with what Calvin was saying. "So... I take it they don't want us to have this data, which is why you want me to steal it instead of asking them for it."

"No rust on you."

"And you're pretty convinced we need this data."

"If the Harbinger stole it then we need it, because we need to know why they took it." Calvin sounded resolute, and since Shen considered himself a loyal friend of Calvin's he would do all he could for him. But wasn't exactly sure how to begin.

"I'll do what I can."

"Is there some way for us to link up with their computers from here and hack in to get the data?"

Shen sighed. Typical management, always expecting more from software and hardware than it could actually do. Just because computer expertise looked like magic didn't mean it was. "You've been watching too many movies, Calvin."

"All right, I suspected that but I had to be sure. Which is why I have a plan B. How about if I get you aboard their station? What would you need to pull this off?"

Shen thought for a minute. "Okay, first off I'd need some kind of external device I can hook up to their system physically to download all the material. How much data are we talking about here?"

"The report said 'several terabytes'."

"Okay that's no problem, I can use my own thumbkey," his eyes automatically darted to its place plugged into his linkup. "But the main problem is that I need access to their system. I'm guessing it requires some kind of secure log-on I'd have to get past in order to run searches and copy data."

"Can't you just hack your way around that?"

Again, too many movies. "It's not quite that simple, Calvin. A really good security framework might take years or even decades to break through. And for just one guy, I might spend my whole life trying to do it and never succeed."

"So what's your idea?"

Shen ran a hand through his mussy hair. "What kind of time window do I get?"

"About an hour."

Considering it would take several minutes to download the data, and maybe just as much to find it, let alone find a computer hooked up to the right server, he didn't like his chances. "I'm not going to lie, it's pretty grim. This may not be possible."

"I'll give you a few minutes to see if you can come up with any ideas. We should at least try something."

"Okay, okay, let me think." Shen sat on his bed and tried to imagine the setup of the computer systems on the station. He'd never been to Brimm but the typical situation was pretty standard in Imperial space. Intranet with an external hookup to the Empire-Wide-Network, he knew roughly how it was served, the capabilities of the mainframe, and what kind of software kept it all together. He combined that with his Intel Wing training, more or less how to lie to people and sometimes shoot them, and this gave him his best idea. Which still wasn't very good.

"Okay, Calvin," he said. "Here's what I'm thinking, if I can get onto one of their computers, which should be no problem, I think I can run a program I wrote using whatever basic user account they have logged in by default. I can't promise this, but I think I can move it over and execute it with just basic permissions. It, in turn, can take advantage of the fact that the intranet is probably..."

"Shen, can you just give me the simple version."

"Alright," he thought for a second. "Basically I can artificially generate all these requests by remotely telling all the computers on the network to start demanding lots of information from the server which will get overwhelmed and crash the system."

"So... you'll crash the system." Calvin didn't sound like he understood, and Shen wasn't about to explain it again.

"Yes," he said. "I'll make a problem for them. Their staff can fix it, but it may take them a few minutes to figure out what is happening. My hope is that I can pose as a technician, babble off some tech jargon, and get some stupid administrator to log me in to help fix it."

"I get the picture," said Calvin. "But if you crash their system how will you be able to use it to get what we need?"

"I can disable my own program—if they don't find it first and wipe it out, and then everything will work fine again. I'll do a system-wide search and download all the data. Hopefully they won't notice this. And I'll be sure to cover my steps on my way out."

"Sounds like a plan. I'll send a message to the quartermaster to send some base-standard technician clothes your way. We'll get you a fake ID too with bogus but convincing credentials. In the meantime you get what you need ready."

"Will do." The comm clicked off and Shen went to his computer to copy over the software he'd need. It still felt like a longshot, but that's what made it fun, he supposed.

And who knows, maybe there'd be a flower-shop on the station.

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Calvin spent the next several minutes arguing with various station controllers. For some reason the Commodore and his direct underlings had been evasive about talking to Calvin a second time, but as he continued to request—no, *demand*—clearance to dock with the station, by invoking Fleet bylaws, he eventually found the Commodore's face again staring back at him from the other side of his comm display.

"It's nothing personal, Lieutenant Commander," the Commodore said. "But our bays are shutdown pending further investigation of the Harbinger attack and any ships coming to dock are considered a security risk by definition. We're only following protocol."

Calvin doubted it was as simple as that. "Yes, protocol," he said. "Thank you, that's just the word I was fishing for. You see, my ship is having some electrical systems failures and we have to put in for repairs."

"That sounds like the sort of thing you can handle on your own. Don't you have an engineering staff and a standard set of replacement parts?"

"I do," Calvin admitted. "But in order to expedite our hunt for the Harbinger this repair could be done twice as fast using your resources, especially your computer scanners and calibrators." Calvin didn't know what that meant exactly but Andre had told him to say it.

"I wish I could help you."

"Oh and did I mention we are low on fuel cells? Current estimate says we couldn't initiate an altered-space jump of more than forty-five percent potential. At that rate we'd get to Iota several days too late. And all because you wouldn't restock our fuel, which, by the way, you're required to do. Do you really want to be responsible for that kind of delay? Especially when both Intel Wing *and* Fleet Command have a vested interest in this?"

"Is that a threat?"

"Let me put it to you this way," Calvin leaned forward in his chair. "I hear the Kisho Mining Belt isn't such a bad place to govern this time of year, it's almost summer. But you'd still need a full climate suit to go outside."

The Commodore's face twisted into a frown. "I don't like your attitude, Mister Cross. But if your ship is in such dire need of supplies I will authorize you to dock next to our support bay. However, your men are confined to your ship."

"I'll need two men to deliver reports and coordinate with your staff face-to-face, not to mention oversee the movement of cargo."

"Very well but only one man, not two."

Calvin smiled. "See, you're not so unreasonable after all."

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Shen felt a little like a clown in the IT support uniform of Brimm Station. He wore a tie that felt too tight, slacks that were a little long, and they made him comb his hair and part it. Regulation, apparently. Something he'd never do of his own free will. He felt a renewed wave of gratitude for Calvin's relaxed policies on the Nighthawk.

His fake ID was clipped onto his button-up shirt. "Sukati Yoshimo, Support Staff Technician."

After he checked in with Andre and picked up a datapad with reports on the ship's systems, which had mysteriously started to fail, he made his way through the narrow corridors and elevator to the auxiliary hatch. As he passed some crew quarters he caught Sarah coming out of her room. His heart skipped a beat and he stopped in his tracks.

Her hair was loosely held up by a rubber band and she wore simple, casual clothes instead of her uniform. It made sense since she wasn't on duty for several more hours, but also made her all the more eye-catching.

"Hey there," she said with a smile. Her eyes seemed to twinkle.

"Hi." He didn't know what to say and just smiled back.

"You're looking good," she eyed his bogus IT uniform and didn't keep back a wry, teasing grin. He felt embarrassed.

"Long story..." He said. "Special assignment."

"Ah." She nodded.

He just stood there.

"Well... nice talking to you," she said. Only then did he realize he was in her way. He darted aside fast enough it was almost a jump, and a clumsy one at that.

"Oh sorry," he said.



She laughed and shook her head. "See ya later, Shen," and she walked away down the corridor to wherever she was going. He kept his eyes from following her and instead jumped into a brisk walk in the opposite direction.

"Stupid," he mumbled to himself. Wondering why he could still feel uncomfortable around someone he knew so well. Like he just couldn't be himself. His friends always told him that was the best advice: just relax and be natural. But somehow he got all tense and nervous around women he liked, and it seemed no matter what age he was, that would always be the case.

As arranged, a junior engineer met him at the hatch. She would be the liaison to the station's engineering team. Shen handed her the datapad with the ship's reports. She saluted and went ahead through the jetway and into Brimm's support bay. A moment later she came back and announced the coast was clear.

"Good." He felt anxious again as he hustled through the jetway, down the ladder, and onto the support bay floor of the station. Once he made good distance from the ship he slowed down and tried to act naturally. He knew if he stared at random things and looked busy nobody would bother him. The only thing he couldn't quiet was his thumping heart, but if someone heard that he had much bigger problems—medical ones.

He wiped a little forehead sweat onto his sleeve and strolled out of the bay toward where he expected the main access computers to be. Just before he reached the exit, someone intercepted him.

"You there," an engineer said waving at him. Shen swallowed, his mouth dry.

"Yes?" he asked weakly.

"Can you toss me that clipboard?"

On the table to his right was a set of notes attached to an old-fashioned clipboard. He felt a sigh of relief as he picked it up and tossed them to the engineer. There was less than two meters distance between them but somehow the paperwork managed to take a nosedive before reaching the engineer's outstretched hands. As the man bent over to scoop it up, Shen slipped out the door and walked into the main concourse, perhaps a bit faster than normal.

"Kiosk... kiosk..." he whispered as he looked around. The wide open space was surprisingly empty, but then he remembered how late it was according to Local Time.

It didn't take long to find a proper computer terminal. It was more exposed than he would have liked so he positioned his body to hide what he was doing as best he could. He hastily copied over his program and executed it.

In no time it was putting a strain on the local server and he pulled out his drive and hustled away. It would take Brimm's technicians at least a few minutes to figure out their new problem was rooted to this location, since by now his program had infected every other system on the intranet.

He wandered away into an even more open cross-section where he correctly guessed he'd find a map of this deck. It wasn't quite as specific as he would have liked, but he was able to pick out a small room that was a pretty good candidate for being the office of a local administrator—its proximity to some computer labs was the clue. Before he made his way there, however, he spotted a row on the bottom of the map advertising several small shops and novelty stores. One of them was a boutique.

He thought of Sarah and realized—after he'd completed his mission—he could easily walk there and buy her some flowers. It wasn't too far away, and she'd love them; wouldn't she? But the more he thought of it, the more his feet felt glued to the floor. He *could* do it. Nothing was really stopping him. He could even give them to her anonymously if that's what it took; then take credit for them later.

"Who am I kidding?" he whispered. Somehow the thought of giving flowers to Sarah, or anyone, just felt ridiculous. He just didn't think women could take him seriously. And then he'd look like a fool. And things would be all awkward after that. *No, Shen*, he thought to himself, *that just won't do*.

He made his way to the small office and, finding the door open, walked inside.

"What can I do for you?" A man asked from behind a bushy moustache. He wore the blue-and-black uniform of the Navy and had a very pointed angular face.

"I'm here to service your computer," said Shen; he unclipped his ID, handed it to the man, and continued. "IT Technician from deck sixteen, we're having some trouble with the servers and we've isolated the problem to this deck."

The officer looked back and forth from Shen to the ID, seeming almost skeptical, and just as Shen felt the impulse to run—thinking his cover was blown, the officer handed it back to him with an approving nod. "Good. I've been having trouble getting onto the network—started a few minutes ago. Keeps thinking and thinking and never goes anywhere. Something's broken."

Shen nodded. "I need to have your computer run a few programs to secure it from the virus." He knew throwing out the V-word would spook the guy since he, like most people, probably had no understanding of what a computer virus actually was, and probably believed its power was akin to a wrathful deity.

"Why my computer?" the officer asked. "Why can't you just *make* it work? I mean, I didn't do anything funny on my computer to mess up your servers."

"I know you didn't," said Shen. "But your computer is at risk. I'll need to run some defensive software to protect your data," he held up his drive and forced a smile.

The man frowned for a minute and once again Shen felt his heart race and tiny beads of sweat form on his forehead, but eventually the officer seemed to agree that this made sense. "All right," he waved Shen forward and stepped out of the way.

Shen plugged his drive into the computer and discovered it wasn't logged in. "I need you to log into your account, sir."

"I thought you technicians had full computer access," the man said, his tone suspicious.

Of course, Shen knew, the technicians probably did. Too bad he wasn't really one of them, otherwise he could log in as a basic administrator and this operation would be a cinch. Fortunately, though, he was pretty sure this particular officer, despite being stationed near computer labs, knew very little of actual computing. Shen swallowed hard and came up with some more baloney.

"In order to protect your information I need to be logged into *your* account. I don't have your log in information specifically. So please, if you don't mind," he waved toward the key prompt, "the longer we wait the more danger your stuff is in."

The officer didn't take the time to think this over. The urgency in Shen's voice—made believable by his own anxiety, was convincing enough. Shen soon found himself perusing the local Network. His sabotage program had been discovered and wiped out and the server was working fine. Of course, the officer hovering over his shoulder didn't know that. And, even though it'd been purged, it would still do the job of hiding his tracks once the technicians did a proper restore. With luck, no one should notice that any data was copied.

Shen did a search based on a few simple parameters. The most useful mechanism for this was to check everything for its time stamp and access-modification dates. Everything that seemed to plausibly fit in the Harbinger's window of time, when they'd boarded the station, Shen copied over. It took awhile and as he sat waiting for the data to upload, he felt even more nervous. The image of soldiers or actual technicians scouring the corridors trying to find the saboteur who'd knocked out their servers frightened him. Seeing Shen sitting here would flag the right people's attention if they were looking.

"Do you mind shutting the door?" asked Shen. "I'm a little cold and that vent is giving me goosebumps." He was lucky that a significant amount of cool air was flowing through a large vent just outside the office.

"All right," the officer said and he closed the door. Shen figured that bought him a little more time.

As the last of the data copied over, he checked the maintenance logs to see what the Nighthawk's status was. It had been refueled but wasn't cleared for departure yet even though the engineering liaison had returned to the ship. Apparently the Chief Engineer of the Nighthawk wasn't yet satisfied the ship's systems had all the kinks worked out yet. No doubt Calvin was having Andre keep making bad reports until Shen was back aboard.

The computer beeped as the data finished moving over. Shen ejected the drive and put it in his pocket. "Well it looks like we saved your data, and now your computer is secure," he saluted, put on a fake smile, and walked out.

"Thanks," the officer called behind him.

"Don't mention it."

When he knew he was out of sight he sped up, carefully ducking to the side when he passed others in the main corridors. No one seemed to be overly alert, or looking for him. But he still didn't stop until he was back in the support bay. As he approached the Nighthawk, which was still connected to the bay via a jetway, someone called out to him.

"You there, technician, what are you doing next to that ship?"

Shen couldn't think on his feet quite as well as he would have liked. "I don't know," he said, feeling his face get warm.

"What do you mean you don't know?"

Shen felt the urge to sprint onto the ship and not look back, but he knew that was foolish. Instead he faced the man down. "I mean, I don't know why but I have orders from deck 16 to deliver this report to the ship's liaison." He held up his drive.

"Oh okay," the engineer said. "But the Nighthawk's liaison has already boarded the ship."

Shen knew this already. "Then I'll have to go aboard."

"Do you have clearance for that?"

"If I don't, I'm sure their security will turn me away. But I have to at least try to follow my orders." He stepped into the jetway leading to the ship's hatch and felt an enormous wave of relief.

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When Shen's message came to the bridge, Calvin happened to be there. His eyes were burning and the long wait had relaxed him to a very bored, almost deliriously tired state. But he managed to shake himself awake.

"Did your mission succeed?" He asked.

"Affirmative, I'm back aboard. Where do you want me to send this data? There's an awful lot of it."

"Send it to the lab," said Calvin. "And get some rest. There's more than enough there to keep several people busy analyzing it for hours if not days, and I want you to keep focused on your other assignments. Especially your investigation into the ships Raidan destroyed, including this latest casualty."

"The Rotham ships? Will do. And I'm not very tired so I'll get back to it right away."

"Fine with me," said Calvin. "Just make sure you're nice and alert for White Shift in..." he glanced at the clock. "Eleven hours."

"Yes sir," said Shen and the communication ended.

"So what was that about?" asked Rose.

Calvin smirked. "It looks like we got our hands on the data the Harbinger stole after all. That should give us some clues about what it's up to, if all goes well."

"I just hope we don't take any fallout for this."

"Shen's very good; I'm guessing Brimm One will never even know." Calvin stood up. "When we're given clearance, detach us from this base and get us heading toward Iota at a good speed. Once on our way, contact them and ask the status of their defenses. The Harbinger should be arriving before long and you'd better send them a warning in case Brimm didn't."

"Aye, sir."

"If you need me, I'll be in my quarters trying to sleep."

Calvin left. He thought of the first time he'd turned his bridge over to the command of less experienced officers and how hard that had been. And he hadn't slept well as he imagined them at the controls making choices that could mean life or death for him as he lay powerless below. But over time he'd gotten past that paranoia and knew that a fresh crew, no matter how green, was better than a seasoned one that'd been pushed to exhaustion.

So, as long as his senior staff was on the bridge when they finally encountered the Harbinger, he'd be fine.

As he approached his quarters he felt the tempting, almost urgent, allure of equarius build up inside him, increasing with a vengeance. Almost exponentially. He told himself he wasn't going to take any, that he was just flirting with the idea because the anticipation of equarius made him excited. That he didn't have to actually take it to enjoy it. But, the more he thought about it, and the more he felt the craving flow through his veins like an electric current, he realized he was going to do it, no matter what he told himself.

After all, he had eleven hours.

## Chapter 17

His sleep was haunted by visions of terror.

His heart thundered as he raced down an endless corridor of charcoal grey. All around him were nightmarish images of people in the throes of death. Blood painted on every wall and door. Corpses everywhere. People reduced to mutilated empty husks bleeding themselves pale. Frail as shadows. It choked him. And he froze in his own cold sweat, writhing until he escaped. Trinity. Trinity. Trinity. *Christine!*

Panting and convulsing, he awoke in his own dark bedroom with icy shivers. His sheets lay in a crumpled, tangled mess on the floor. He sat up in a start, feeling light-headed as his eyes blanked over and, for an instant, he was sure he would pass out again. But the fear and reality of the whole experience gripped him with a fierce surge of energy. Forcing him alert. And in this heightened state, Calvin couldn't blink away the images. He hated them! The blood and wounds, the claw marks, and worst of all William's empty eyes rolling back into their sockets. One last frozen expression on his face. Like a soul lost forever in a state of eternal stasis. What had meant everything to him yesterday suddenly meant nothing.

And Christine. He could hear her whispers in his ears. Her laughter by his side. He reached over for her but found only the cold empty side of his bed.

He wept silently and thought of death. It stared him in the face and he felt his strength vanish as he imagined the blank dark mask of the reaper and his shimmering indiscriminate scythe. An enemy that can never be beaten no matter how much money, force, and strategy is deployed against it.

The idea of such a final and hopeless conflict frightened him—*consumed* him. And, as he stumbled to his feet—legs trembling ever so slightly, barely keeping him balanced, he found the bottle of equarius and turned the lid—his trembling hands barely able to open it.

No matter what it cost him, no matter what effect it would have tomorrow, he needed peace of mind now. And to hell with everything else.

*Here's to the dead.* He chased down the pill with half a bottle of water.

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Summers sat at the command position of the Nighthawk's bridge. White Shift began twenty minutes ago and everyone was present, except for Calvin. When he didn't show right away, she had Sarah contact his quarters. At first

he didn't reply, but when he finally did, he sounded groggy, snappy, and short. He insisted he was on his way so they left it alone. That was ten minutes ago.

Now she sat in quiet anticipation as they closed in on Iota System, at last estimate they were only a few minutes out. Curiously, for all eleven hours of their journey they hadn't heard much from Iota. Red Shift had contacted the station awhile ago, warning them of the Harbinger's approach, and they'd confirmed they were deploying defenses and would be on standby. And then ... what? Almost nothing. They'd checked in at scheduled times, telling the Nighthawk their status was unchanged. But now, as the Nighthawk tried to contact them again, no reply came. Just silence. If the station had been attacked, they hadn't sent out an alert of any kind. Very unusual, unless the Harbinger didn't go there after all... She pursed her lips.

At long last the door whisked open and Calvin walked onto the bridge. He looked horrible. Messy tangled hair, wrinkled clothes that probably hadn't been changed since the day before, and eyes that were so bloodshot they almost glowed. As he approached, his movements were sluggish and he seemed unawake. Summers had seen people act this way before and wondered if Calvin was just tired or if he was actually hung over. She suspected the latter.

When Calvin approached, Summers relinquished the command position and Calvin collapsed in the chair with a huge sigh. He rubbed his temples for a few seconds before closing his eyes and resting his head in his hands.

"Why is everyone being so loud?" asked Calvin to no one in particular. Everyone looked confused since no one was making noise, other than the quiet keystrokes and computer sounds of normal operations.

"Look at the sorry state of you," said Summers. "You're in no condition to command the ship."

"Oh put a sock in it," he snapped. She felt her anger boil. And then she couldn't contain herself; commanding officer or not, this was intolerable!

"*You're hung over, aren't you?* Probably drank all night, didn't you? Well that's *no way* for an officer to behave."

He glared at her. "I *don't* drink," then he rested his head in his hands once more.

"You all right, mate?" asked Miles.

Calvin didn't answer, instead he asked another question. "What is our status, Sarah?"

"Point oh seven two clicks from Iota and closing in. ETA five minutes."

"Alert status?"

"Condition two, all systems standing by," said Shen.

Summers looked back at Calvin who still had his eyes closed and head resting in his palms.

"That's good," he said slowly. "Any word from the system?"

"None, sir," said Sarah.

"Contact them, give them our position, and ask their status."

"Can do," Sarah spoke into her headset and typed something on her computer. A few seconds later she turned back around. "No response."

Calvin finally lifted his head and opened his eyes. "*What?*" He muttered. Then, more loudly, "what about the colony?"

"Again, no response."

"That doesn't make any sense," said Calvin.

"We've been unable to contact them for some time," said Summers.

Calvin didn't say anything. And, seeing his acutely slow state, she offered a suggestion. "We could contact the Fleet and see if they've heard anything."

Calvin nodded and waved his hand. "Good idea, do that."

As they waited for Sarah, Summers stared out the window into the blackness of space. Anything to keep her eyes off their sorry excuse for a CO. Being tardy and out-of-uniform was one thing, which Calvin had made into habit, but showing up unfit for command—because of drinking or drugging—was something else entirely. She would report this, if his dilapidated state didn't get them all killed first.

"The Fleet hasn't been able to contact the system either. Last check in was an hour ago. Everything was fine then. Ships on patrol, defenses powered up, and no sign of the Harbinger."

"No sign of the Harbinger, you say," Calvin's voice was just above a whisper. "They should have been there hours ago."

Summers too found it strange. Raidan wasn't the type to be intimidated away. Perhaps he'd change course.

Sarah continued speaking. "Two warships are en route to investigate and, if necessary, reinforce Iota. ISS Razor and ISS Falcon, heavy cruisers, about an hour behind us."

"So we get the privilege of arriving first," said Calvin, he put a small pause between each word. "ETA now?"

"Sixty seconds."

"Wonderful," Calvin turned his chair. "Miles, standby all weapons and shields."

"What about the stealth system?" asked Summers. In her mind it would be completely logical to survey the scene before announcing their arrival. If there had been a battle, there could still be hostiles. Stealth would allow them to maneuver before striking.

Calvin scratched his head. "Not a bad idea. But I really doubt the station and all its defenses could have been wiped out by anything less than... ten battleships. Hmm... well, come to think of it, go ahead and engage the stealth system."



"Too late," said Sarah. "We're incoming in five, four, three, two..."

All eyes turned to the windows.

"One."

The view filled with stars and a blue sun. "Do a quick scan of the system, and give us a view of the station. If it's still there."

"It is, and so is... oh my god! *It's here.*"

Summers moved briskly to stare over Sarah's shoulder at her screen.

"What is?" asked Shen.

"The Harbinger!" Sarah spun to face Calvin, awaiting orders.

"I can confirm that," said Miles from the defense post. "It's about six hundred and fifty thousand mc's from the station. It's exchanging fire with the station and three corvettes, five sentry ships, and about two fighter divisions."

"Project it," said Calvin.

A 3D model of the Harbinger was displayed, complete with a few burn marks on its hull. Overall, though, it looked intact. Every now and then there was a blink of light as its guns intercepted missiles aimed toward it. All around, tiny blips of starfighters flew circles around it like a swarm of infinitesimal bees attacking a tiger. They were hard to see at this resolution.

Summers almost couldn't believe it; Raidan was finally within their grasp. She'd almost given up hope. But now she had him, and justice could be served.

"Bring us closer, but keep us out of close firing range. I don't want to take any flak," said Calvin.

"Yes, sir."

The Nighthawk maneuvered closer and, before long, the green and white planet became visible, and as they moved starboard, it eclipsed the sun. The flashes of energy and gunfire were visible now to the naked eye through the windows, and seeing the Harbinger dwarf the corvettes made it appear like a huge, menacing, grey skeleton.

"Damn that's a big ship," said Miles.

"Try to contact the station again," said Calvin. "See if we can't get through with close-range radio."

"Again no response," said Sarah. "The Harbinger is emitting some kind of communications scrambler. I've never seen any that could block out a radius this large before, but that's why our messages couldn't get through. Whatever it is, that instrument most definitely did *not* come standard on the Harbinger."

Summers had heard of such technology back at the academy, as part of a general course she'd been required to take. That was only eight years ago, but back then the device had been purely theoretical.

"So Raidan's made himself some pretty powerful allies."

"I'm picking up something else, Calvin," said Miles. "Debris patterns. Looks like the remains of two or three ships. Rotham markings, probably commercial class. I'm guessing freighters."

"Can we ID them?" asked Calvin.

"Maybe, depends how intact the identifiers are and whether or not they have black-beacons still functioning."

"Most Rotham ships don't even have black-beacons," said Shen.

"And there's something else," Miles added. "Another ship on the far side, about nine hundred thousand mc's from the station. It's a Rotham class C freighter and... it's just sitting there. Hull is crippled, engines destroyed, but they still have power. Her operating lights are on, but she's not going anywhere. Weapons, shields, and engines are all offline."

"The Harbinger is moving," Sarah reported. "New heading one, one, seven mark five. Eighty degrees pitch fifteen yaw, port side."

"And now Raidan sweeps in for the kill," said Summers. "And the Rotham genocide continues."

"No it's heading away from the vessel, it's... facing us now and accelerating. Corvettes and fighters still nipping at its heels but not doing much damage."

"Uh oh, looks like we got noticed," said Miles. "All weapons standing by; what should we do?"

Calvin just stared at him.

"Sir?"

They waited.

"One point two million mc's and closing," said Sarah. She looked nervous. They all did. Summers knew she had to do something. So she took charge. Raidan wasn't about to get away again because of Calvin's idiocy.

"Target their engines," said Summers, moving to get a view of the defense console. "Standby all missiles and close in with ninety-percent thrusters, we only get one shot at this—let's do it right."

"Belay that order!" said Calvin.

"*What?*" asked Summers. Raidan was *not* going to get away! "We have orders from the Fleet Admiral! Shoot on sight. We *must* comply."

"That's suicide," said Calvin. "All stop."

Her frustration boiled inside her. Raidan was going to get away again and kill who knows how many more people, and all because of this... *boy*. Less her age and less her rank and there was nothing she could do about it. She broke protocol and challenged her CO. "The Harbinger is wounded. This is our best opportunity to end this."

"I said *no*."

Did Calvin even want Raidan brought to justice? "But the admiral said—

"

He cut her off. "On my ship, *I* am the admiral." The sleeping bear had awoken and ferocity burned in his voice and shined in his bloodshot eyes. "Do *not* question my authority again."

Summers was speechless. How dare he speak to her like that?

"Status?" Calvin asked Sarah.

"The Harbinger is inbound, holding speed, a hundred thousand mc's away. Cleared for action and within missile range."

"What are your orders?" asked Miles. He looked antsy, like a psycho-maniacal killer with his finger curled around the trigger, squeezing ever so slightly.

"Do nothing," said Calvin. "Alert Condition One, shields full strength forward. Standby helm, we may need to do some hard maneuvers."

"Aye, sir," his crew complied, sounding slightly confused.

"The Harbinger hasn't fired on us yet," said Calvin. "So I don't want to fire on it until I know what it's up to."

"Closing in at forty thousand mc's. We're in range of all weapons."

They waited in tense silence as the behemoth slowly filled their view. It really was a sight to behold. A hulking metal beast with ferocity in every contour, being this close to it was like kissing jaws of steel. Even its wounds and burn marks—few that they were—served only to intimidate by giving it scars.

"I *really* think we should do something," said Miles.

"Like what, Lieutenant?" asked Summers, hoping she could get the crew to pressure Calvin into action.

"Getting the hell out of here for starters."

"Patience," said Calvin. He looked confident. Summers only wondered what was going on in his mind, if anything.

"The communications scrambler has been shut down," said Sarah.

"Incoming message from the Harbinger."

"Display it."

"It's audio only."

"Go ahead."

The message came over the speakers loud and clear.

"*Board the ship, Calvin.*"

It terminated.

Summers recognized the voice, it was Raidan's. Hearing it sent a flutter of mixed emotions through her. There was a time when that rich, deep voice made her smile. Now, though, it made her all the more determined to take him down.

"Try to contact them," said Calvin. He looked more curious than anything else.

"No response," said Sarah. "The Harbinger is upon us."

They could only see a small portion of the ship as it slipped past them on the port side. It must have been several mc's away, but it felt like only meters. Summers felt a momentary chill and all of them stared in awe out the window, silently shaken by the whole experience.

When the ship disappeared, Sarah spoke again. "The Harbinger is accelerating and has set course for altered space. Clear to jump in fifteen, fourteen," she counted down until finally "the Harbinger has left the system." And, just like that, Raidan had slipped through the Fleet's grasp and Summers' fingers once again. She let out an enormously frustrated sigh.

"I hope you're happy, *Lieutenant Commander*," she said.

"Board the ship..." Calvin mumbled, ignoring her. "I wonder why he wants me to do that?"

And of course Calvin seemed to actually be considering it! "Well, regardless of whatever perverse idea Raidan has, we cannot board that ship. That would be an act of war."

Calvin nodded. She almost couldn't believe it. Was he agreeing with her? "I know we can't board it," he said. "The Rotham-Imperial Peace Accord is fragile as it is. But we should still ask ourselves what we might find there." His eyes brightened a little. "Sarah, contact the crippled Rotham ship and offer our assistance with repairs, medical needs, and whatever else they may require."

"Yes, sir."

So Calvin was going to try and worm his way onto that ship anyway. Summers rolled her eyes. Typical. Always ready to chase after whatever dead-end Raidan threw out to distract them. But at least this strategy was lawful.

"Response from the freighter," said Sarah. "They respectfully decline."

"What, really?" asked Shen. "They just want to sit there?"

"Apparently they have their own ship on the way to assist, and they'd rather their cargo and personnel be handled by other Rotham."

"I'm not surprised," said Calvin. "They don't want us to find whatever they're carrying. That's why Raidan wanted us to board the ship."

"How far out is their assisting ship?"

"Four hours."

"So they're just going to sit on their asses for four hours?" asked Miles. "Unbelievable."

"Four hours isn't a huge price to pay," said Calvin. "If their cargo is, say... biological weapons."

"That's a pretty serious accusation," said Summers. "More likely the Rotham trust for the Imperial Military is degenerating with each successive attack by Raidan." She didn't blame them.

"I'm not making any specific accusations," said Calvin. "But I give it a hundred to one *on* they have something they don't want us to see."

Summers frowned. Maybe they did; she knew she couldn't rule that out entirely. But provoking them wouldn't help anything. What mattered most now was putting an end to Raidan's crime spree, fixing international relations, and getting the Fleet back to its usual pristine operating self. Calvin's obsession with unsettling everything would only make a bad situation worse.

"Contact the station and bring us within fifty thousand mc's of their operating range. Let's find out exactly what happened."

"You got it," Sarah again spoke into her headset and Summers' gaze met Calvin's. Meeting his sharp eyes, which weren't as bloodshot as before, made her defensive—like he was challenging her. He didn't say anything, but she couldn't shake away the impression that he wanted to. She blinked and looked away.

"Connected to the station's Deputy Administrator, General Hesso."  
*General? Must be a marine base.*

"General Hesso here. Welcome to Iota, IWS Nighthawk. I'm afraid I'll have to make this brief but, as you can see, we have a lot of cleaning up to do."

"I understand, sir," said Calvin. "I just want to know the details of the engagement."

"You should direct those questions to Captain Anderson. She was in charge of our field response and led the counter action. She has more information than I do about the Harbinger's attack."

"Where is she?"

"Her starfighter is still deployed."

"Can you have her dock with my ship and come aboard?"

"Affirmative, I'll give her the order. Now, is there anything else?"

"Yes, one thing," said Calvin. "Did anyone from the Harbinger, at any point, go aboard your station or to the colony below?"

"No. They arrived, blocked communications, engaged our ships, attacked the Rotham freighters, disabled one and destroyed two. Then you showed up and the Harbinger withdrew."

"Can you give us the identities of those Rotham ships and any information you have on them? It would be very helpful to our investigation."

"I'll send you what I can, but it isn't a lot. For some reason, someone above me has thoroughly classified everything, I can't make heads or tails of it. But I can at least get you the names of those ships."

"What about their cargo?"

"I'll do what I can," the general said with a smile. He didn't look hopeful.

"Thanks," said Calvin. The transmission ended.

"That was short and sweet," said Sarah.

Calvin nodded. "Begin a standard survey pattern, see what we can find. Especially comb that debris nice and well. When Captain Anderson comes aboard, send her to my office. Summers, you have the deck."

Summers wasn't surprised by this. Calvin avoided being on the bridge like it was a disease.

# Chapter 18

Captain Anderson arrived in no time. She was a thirty-something year old woman with curly dark hair wearing a minimally decorated flightsuit. She held her helmet tightly against her side in one hand and saluted with the other. He saluted back and waved for her to sit down. When she did, he got a closer look at her.

Her eyes were steel grey and her face was firm and unbending, and she somehow managed to look even less comfortable sitting than standing. Calvin recognized her type. A leader who meant business and wouldn't accept any grief for any reason. He wondered if Anderson and Summers would get along or if they'd see each other as rivals for supreme tightness of the universe.

"Captain Anderson reporting as ordered, sir."

"Thank you, Captain. I understand you were in charge of the action against the Harbinger. I have a few questions."

"Yes, sir."

"Who fired first?" Calvin paid close attention to her eyes, wanting to make sure she was completely honest with him.

"We did. We had orders from the top to follow a shoot-on-sight policy." She didn't hesitate. In fact, she didn't seem bothered at all. She was an officer doing her duty and felt no reason to apologize for her actions. Calvin doubted she was knowingly involved in any kind of conspiracy, though he increasingly suspected there was one.

"Walk me through the whole engagement."

"The ship showed up at about 0400 L.T. and six million mc's out with a basic heading and speed, similar to a Winske approach."

"Toward the base?" asked Calvin who, not being a pilot anymore, wasn't as sharp on his maneuvers as he used to be.

"Yes, the Harbinger immediately activated its communication dampening technology and then flew directly toward the base where three Rotham ships were in a holding pattern. They'd just left the dock, you see, and were preparing to clear the system and jump to their destinations. This was all scheduled."

"Do you know what any of their destination were?"

"No, that was all classified."

Calvin frowned but was unsurprised. "Go on."

"When the Harbinger arrived, we had five sentry ships on a basic patrol pattern with three corvettes as support and that's all. The ships were in a

cluster pattern supporting each other, so they couldn't cover a lot of area. I made that call, because knowing the Harbinger's firepower I felt that, individually, these ships were no match for it."

"Makes sense."

"I wish the General had been as understanding," Anderson said. Calvin resisted smiling, the ground forces always seemed to hate being subject to Navy commanders regarding issues of interstellar defense. "Anyway, the problem was that, when the Harbinger arrived, our defense force was patrolling the wrong side of the station. The Harbinger was able to close most of the distance before our ships could get around the planet and intercept it. By then, it was too late to cut through its shields and disable its engines, given the weak firepower of the corvettes and sentry ships. These aren't capital ships, sir. They just don't have the punch you need to get through those shields."

Calvin was more than aware of the relative firepower of basic starships, but he humored her by not interrupting.

"So we scrambled our fighter divisions hoping to distract the Harbinger long enough for the Rotham ships to escape. They began an orderly and speedy retreat but we were outmatched."

"Is it your opinion," asked Calvin, "that the Harbinger knew about your position and chose to enter the system from the best angle to avoid your defense patrol?"

She was silent for a few seconds. "No. My pattern was whatever I thought of at the moment, random and unplanned. I don't like committing to maneuvers on paper for exactly the reason you suggest."

"Sometimes even the bad guys get lucky, I suppose," said Calvin.

"But I think the Harbinger deliberately arrived right when the Rotham ships were scheduled to leave."

Calvin agreed, but wanted to hear her reasoning. "Please explain."

"The Harbinger headed straight for the Rotham ships and opened fire, like it knew they were there before arriving. I expected the freighters to be destroyed within seconds but, and this is strange, the Rotham pilots performed an evasive maneuver. A military pattern. With more skill than I would have suspected from civilian crews. And when they did take hits, their shields and armor took a beating consistent with modern corvettes. Much more than I'd expect from freighters."

Calvin smiled. This further supported his hypothesis that the ships were carrying something important, and that they shared a common link.

"Two ships were destroyed," said Calvin. "But the third Rotham ship survived."

"The third managed to get a bit further away and there was a kind of cat and mouse exchange. They moved in and out of our station's defenses for



protection, looking for an opening to jump from the system but the Harbinger kept edging it out and closing that window. Eventually the ship was disabled. Then you showed up and the Harbinger withdrew."

"Is it your opinion the Harbinger was unable to destroy the third Rotham ship?"

"No, the Harbinger had more than enough firepower and opportunity. It was deliberately disabled and then ignored. I have no idea why."

"Do you know what its cargo is?"

"No."

"Let me guess... classified?"

"Affirmative."

"Anything else strange stand out about this engagement?" he asked.

"Yes, one other thing," she said. "I don't believe the Harbinger meant to cause any permanent injury to Imperial property or personnel."

This also didn't surprise Calvin. "Go on."

"The Harbinger tried not to engage us. It did everything it could to out-manuever us. Give us bad shots. It spent most of its energy boosting its shields and thrusters. The only casualties we took were a few fighters. But it's really hard to disable something as small as a fighter without blowing it up. I don't think the Harbinger shot at our fighters except when absolutely necessary, to protect its engines. I expect you know that some fighters, like most missiles, can slip through alternating shields?"

"I do."

"That was something we tried. But the dreadnought's perimeter guns wiped out anyone who got too close. As long as we stayed outside its shields, however, no one was harmed. In total, fifteen fighters were lost and twenty-eight personnel were killed in addition to thirty-two others who sustained injuries."

"What about damage inflicted on the Harbinger?"

"Negligible."

"Thank you, Captain, you're dismissed."

She saluted and left. When she did, Calvin decided it was time to check in with his staff. But first—

He connected to Grady Rosco's private line. "Have you got anything new for me, Grady?"

"Yeah a few people were *persuaded* into telling us who some of the fellas were that Raidan's team met with. We used their descriptions and ID'd a few of them. Mostly they were who we thought, ex-Imperials. But one of them was a guy named Yanal Kemmer. A hotel tycoon from Capital World who was here incognito. He transferred a very large sum of money to Raidan's team. And I mean very large. Like a billion q. We just checked through some

of our... lesser known... you could call them 'banks', and it's true, that kind of money was moved through here about that time."

So now Raidan had a real motive for going to Aleator. He needed funding. Perhaps that was the purpose of the whole visit? Calvin honestly couldn't hazard a guess yet one way or the other. He wrote down the name Yanal Kemmer to research later. "So where is Yanal Kemmer now?"

"Vanished. I think he left the same time as the Harbinger. Nobody matching his description went aboard their shuttle but that doesn't mean he didn't go with them. Wherever he is, he isn't on Aleator now. I'm sure of that."

"So did you find out anything about CERKO?"

"Yeah, we nabbed a guy, the only survivor. And we got a little from him. He needed some *encouragement* too but eventually he talked."

Calvin knew what Grady meant. Calvin also knew that information extracted from torture was occasionally useful but often unreliable. People would say anything to stop the pain, even if they didn't know anything. Torture led to more bad information than anything else in the business, but try telling that to a Rosco.

"CERKO is being organized by someone outside the group's leadership. They're being paid to take jobs mercenary style and paid a lot. Not just in q but in weapons and equipment. They've been organized into cells and given discreet orders to do specific tasks. The guy here had never met or spoken with whoever's organizing this. Each CERKO member in a cell reports to a handler and gets assignments and pay from him. We don't know the name of this guy's handler, but we did confirm his cell was equipped, hired, and transported to Aleator to kill you. And that the hit came from someone outside of CERKO."

So someone wanted him dead and it wasn't CERKO, though CERKO was more than happy to pull the trigger for the right price. Calvin also found it interesting that an activist group turned terrorist had now turned mercenary. Were they that desperate for cash or was someone planting a false flag? "I need to find out who's organizing them," said Calvin. "See if you can get the handler's name."

"Can't help you there, sorry."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean our source is dead. We were trying to get the handler's name when he keeled over, just like that."

And *that* was the other problem with torture. And though it may have been effective at getting something, it ultimately prevented them from getting everything.

"Well, thanks for what you did find out," said Calvin. "We're square now."

"Are you kidding?" asked Grady. "This is all just trying to make it up to you that you were attacked in *my* house. We haven't even begun to repay the favor we owe you."

Calvin expected that answer and decided it wasn't worth arguing. "In that case I'd like you to look into a guy named Titus Antony. He was on Aleator One using the alias 'Jacobi' when I was there. I played a card game at the Rodeo Den and one of the dealers seemed to know him. That dealer looked like—" Calvin thought back. "He was male, tan skin, mid-forties, large physique, about one-point-eight meters tall, short brown hair, big round face... that's all I remember. He seemed to know Titus as Jacobi, and I'm looking for any connection between Titus and CERKO. That dealer may have been involved."

"No problem, Calvin. Any particular reason why Titus is that interesting?"

"He died saving my life."

"Ah. Well then, I'll see what I can do."

"Thanks." Calvin closed the comm and left his office.

## Chapter 19

When he entered the bridge, Calvin took the command position from Summers.

"Yesterday I gave some of you Intel assignments and now I want updates," he said.

"I have to remind you," said Summers, "that our mission is to assist in finding and capturing the Harbinger and anything else, including a detailed investigation of what Raidan's been trying to do, is off-mission."

If Calvin didn't know better he'd almost think Summers was in on it at some level, that she didn't want Raidan's true motives known. After all, it seemed like if there *were* a conspiracy, the Fleet had to be compromised to some degree. How hard would it be to buy off one more officer, plant her on the pursuing ship, and encourage her to disrupt his investigation? Curtail his efforts and keep an eye on him. It was only logical.

But he saw through Summers enough to know she was a hardened duty zealot, which meant she had too much integrity to be bought off or coerced. If she were someone's tool, which Calvin thought likely, she wasn't aware of it.

"Investigation is what we do here in Intel Wing," said Calvin. "And every scrap of information we can get our hands on will get us that much closer to finding and capturing Raidan. If we know what his motives are then we can predict his behavior." Calvin was mostly speaking hot air. The more he learned, the less he wanted to trap Raidan. And he still had a commitment to the Royal Family—or, at least, to Kalila Akira—not to bring Raidan in, for now.

Summers' eyes narrowed; she saw through his thin layer of excuses and he knew it. But he didn't really care.

"Thank you, Commander, for your pointless reminder." He cleared his throat and avoided making eye-contact with her. "About those Intel assignments, I'll give you a few minutes to collect your notes and organize your thoughts if you need them. When you're ready, let me know."

"I'm ready," said Miles.

"Good," said Calvin. "Now, your task was to look into Tristan and find out everything you can."

"Yeah, and I got nothing."

"Okay that's not so good."

"I did my best. I searched every database, the network, everything. Tristan as a general search pulled up too many results, but tagging the name

with lycan, werewolf, Remorii, *anything* else pulled up too few. I couldn't get anything from the Rotham either. They gave me some police files from Aros Five, but nothing stood out. My guess: Tristan lied to you. Either that or the Rotham already whitewashed the files. Without more information to go on, I'm at a dead end. I'm sorry, Cal."

Calvin nodded. "Alright," he said. He wasn't too surprised. Tristan still was as big a mystery as anything else. "What about the Remus System? How are the Remorii getting off it?"

"I'm not sure. Once the Empire cracked down on Remus they surrounded the system with mines and left everyone there. No trials, no investigations, no sentences. Anyone still alive was just left there. Their fate is listed as *unknown, presumed dead*. Remus has even been removed from most starcharts; the whole area is flagged as a hazardous Do-Not-Fly-Zone. How any of the Remorii escaped is beyond our Intel Wing files. And unless we find someone who was there, I don't think we'll ever know."

"I see," said Calvin. "Anyone else ready? What about you, Shen? Find out anything useful about the ships Raidan destroyed?"

"Yes," said Shen. "But my impression is that, instead of being classified, a lot of the info publicly available about these ships is just fiction. They're all owned by the same company, a corporation that operates across Rotham and Imperial space called..." he stared at his computer and read what was certainly a very butchered pronunciation. "Yut'hama'za... it's a mishmash of the Rotham words for Service and Excellence. It's a pretty small freight company that hasn't attracted much attention. Supposedly they've operated for about ten years and have delivered ten thousand shipments from Rotham space to Imperial space, but the earliest shipment I could actually verify was only a few months ago. The simple explanation is that, if the deliveries were to some of the smaller colonies, like in The Corridor or along The Rim, they might not keep data on shipments for more than a few months.

"But I couldn't get anyone to give me a specific list of places these shipments went or what they were. Just a figure from customs that agreed the company had exported about eleven thousand convoys of cargo. At an estimated worth of 87 billion q. The company doesn't export anything from the Empire, it just brings in imports. All of its buyers are wholesale distributors that are privately owned."

"So who was buying the cargo Raidan destroyed?"

"Kemmer Associated Goods, they—"

"Tell me everything you found out about them," said Calvin. The Roscos had mentioned Yanal Kemmer only moments ago. The tycoon who'd given Raidan a fortune on Aleator.

"Kemmer Associated Goods was started by the Kemmer family almost a hundred years ago but, recently, they sold the company to MXR at a loss."

Calvin raised an eyebrow. "How much of a loss?"

"About two-thirds of the stock's value. Still an enormous fortune, but less than they could have gotten, especially since the company was making strong profits. I couldn't find any kind of public statement from them explaining why they sold. All I know is that the whole family sold out and then spread their new fortunes into all kinds of new, random investments. Real estate, car factories, environmentally-friendly technology, medical research, charity. They just kind of went their separate ways. Most people on the nets think there was some kind of family dispute and they couldn't keep it together so they sold out while the going was good."

"When did they give up control of the company?"

"It's not clear how long the sale was in the works, the negotiations were private. Probably to keep the shareholders from speculating. But the sale was officialized seven standard months ago."

"Is someone named Yanal Kemmer part of that family?"

"Yes, he's one of the heirs to the family fortune, along with his siblings. He's a Capital World resident in his mid-fifties and has a considerable estate even though his parents still control the majority of the family's holdings."

So, provided the Roscos' information was correct, Yanal Kemmer was both connected to Raidan—for giving him money—and connected to the convoy Rotham destroyed—because his family's company was, supposedly, buying whatever it carried—although the company was no longer under his family's control. Perhaps he was bribing Raidan to destroy the convoy to make the company look bad. But Calvin didn't like that explanation. If this whole conspiracy was about an eccentric billionaire bribing an insane captain to seek revenge against a corporation who may have strong-armed him into selling his shares prematurely... Calvin would be extremely disappointed. It also wouldn't go very far to explain why that was allegedly for "the good of the Empire."

No, that wasn't it. The fact that the Fleet had become this *involved*, and Raidan continued to strike against Rotham ships, all of which were heavily armored, suggested this went much deeper than some kind of corporate vendetta. Especially since there were better ways to hurt MXR than to punch Associated Goods in the nose. But he couldn't dismiss the idea of a corporate sabotage completely. People do strange things when money like this is involved.

"Find out what you can about MXR," said Calvin.

"One step ahead of you; I've been digging into these guys for the last few hours. Officially, they're in the energy business. They're a human-run corporation that operates its main headquarters and plants on Capital World but owns considerable real estate in The Corridor, including a plant on Praxis. The shares are not available publicly and the company is owned by

Brinton Martel, the fourth richest person in the galaxy, and second richest man in the Empire. His estate rivals that of the Akira Family, not counting government property under the Royal Family's control."

"Martel..." said Calvin. "As in the Martel House on Capital World?" One of two rival families who'd tried to wrestle away the throne from the Akiras over the past several decades.

"Yes, he's from that House. But his sons are the ones making a raucous on Capital World. Brinton's divorced himself from politics and lives a relatively humble life in a small mansion in the Thetican System."

"Which is," said Calvin, making what he thought to be an important observation, "not far from the DMZ."

"Exactly," Shen wagged a finger. "The System is a blue-bleeding Imperial system with a better than average defense force, sorta like Praxis, but at the end of the day we can't ignore the proximity. Anything that close to the Rotham border... who knows what kind of alien influence is there?"

"You think Brinton Martel, one of the richest men in the galaxy, is being paid off by the Rotham government to be a spy or an agent or something?" asked Sarah, she seemed skeptical. Calvin wondered if his and Shen's inference had gone too far.

"There are ways of motivating people that don't involve money," said Shen. "They could have threatened him, or maybe they pay him in information or exotic luxuries."

"Or maybe they just have some leverage on him, a secret he doesn't want found out," said Calvin.

"This is a waste of time," said Summers. "We should be fulfilling our mission and chasing down Raidan, not sitting here accusing one of the Empire's richest citizens of treason. Not only is there no motive, means, or opportunity, there's no crime. The case you lieutenants are making is the weakest I've ever heard."

"No crime that we know of yet," Calvin hated to admit it, but she was right. They were getting ahead of themselves. "What we have here is a long thin chain that ties Martel to Yanal Kemmer to Raidan, however loosely. Any connections we can find, no matter how weak, must be investigated."

"This whole operation *isn't about* investigating Raidan," Summers looked supremely annoyed. "His guilt was proven in a military court already. Our job is to hunt him down and, if possible, take him out. Nothing else." There was more she wanted to say, he could tell, but she held back.

"If we can find out all of Raidan's contacts and friends, we can be there waiting. He'd have nowhere to go. No friends to turn to. Then the Fleet could get him." It was a flimsy excuse to continue what he really wanted to do, which was investigate Raidan, not capture him.

Summers didn't buy it. "That's not practical and it'll take too long. This ship is faster than the Harbinger and we have every resource to track it down and coordinate a strike against it with the Fifth Fleet. Those are our orders. That's what we have to do."

Calvin wasn't sure what to say. Part of him wanted to retort, if nothing else to assert he still had command of *bis* ship. But, on the other hand, he didn't want to encourage Summers to take up her grievances with the Fleet any more than she already had—the extent of which Calvin could only guess at. Somehow the Fleet had its hooks in Intel Wing, and orders from them were much harder to ignore than from the Fleet or from some snippy Executive Officer. He changed the subject.

"The Harbinger was several hours ahead of us leaving Brimm but arrived at Iota less than an hour before we did. I know the Nighthawk is faster, but not that much faster. Once again the Harbinger experienced an unusual delay. This happened before when the Harbinger reached Aleator much later than anticipated. Thoughts?"

"Yeah I've been giving a little thought to that," said Miles. "I wonder if it's not a tactical delay. Choose arrival times that are hard to predict, keep the element of surprise, something like that."

"Good thinking," said Calvin. "When I talked to Captain Anderson earlier, it was her opinion that the Harbinger showed up when it did because that's when the Rotham ships were scheduled to leave. But it was risky, if he gave us too much time we could have had the whole Fifth Fleet waiting for him. The Harbinger is powerful but not that powerful. The Andromeda alone could probably handle it."

"Now don't start that with me," said Miles. "I already argued this point with Sarah earlier; the Harbinger would win that battle."

"If the Harbinger were the better fighting ship," said Sarah, "*it* would be the flagship."

"There are other considerations," said Miles animatedly. "The Andromeda is a luxury-liner meant for pampering dignitaries. The Harbinger is a real warship meant to watch the DMZ. The Andromeda has more fighters and missile launchers, I'll give you that, but the Harbinger has more mounted guns, better mass drivers. And let's not forget the Type X shielding on the Harbinger, it has a customizable repeating pattern, it's impossible to predict and penetrate via modulation. The Andromeda is running a double layer of Type VIII; sure it technically can absorb more force but there are ways around it if you know what you're doing and you have a little information."

"But the Andromeda is more maneuverable."

Miles laughed. "Bah, who needs that? The Harbinger's weapons are still deadlier even if it can't get in a full broadside."



Sarah threw up her hands in a gesture of apathy. "Whatever."

"Once again we're wasting our time," said Summers. She looked at Calvin as if to say *handle this*.

"Sarah," he said. "I asked you to look into the Harbinger's belated arrival at Aleator. Could the ship have rendezvoused with someone during that time?"

"If it did," said Sarah. "It met with an unregistered ship. There are no stations close enough for him to have stopped at—and no one reported seeing the Harbinger—and as for ships... there was one semi-promising lead but it didn't pan out."

"Why not?"

"The Liberty Sun was flying by at about that time, it's an old frigate the Sixth Fleet decommissioned, disarmed, and sold to a human shipping company."

"A civilian corporation owns a warship?" asked Miles.

"What used to be a warship," said Sarah.

"Who knows how it's outfitted now," said Miles. "It could still be a warship, illegally I mean."

"Anyway," said Sarah. "The company that purchased it is owned by MXR."

"That does sound promising," said Calvin. Their web of mysteries seemed to be getting even more tangled.

"But there's no way the Liberty Sun could have met up with the Harbinger. Because while the Harbinger was late getting to Aleator, as we know, the Liberty Sun was *not* late getting to its destination."

"Maybe the records were forged to make it look like it had arrived on time," said Calvin.

"Except that it was visually accounted for," said Sarah.

"I see..." Suddenly what sounded very promising seemed almost worthless. "I guess we're back to the working theory that Raidan was trying to conform to someone's schedule and arrived at Aleator at a pre-determined time. One that gave him enough of a window to make sure he wouldn't be late."

"There was one other thing I discovered," said Shen. "It's not conclusive but I think it's important."

"Yes?" asked Calvin.

"According to flight data we got from Brimm, the ships Raidan attacked—all of them—were scheduled to pass through the same point at nearly the same time."

Calvin became excited. "Where's the bullseye?"

"Abia System."

Calvin had never heard of it. "What's in Abia?"

"Seemingly... nothing. A small outpost, more of a supply depot than anything, fifteen people staff it. There's also a dwarf planet that's too cold to colonize. I don't know why anyone would want to go there, but that's the place."

"Maybe because it's somewhere deep in the Empire that nobody would be watching," suggested Calvin.

Summers was obviously getting bored with this conversation. "How's the scan of the system coming?" she asked, now hovering over Shen's console. "Have we isolated the Harbinger's heading yet?"

"I'll check the computer," he replied.

"I don't think it'll matter," said Calvin while Shen analyzed the ship's findings. "I know where the Harbinger is going."

Summers raised an eyebrow. "*Where?*"

The fact that she asked *where* before *how* told Calvin she was more interested in finding Raidan than anything else. "He's heading for Abia System, obviously."

"What? Because the Rotham ships were passing by there? That's ridiculous."

"And," interjected Sarah. "I just realized something. Aleator, Brimm, Iota, Abia... think about it!"

"What?" asked Summers, now looking as much baffled as she was annoyed.

"See it?" asked Sarah. "Raidan went to Aleator, Brimm, and Iota in that order. If he goes to Abia next that completes the pattern."

"Abia," said Calvin. "Brilliant!"

"What are you talking about?" asked Summers.

"*Ab*," said Shen, now getting it. "The first letter of each place, it spells out Abia."

Summers rounded on Calvin. "*This* is the work of Intel Wing?"

He shrugged. "It's a clever discovery. But more important is the fact that those ships were scheduled to pass through that system. That alone is worth checking out."

"No it isn't." Summers folded her arms. "Just because ships Raidan attacked we going by Abia doesn't mean that Raidan is going there."

She was right. But he still wanted to investigate Abia and that meant convincing Summers the Harbinger would be there. And for all he knew, it would.

"I've found their heading," said Shen. "Zendricun Alpha."

*Damn!*

"*See*," said Summers. "Not Abia. Now we know where to go. Would you do the honors or shall I?"

Calvin knew what she meant. She wanted him to order a new heading and leave right away. The problem was Zendricun was more than a day's flight in the wrong direction.

"Not yet," he said. "I haven't checked the status of the below deck teams and the ship as a whole." This was true, he wanted some updates on cracking the coded message Raidan had given him, and he wondered if they'd gotten anything else useful from the mountain of data they'd stolen from Brimm. It would buy him a little more time to think of a compelling reason to go to Abia.

"We can do that on the way," said Summers.

Miles apparently decided it was his turn to speak. "Part of me wants to agree with you, boss lady," he said. "We're still owed a shore leave and hitting up Zendricun sounds pretty nice. Beaches, booze, babes in bikinis... *but* since the idea is coming from you, I have to disagree with you on principle," he grinned toothily. "You understand?"

"Excuse me?" asked Summers, she shifted her attention.

Miles looked her up and down. "Although, speaking of bikinis, you should consider wearing one. It might be enough to um... sway me to your side."

As Summers berated Miles, Calvin took the opportunity to check in with the lower decks. "Please give me some good news," he said as much to himself as he did to the comm. He imagined the junior officers below scrambling to get their notes together to make a proper report.

"We came up with a few possible answers to the coded text message you sent us." Calvin remembered it verbatim. *I stop shiny sunsets. I find pale blue lights, always.* "But I wanted to do a complete analysis before reporting."

"What's the best candidate?" asked Calvin. He'd hoped a single solution would be ultimate and convincing, but he'd take what he could get. Maybe the fact that multiple solutions seemed possible meant it hadn't been a coded message after all. Or maybe they needed a better cipher.

"The best we've come up with so far is this. Starting on the top line, if you take the first letter of the first word, then the second letter of the second word, then the third letter of the third word, and the fourth of the last word you get; I.T.I.S."

"Okay.," said Calvin. "Itis..." it didn't ring a bell.

"But," said the officer over the comm. "Continuing that pattern through the whole clue doesn't go anywhere. You get words without enough letters, and if you skip over those the result is just garbage. *But* if you reverse the pattern for the second line, take the last letter of the first word, then the second to last for the second word and so on, the complete clue is; I.T.I.S.I.N.A.B.I.A."

Calvin saw the answer right away.

"It is in Abia," he said.

"It's a really simple cipher, but that's the most coherent, strongest solution we've found."

*Perfect.*

"Thanks," said Calvin. "Keep working on it, but I think that's the one."

"Yes, sir."

He closed the channel and looked at Summers with a broad smile.

Apparently she'd finished haranguing Miles who was looking the other way.

"Did you hear that?" he asked.

"What?"

"The coded message says 'It is in Abia.'"

"The riddle we found in that debris?"

"Yes. We cracked it and that's what it says."

Summers looked skeptical.

"It's true," said Shen, "they just forwarded me their report."

"So then you agree we have to go to Abia," said Calvin.

"No," said Summers.

He was afraid of that. "Why not?"

"Several reasons: one, our mission isn't to follow clues; our mission is to hunt down Raidan. And we know where he's headed. Zendricun Alpha. Abia is in the wrong direction. Two, that answer might not be the solution to the code. Maybe it is, maybe it isn't. Three, the code might be a ploy by Raidan to throw us off his trail."

"I honestly think," said Calvin, "that this is Raidan's way of reaching out to us. The messages he's sent, his warning, the code. He wanted us to board that ship..."

"Which would have only served to delay us even more, and maybe even provoke the war with the Rotham Republic that he seems to want."

"Or maybe he's onto something big and, for whatever reason, he can't tell us what he knows directly. He's giving us hints to push us in the right direction of discovering it on our own."

"Or maybe," said Summers. "We have orders from every admiral in the military and every controller at Intel Wing to track down Raidan and try to disable his ship for capture. Is that what this is about, Calvin? You're afraid to take on the Harbinger directly?"

"There's nothing wrong with a little fear. Nature gave it to us to keep us alive," said Calvin. "But no, that isn't what this is about. This is about getting to the bottom of it and finding the answers to everything. It's who I am and what I do."

"What you're *supposed* to do is follow orders, and our orders couldn't be clearer," she said, her tone hardened but her face relaxed to an icy cool. She didn't want to be provoked into showing anything but pure, rational

objectivity, but Calvin knew better. She wasn't just a zealous officer trying to follow orders; she had some kind of vendetta against Raidan. It showed ever so slightly in her shimmering beautiful eyes.

"It's funny you mention orders," said Calvin. "Because, last I checked, I give the orders around here." Before she could retort he turned to Sarah. "Set course for Abia, fastest safe speed. Let's get to the bottom of this." He was certain they'd find something in Abia and that whatever it was would be worth letting go of Raidan to find.

"Yes, sir," said Sarah and she set to task.

"You're right, I spoke out of line," said Summers. Her voice had calmed but her eyes hadn't. "It's my duty to follow orders, just like it's my duty to send a report to the Fleet."

"Tattle-tale, tattle-tale..." Miles whispered just loud enough to be heard.

"You go ahead and send your report," said Calvin. "In fact, it's time I sent one of my own." They stared at each other for a few seconds, neither wanting to blink or back down. Eventually, though, Calvin stormed off toward his office to organize his thoughts. "I'll be doing that now. You have the deck, *Commander*."

## Chapter 20

Calvin stewed quietly, tapping his fingers against his desk over and over. He thought about turning on some music but decided it'd be too distracting. Instead, he sat there in silence, head buzzing while he debated what to do.

The ship was heading toward Abia; he felt good about that decision. *It*, something, was in Abia. And he wanted to know what *it* was before *it* left, whatever the consequences were.

Raidan had made it clear as crystal that he wanted Calvin to go there, for whatever reason. Probably to see something important. And Calvin wasn't about to let that opportunity slip through his fingers because Summers wanted to keep hounding the Harbinger. Especially since, if he caught up to it, he'd have to invent some new excuse for why he refused to attack it *again*. Since the obvious one didn't seem to be working—that it was tactically insane.

Summers was wrong. Everyone was wrong! Raidan wasn't a lunatic trying to start a war, and he wasn't a pawn in some corporate game either, he was part of something much larger. Why else was the Fleet behaving so strangely? And why else would Princess Kalila act so threatened?

Perhaps princess Kalila was representing her own interests and not the Royal Family's. If a war broke out, or some kind of instability shook the Empire, it might mean an opportunity to grab for power—outmaneuver her other siblings and destabilize her father's control of the monarchy.

He knew less about Kalila than he would have liked. He'd heard of her charity work and bits and pieces about her here and there, from news and tabloids, but he'd never given her, or her family, much thought. They were above and beyond him and not worth thinking about. Or so he'd assumed. And now he wished he knew more about her, to better judge her motives and character.

Calvin frowned. It was hard to pinpoint just what he believed. The best he could do was continue collecting information. And the best way to do that was to go to Abia. He knew that was what he had to do.

But he had to sell that idea to Intel Wing. If they wanted him to do a good job with his investigation, they would be supportive. But if they were only interested in containing Raidan, and preventing the truth from coming out, then it would mean they'd been compromised too. That some third influence had its hooks in both Intel Wing and the Navy and that influence, whatever it was, would see Calvin's choice to go to Abia as a direct threat.

He decided that, since Summers had forced his hand, it was time to test the Fleet and Intel Wing to see just how far the corruption went.

So he recorded his message.

In it he explained his reasons for going to Abia. He couldn't tell them about his meeting with Kalila. And he couldn't tell them why he'd chosen not to fire on the Harbinger. Or that he'd stolen data from Brimm that implicated Abia. All he could say was that he'd cracked a code that discussed Abia, and that he thought it likely Raidan would be there. That the Harbinger's apparent jump to Zendricun Alpha was merely a ruse.

Being as limited as he was, unable to fully explain his reasoning, his argument sounded weak. And he knew it. But he did the best he could. Appealing to his direct superiors and emphasizing, again and again, that this was definitely the right move for the investigation; he was certain. More certain than in previous investigations from which he'd earned silver stars. If they were objective, and had not been compromised, they would understand his message for what it was.

But if they *had* been compromised, they would hear it as: *I'm not working for you anymore. I've gone rogue.*

How they reacted would tell him a great deal. If they came down hard, he'd know he was on his own.

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Summers typed her report into the command panel of the access station on the aft side of the bridge. She could have broadcast it by voice but she didn't want the other bridge officers to overhear. All three of them: Sarah Winters, Iwate Shen, and Miles Brown—*especially* Miles Brown, were sympathetic to Calvin and didn't have any perspective on what was really going on. Serving together as long as they had, Summers couldn't expect any of them to look at Calvin objectively. A sad, predictable fact that helped explain the sorry state of the Nighthawk's command chain. And because of it, she didn't want them to hear what she had to say about their beloved Calvin.

Calvin lacked the ability to truly command a ship. He'd proven that when he'd melted under pressure and, in his frozen state, couldn't think fast enough to act against the Harbinger. How they all survived was an unexplained miracle, perhaps the act of a merciful god. Who could know? Summers wasn't going to speculate. Since the Harbinger hadn't destroyed them, she felt they'd been given a second chance to redeem themselves and prove their loyalty to the Empire by ending Raidan. Sometimes she felt like she was the only one on the ship who kept the wheels moving forward. She knew people acted differently around her, almost like she were the only real

officer and the rest were tourists on some kind of government sponsored joy-ride through the galaxy. In her mind she couldn't suppress the image that, should she disappear for any amount of time, mojitos and flowershirts would spring out of nowhere to the beats of lively party music. Didn't these people go through training?

Despite following orders to the letter her entire career, here she was in this mess. It drove her insane, and that feeling came across in her report.

Her tone was still formal and proper, but it carried a knife-like edge and she made her case strongly, clearly, and articulately for why Calvin was unfit for command and not following the mission. Emphasizing that he'd broken orders and refused to engage the Harbinger, which had flown right past them. And how, instead of following the trail to Zendricun Alpha, he was diverting them to Abia for no good reason. She ended on the suspicion that he was abusing a substance, probably alcohol, and it was affecting his judgment. Putting the crew in danger.

She sent the message with standard encryption and returned to the command position where she sat and took a deep breath. She had mixed feelings about her message. Partially she regretted sounding so negative—she didn't hate *everything* about Calvin. But an even deeper part of her remembered Raidan and how he'd manipulated her. Used her and set her aside. And now, if she let Raidan get away—which Calvin seemed more than willing to do, then even more people would die. Whatever else Raidan was, he was a killer.

*Yes, Calvin, Raidan does want us to go to Abia. But not because he's there. And when we arrive in the middle of nowhere and dig for clues that don't exist, Raidan will be torching Rotham ships and murdering civilians. And all because you, Calvin, are so easy for him to manipulate. Just like I once was. You just don't know Raidan like I do. He's playing games with us and you're taking the bait.*

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It wasn't more than ten minutes after he'd sent his report that Calvin received the very message he feared most from Intel Wing.

"You are ordered to change course and make port at CC-Platform B in the Xerxes system immediately." The Director's face looked strangely blank over Calvin's viewer as he spoke.

Calvin's heart sank and he was almost speechless. He'd half expected this reaction, but the other half of him, the better half, tried to deny it was even possible. He loved the Empire and now, to one degree or another, he was sure it had been corrupted. Infiltrated. *Compromised.*

He snapped back to attention and tried to play his part, feeling sick and more like an actor than a person. "What for?" he asked, feigning surprise.



"You'll be briefed there. See you soon," the Director faked a smile and terminated the call before Calvin could say another word.

Of course, he knew what it really meant. He was now a liability instead of an asset. They were going to take him out of the picture. Dump him off on Xerxes, the closest system with an Intel Wing presence, and then transfer command of the Nighthawk to someone more dependable. Maybe they'd even take the ship offline while they washed through the crew and sorted out who was reliable and who wasn't. He wondered if another Intel Wing ship had already been given the Harbinger assignment. For all he knew, more than one ship had been tailing it the whole time.

"So they want me to go to Xerxes with my hands in the air and tail between my legs," he said. Of course, he'd made up his mind years ago that if he ever were in a situation like this, and knew he was about to get burned and lose everything, he wasn't going down without a fight.

He figured he had a little time to decide his next move, since Xerxes and Abia were in the same direction. But once his ship didn't make the course correction toward Xerxes in about an hour, they'd know he'd gone rogue and would do everything they could to stop him.

So his first move came right out of the basic playbook for war. *Disrupt communications*. He stood up and ran out of his office onto the bridge.

Summers looked surprised to see him, or at least surprised he was moving that fast. He didn't care though. If he did this right, she wouldn't be a threat anymore, but he *had* to get her off the bridge first. He waved her out of his seat and took the command position.

"Summers, I need you to go below decks and check in with engineering."

"All right," she said. "But why don't I use your comm switch to call them?" She seemed tense.

"Because I need you to pick something up for me," he lied. She seemed to catch onto this. Ordering the XO to run and fetch something wasn't going to fool anyone. Everyone knew it was an excuse to get her off the bridge.

"Why not have someone who's already there bring it up?" she asked, folding her arms.

"Because it has sensitive information that I can't trust with just anyone," said Calvin. Summers raised a curious eyebrow. Calvin had no idea what this object was going to be.

"What is it?" she asked. "I need to know what it is if I'm going to get it."

"Just ask Andre, the Chief Engineer. He'll tell you."

"All.. right," she said cautiously. "I'm on my way." She stepped into the elevator and it whisked her away below deck.

"Good lord, I thought she'd never leave," said Miles.

"What's up, Calvin?" asked Sarah.

"We may be getting some unfriendly messages in the near future. I don't want to hear them," said Calvin. "Until I say otherwise we're going to have complete radio and kataspace silence. Comms between decks will stay online but no contact outside the ship will be allowed."

Sarah tapped her nose. "All right, I think I can handle that."

"And just in case," said Calvin as his heart started beating faster, "Shen, help me lock it out with our command codes."

"Yes sir," said Shen and he opened the systems' command prompt while Sarah began shutting things down. Together, Calvin and Shen used their respective codes as CO and senior officer of operations to jointly lockout the kataspace connector so it couldn't be reactivated without the use of an equal or higher set of command codes, which Summers didn't have.

"That ought to do it," said Calvin. "Continue flying toward Abia and act like business as usual." He tapped the comm to engineering.

"Andre here."

"It's Calvin. You're going to see the XO in there very soon. She'll ask you for something to bring back to the bridge. Give her some random datadisc."

"Will do. May I ask why?"

"Need to know basis, sorry friend," said Calvin.

"All right," said Andre. He started to speak again but one of his junior officers interrupted him. A moment later his voice returned. "The kataspace connector linkups and receiving beacons have been switched off?"

"That's correct," said Calvin. "As a matter of security."

"Let me guess," said Andre. "Need to know basis again?"

"That's right." He didn't want to keep Andre in the dark; he was someone Calvin trusted. But he didn't want to explain the situation over the comm into a room he couldn't see, where anyone could be listening. "Meet me in my office a bit later, Chief. When you have things nailed down over there. We have some things to discuss."

"Will do."

Calvin's next call was to Special Forces. But before he could call them, they called him.

The Major didn't sound angry, or rather, not angrier than usual, but there was a kind of alertness in his voice. Clearly shutting down all outside communications was a pretty big deal and, as chief of security and direct CO of a third of the people on the ship, he expected to be in on the decision to do it. The trouble was, unlike most of the ship's crew, the Major and his soldiers were not people Calvin knew well enough to trust with the details. He'd have to invent something.

"Why are you shutting down all outside communications, Mister Cross?" His deep voice came across as more gritty and gravely than usual.

"Well hello to you too," said Calvin, taking a moment to solidify the story he'd prepared for the Major.

"I'm waiting," said the Major. When Calvin didn't reply right away he added, "*for an answer.*"

Calvin's story relied on the most clichéd of excuses—'*it's a security threat*'—and that was especially dangerous since security was the Major's realm of expertise. But nothing else seemed to make sense. He decided to invent a kind of security risk the Major—and Summers—would never have heard of before, because it didn't exist.

"There are several small prototype... feeler probes," said Calvin, coughing to buy himself a few more seconds to iron out his exact phrasing. "As I said, feeler probes that Raidan and his contacts have deployed in order to protect themselves. They send our ship false messages and when the false messages are repeated back to them, they can covertly determine our position so the Harbinger can out-manuever us indefinitely..."

He paused. "... but, if we isolate all the comm systems and lock them out, that tactic won't work. And instead it'll give Raidan a false sense of security."

Calvin waited, wondering if the Major would buy it. He didn't know how convincing he sounded over the comm line, but he was satisfied that his story was the best he could come up with in so little time. He couldn't help but notice Shen roll his eyes and crack a smile.

"All right," said the Major. "So why haven't we been doing this before now?"

"Because we didn't know about it until now," said Calvin. "In fact, if you check the comms records you'll see we got a message from Intel Wing a few minutes ago. They were giving me this new intelligence." It was true that the ship kept track of when a transmission came and how long it lasted, but no data as to the contents of the message were ever recorded. Since, almost always, it was for select ears only. Calvin was the only person on the ship who knew what the message really had been about.

"Understood, HQ out," said the Major. The call terminated and Calvin breathed a sigh of relief.

"I take it that's not *quite* the real reason," said Shen.

"What makes you say that?" Calvin smiled.

"Because that kind of technology doesn't make any sense," Shen sat back and folded his hands behind his head. "I know it's cutting edge and experimental blah, blah, blah, but," he shook his head slowly, "it wouldn't work."

"Okay you're right," Calvin admitted. "Here's the real reason. The Fleet, or someone, has its hooks deep inside Intel Wing, and they're willing to give us up in order to keep us from getting to Abia. Whatever Raidan wants us to

find there, someone else obviously doesn't. When I reported that we decided to head to Abia they told us to make port at Xerxes."

"Xerxes?" asked Miles. "That place is a rotting hell hole." He reclined his chair and put his feet up on the console.

"And if we go there, they'll take this ship apart, interrogate us, and hold us there until they're convinced none of us are bad assets."

"But we *are* bad asses."

"Miles, not now," snapped Calvin.

"Oh come on it can't be as bad as all that," said Sarah. "Are you sure?"

Calvin nodded gravely. "I'm sure."

"It makes sense," said Shen. "From their perspective. If whoever is calling the shots wants Raidan reigned in because he knows something they don't want to get out, and if that something is in Abia, then they'd be motivated to stop investigators—like us—from getting there."

"So why'd they sick us on Raidan in the first place?" asked Sarah.

"Here's how I see it," said Calvin. "They definitely want the Harbinger taken down, it's a liability for someone. We were hired to find it and help mitigate that threat. But during that process, we became a threat ourselves."

"Because we didn't stop the Harbinger by launching into some bozo suicide attack?" asked Miles.

"That and because we're asking too many questions. Our going to Abia instead of Zendricun," said Calvin. "Proves to someone that we are more interested in solving the mystery than taking Raidan down. Now, if they do have something to hide, and there is a vital clue in Abia, then we are a serious threat because we are trained. Moving us to Xerxes is a way of mitigating us. And then whoever is pulling the strings can divert other resources to handling Raidan. We were a convenient tool yesterday. But today, we're part of the problem."

"So why don't we just play nice and then go to Abia later?" asked Miles. "You know, fake 'em out. Go to Zendricun, maybe stay a few days, have a few drinks, and then sneak over to Abia when no one's looking."

Calvin laughed. "Thanks for cheering me up."

"I wasn't joking," said Miles, sitting up. "Why do we have to go to Abia now?"

"Because whatever is in Abia might not be there later," said Calvin. "Besides it's too late now, we've shown our cards."

No one spoke for a few seconds. Then, just as Shen opened his mouth, the elevator door slid open and Summers stepped onto the bridge. "Here is your mysterious datadisc," she said.

"Thanks," said Calvin. He moved to take it from her but she kept it out of reach.

"It's blank," she said.

"What?" he asked, trying to think of some excuse for why it might still be important.

"I figured since you trusted me to go all the way down to get it, that implied I had clearance to see what was on it. But it's blank. And not just erased blank; it's never been formatted." Her eyes probed his and he knew she saw through him.

He snatched the disk from her hand. "The data isn't on the disc, it's *in* the disc," he said dismissively, as if she were stupid. When, in reality, nobody really understood what he meant. Including himself.

He went into his office and pretended to look the disc over carefully until his door slid shut. Once he was alone he locked the disc in a drawer and collapsed in his chair with a sigh.

Other ships would be looking for him now. And all his faceless, nameless enemies knew he was going to Abia.

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Summers tried once more to contact the Fleet with the terminal in her room but, for the sixth time, she only got as far as the screen that said: "*I'm sorry, this function has been disabled: code 101-C.*" She'd used every Executive Officer bypass she knew to remove the block but Calvin had higher clearance than she did. The computer wouldn't budge.

She felt like slapping the console a few times, but had just enough discipline to keep it together. So, instead, she took a deep breath, marshaled her intellect, and began brainstorming how to circumvent Calvin and contact the Fleet.

Since Calvin had gone to such lengths to keep the Fleet from contacting her, she had to do whatever it took to contact them. And find out what Calvin was trying to hide.

She didn't buy Calvin's ridiculous story that outside contact was a security threat. It was a bold-faced lie. Calvin had obviously blocked it out for his own purposes—just like Raidan had. And if that's what ended up stopping her from catching Raidan and fulfilling justice... she'd go completely ballistic!

Of course... if Calvin were somehow *unfit* to command the ship, Major Jenkins had the power to override his command codes. And Calvin's standing orders could be revoked. But how to arrange that? It wasn't an issue of forcing it happen. She wasn't going to injure him. That was something out of Raidan's playbook. No, Summers would follow the rules; since, in the end, the rules were designed to prevent this sort of thing from happening—they would allow a way for her to stop a deranged commanding officer from chasing ghosts across the universe at the expense of the mission.

Calvin had shown bad judgment on the bridge. And he'd shown up with signs of confusion and mental exhaustion. He'd been drinking, she was sure of it. And in that kind of condition he was not fit for command. And yes, that would explain his poor decisions. He's not right in his head. He needs help.

Before she knew it, she was on her way to the infirmary. With every step she further organized her arguments, giving them a brief polish so they'd be ready for the chief physician, Dr. Blair. Then he could declare Calvin unfit and Summers would take command. Once she had control, she'd re-establish contact with the Fleet and get the ship back on course to track down Raidan. It was not only the logical thing to do, it was the right thing to do.

Arriving at the infirmary, she found an empty, sterile room with a bored looking medic twiddling his thumbs and staring absent-mindedly from his chair by the door. Upon seeing her, the young man jumped to his feet, brown hair bouncing over his eyes. "Commander," he said, snapping to attention. She returned his salute.

"I need to see Dr. Blair right away."

"He's in his quarters," the medic pointed to a door. "He's not on shift."

"I need to see him, *on the double, mister*," said Summers, adding an edge to her voice. She didn't know what Calvin had done to these people, but for some reason they only seemed to listen if she sharpened her tone and repeated herself.

The man paged Dr. Blair. His rough voice crackled over the speaker. "Just what the hell are you doing, boy? I'm trying to sleep!"

Summers wasn't impressed.

"I'm sorry, sir," the young medic said. "But the XO is here to see you."

"If she's bleeding then patch her up. If not, tell her it can wait 'til morning... err afternoon. Whatever the hell time it is when I get up."

The medic glanced at Summers, clearly unsure what to do. Summers let out a quiet sigh and waved him aside. "Mister Blair," she said into the comm. "I need to speak with you right away; that's an order."

"Can't you just speak to me over the comm? I mean that's what you're doing right now, isn't it?"

"Not good enough."

"Fine, fine, just.. let me put some pants on."

As the seconds ticked by Summers found her patience wearing thinner and thinner and again her mind spun circles at how ridiculous this whole ship was. 'Intel Wing is the pride of the military'... *hardly*. Public transit was more orderly than this flying circus.

"Okay, what is it?" Dr. Blair asked after poking his head out the door. She'd only seen him a few times and once again it stood out to her how old he looked for a man in his fifties.

"We should speak in private," she said, walking toward his door. Her intonation made it clear this was an order and not a request. Dr. Blair looked startled for a second and then hustled inside.

"Yeah... just let me put a few things away real fast."

Summers pushed the door open and caught a glimpse of what had to be the strangest starship apartment in the military. It was half bathroom half bedroom with a small liquor cabinet and a tiny refrigerator. The place smelled of old cologne and... some kind of fruit, and the few dressers and only table were covered with clothes, books, and random odds and ends. Clearly Dr. Blair wasn't used to entertaining guests.

As Summers closed the door behind her, she saw Dr. Blair hurriedly cram a stack of magazines and who knows what into a dresser drawer then slam it shut. Summers folded her arms thinking *I don't want to know*.

"So how can I help you, Commander?" Dr. Blair put on what was obviously a fake smile and then waved for her to take a seat. She declined.

"I'm going straight to the point, Doctor," she said. Perhaps approaching a subject like this slowly and gingerly was better, but she'd never had any skill at beating around the bush. Why bother trying now? "It is my recommendation that Calvin Cross be relieved of command. He is unfit."

The doctor looked taken aback; Summers had expected this. She waited quietly for it to sink in.

"What... what for?" His voice was weak. He still sounded shocked but there was something else too, a hint of anxiety.

"Because Mister Cross has violated direct orders from the Fleet—he did not engage the Harbinger. And now he's cut off outside communication, and is sending the ship completely off mission." She tried not to raise her voice but couldn't help it.

"Now, now, I'm sure everything's fine. I'm not in the chain of command so I really can't arbitrate these kinds of issues. I'm sure Calvin knows what he's doing. He's won his share of medals and all that."

She felt her face get hot but she managed to keep calm. "Calvin showed up on the bridge today hung over—like some kind of binge-drinking juvenile alcoholic! And it affected his performance. His slow reaction time gave the enemy ample opportunity to destroy our ship."

"And yet here we are," Dr. Blair said calmly. "So what happened?"

"We got lucky," she said. "But next time, who knows. For the success of the mission and the safety of the ship, Calvin must not be allowed to retain his command. In his condition, he's putting everybody and everything in jeopardy."

"You said he was like an alcoholic," said Dr. Blair. "I happen to know for a fact that Calvin doesn't drink."

For a moment Summers second guessed herself. She really didn't know that Calvin was an alcoholic. But she did get the distinct impression he was hung over. "It was in his face and in his eyes, and his reaction time was very slow. He complained about noise on a quiet bridge..." she wracked her memory. "I'm sure something wasn't right about him."

"But you don't actually have any evidence of any kind?"

"Circumstantial..."

"—but not *empirical*."

"I suppose that's so," she admitted.

Dr. Blair smiled and seemed calmer. "I'll take your recommendation under consideration, Commander. But on this ship people are innocent until proven guilty. If you find evidence that Calvin has more than the allowed amount of alcohol or too strong of drink, you let me know."

"But until then you're not going to do anything, are you, doctor?" She was disappointed.

"No, I'm not. Nor should I. Now I suggest you go get some sleep yourself, Commander," he said, almost condescendingly. "You look miserable. And don't worry. I've known Calvin a long time and he knows what he's doing."

"Unless he's not himself."

"Tisk, tisk," the doctor wagged a finger at her. "No accusations like that until you find proof of the proof, get it? It's a pun," he chuckled and then climbed back into bed. "Don't let the door hit your ass on the way out."

Strongly irritated, she left his quarters.

So the doctor wasn't going to be any help; she should have expected as much. Just another crew member Calvin had in his pocket. One more marching, clapping, dancing idiot in his circus of fools. She pined for the day when Calvin's ship would undergo a thorough investigation and he'd get his. But, since that wasn't going to happen any time soon, it was up to her to set things straight.

She realized she still had one more card to play, as much as she loathed the idea. It was the kind of despicable thing she considered beneath her. But, despite her proper nature, she wasn't blind to the effect she had on men. And she'd seen Calvin, and almost every other man on the ship, trace her figure with their eyes at one point or another... why were men so very weak?

Calvin wasn't ugly, but the thought of letting him get close to her was absolutely repulsive. She would never let him have his way with her, but that didn't mean she couldn't use his desire against him. The very idea was shameful... but if that's what it took to save the ship and prove that Calvin was a lunatic unfit for command, then that's exactly what she would do.



"I hope everything went well with the doc," the young medic spoke in his own cute nervous way, his face turned red when their eyes met. Summers smirked, thinking Calvin didn't have a chance.

"Yes, everything went fine," said Summers with a cool smile. "Now, mister..." she searched his lapel for his name but the white coat had no markings.

"Andrews," he said flashing a sheepish grin. "James Andrews." She had his complete attention.

"Thank you, *James*," she said. "Now I was wondering if you could help me with something."

"Anything."

"I need a particular kind of medicine."

# Chapter 21

Calvin stood on the observation deck, leaning against the railing. In front of him was the largest window on the ship, so clean it would be invisible if not for the glare of the light behind him and the hint of his own reflection. Beyond that the view was one of complete darkness. Emptiness. A perfect void with absolutely nothing to see. To Calvin it was more intriguing than depressing. And it helped him forget the many questions on his mind, however briefly.

There was something peaceful about the deep black emptiness. Something serene. Even a slow rolling tide couldn't be more calm. He hadn't felt that kind of peace in a long time, if ever, and now, as his mind struggled harder than ever to make sense of the mess he'd been catapulted into, he felt some desire for that peace to last. It was a strange thing to be jealous of the emptiness. What was space anyway? Apathetic nothingness?

Somehow it reminded him of the Trinity. How he'd seen death's face and known true despair. Is that how it'd been on the Rotham ships just before Raidan destroyed them? Or were they wiped into oblivion before they could even realize it? He hoped, if things didn't go well, he'd get the second treatment. And maybe then, if there were some kind of afterlife, he could be with Christine again.

He heard the door slide open and he turned around. Summers walked in; she was alone. His instinct was to tense up, guard himself, but there was something different about her. He could see it in the way she walked. She was relaxed, even though her clothes hugged her tighter than usual, accenting her unusually beautiful physique. Her thick lips curved into a mischievous smile and her eyes danced with his playfully.

He felt his heart thumping. And... couldn't make sense of this change in her character. She was like a completely different person. And as she approached, he caught the scent of something wonderful. He didn't know if it was perfume, lotion, shampoo, or what, except that it smelled clean, refreshing, and alluring.

He was too dazed to speak. His thoughts were lost as he felt his eyes grip her face like some lost piece of rare, brilliant art. It just wasn't fair that some people in the universe could be so overwhelmingly, undeniably beautiful, while the rest did their best just to pass as mediocre.

Calvin shook his head slowly. Some small part of him sounded an alarm, despite how much his eyes approved. It took more effort than he would have

liked, but he managed to tear his gaze from her and turn back to the blackness which, now, seemed completely uninteresting.

"So what's this about?" he asked, holding back the excitement he felt inside. Instead, he allowed his suspicion to tint his words. After all, *she* had arranged this meeting and, since she had thus far been a thorn in his side, he had no reason to think this meeting was for his benefit. He kept his eyes fixed on the window and, as best he could, breathed through his mouth in a vain effort to ignore her intoxicating scent.

"I just thought it would be nice for us to talk," she said, slowly stepping closer and closer. Not able to see her face, he had some trouble reading her intentions. She kept her tone simple and pleasant.

"What about?" he asked, still making an effort to sound cold.

"About us," she said smoothly.

His heart skipped a beat.

"About the tension between us," she clarified.

He felt himself go stiff as she sidled up next to him, resting her delicate smooth hands on the railing, next to his hands. Close enough he could touch them, if he wanted to.

He tried not to look at her. When he didn't say anything she continued. "I owe you an apology, Calvin. As much as I hate to admit it."

Now he was totally lost. "For what?" He tried not to betray his confusion.

"For questioning your command on your bridge," she said it slowly, almost like she meant it. Could she? That seemed wrong to him. A few minutes ago he thought he understood her perfectly, had her pegged as a zealot with a one-track mind. *Take Down Raidan*. And Calvin had been certain she didn't approve of him, his ship, or any of his ideas. But then again... he wasn't a mind reader. And he hadn't truly known her long enough to be absolutely sure who she was and what she thought. Had he?

He said nothing. Hoping her words would reveal her intentions.

But when she didn't speak again and the silence hung between them for awhile, he couldn't help opening his mouth. "Summers... why are you really here? What do you want?"

"I want us to be friends."

"Now why don't I buy that?"

Her voice was soothing. "This whole thing has been an adjustment for me," she said. "First the thing with Raidan..." she paused before continuing. "And now... here I am. It's just hard, you know, this ship, this... mission. It isn't what I'm used to. It isn't my world." She almost sounded ashamed, like there were some real emotions hidden beneath the surface of her words. And that she struggled to articulate her thoughts sounded, to Calvin, surprisingly sincere. He felt himself relax as he took it all in.

Could this beautiful woman standing next to him really be a victim of circumstances? A soldier thrown into a ring of chaos as her commander, Raidan, betrays her and she's tossed onto a strange ship working for some strange part of the military she's unfamiliar with? A lifestyle she isn't used to. A mission she isn't used to. And this strong front she's been putting up—all those walls, all her barking orders, protestations, emphasis on protocol—was that some kind of mask to hide her own vulnerability? A defense mechanism?

He didn't know. A part of him wanted that to be true, and that part of him steered him in the direction of believing it was true. Because then, if that were so, he could imagine a future where he and Summers could co-exist without tension, without being enemies, and maybe they could even be friends. It was a strange thought. But an attractive one.

On the other hand, for her to act that strong and question him so much for so long ... and then suddenly change, letting her walls tumble down before him, just like that... it was too good to be true. No, the more he thought about it, the more he just couldn't buy it. Whatever Summers was, she was more complex than that. And, he was sure, she wanted something from him. Was this her strange way of asking him to unlock the kataspace connector? Not going to happen. Even she must know that.

No... her game was something different. But what? He wracked his brain wondering what she could possibly be after and when his mind came up blank he knew he couldn't rule out the possibility that she meant what she said. That she wanted to make peace. If that were true, it couldn't have come at a better time.

"Aren't you going to say anything?" she asked, her voice tender.

"Yeah," he said on impulse. He tried to think of something to say. Anything. "Look, I'm not very good at this sort of thing. I really don't have a lot of experience," he chuckled to ease the awkwardness and thought of his few experiences in the past having heart-to-heart conversations with women. None had gone particularly well. "But I accept your apology," he said. The next part came almost like a reflex. "And I apologize too, for being a really stubborn CO and not asking for your advice more often."

She looked up at him and smiled. It wasn't a big smile, but there was something about it that pulled him in. The way her lips curled, her cute nose, and above all her bright shining eyes. He took her in for a full, rich moment and then looked away. Pretending to stare off through the window. But he wasn't interested in the view of space anymore.

"So tell me about yourself, Calvin Cross," she said his name slowly.

"What do you want to know?"

"What do you want to share?" Her reflection was playful.

He couldn't keep from laughing and shaking his head at the absurdity of the whole situation. It was surreal.

"Well... there's not much to me," he said. "I like all sorts of music. No genre in particular. My favorite food is sushi. My favorite color is green." He didn't say it but it was the same deep shade of green that was in her eyes. "And I like hiking and swimming..." he tried to think of all the stupid get-to-know-you-in-two-minutes-type questions he always ran into. "I like... puzzles..." Unable to think of any more he shrugged. "What about you?"

She inched closer ever so slightly. He felt his heart quicken.

"Puzzles?" she laughed and it made him laugh.

"Hey there's nothing wrong with puzzles," he said, throwing his hands up.

"Sure, if you're in a retirement home," she smirked. He liked the banter. It helped him relax around her.

"What about you?" he asked again, trying to think of something incriminating about her. He couldn't come up with anything.

"My favorite color is blue and my favorite music is classical," she said. "And my favorite drink is a variety of white wines." She emphasized the last word. "What's your favorite drink, Calvin?"

"Water," he said. She seemed disappointed by his answer.

"You like water more than wine?"

"I'm afraid so," he made a weak grin. Her eyes tested him, then she changed the subject.

"So what brought a hiking, puzzle-playing, city boy like you all the way out here?" she asked. When he didn't answer right away she clarified. "Why *did* you join the military?"

"That's an interesting question," he let out a sigh. He liked this side of her. It had been too long since he'd been in such enjoyable company and seeing her take interest in him—though a part of him wondered if it was all a façade—felt good. But just because he liked it didn't mean he was about to roll over and make himself an open book. "It was my best option," he hoped to leave it at that.

"What do you mean your best option?"

"No, no, that's enough about me," he said. "What about you? Why did *you* join the Navy?"

"Okay, the truth..." she paused. "I met someone. Dark eyes and gorgeous black hair. Killer smile..." Calvin automatically hated this person, whoever it was. But he smiled anyway as she spoke.

"I was young," she paused briefly. "And sort of... impressionable. When I was about seventeen this nineteen year old midshipman boarded at our house for awhile. He'd talk about the stars and seeing exotic places and how much he loved being not only inside the Empire but actually a part of it." She

laughed. "He told me all these ridiculous stories about how romantic and adventurous the Navy was... I know now how silly and wrong they were. Military life isn't even close to how he described it."

"Like they say, hindsight is twenty-twenty."

"Yeah..." she said, musing, lost in her past. "But I'm still glad I joined. Even if midshipman Howe was completely full of hot air. My father," she laughed again. "He wasn't happy about it. Of course, he didn't like anything about Edward. Especially when we spent time together."

"Edward?"

"Midshipman Howe. His name was Edward... and he was my first. You never really forget your first, do you?"

Despite himself, Calvin felt a ping of jealousy hearing her talk about Edward Howe. And a little anger. He didn't like it; it was unbecoming, but... still... seeing Summers there next to him. Thinking of how beautiful she was. And thinking of some older Navy officer spinning stories to take advantage of her. It bothered him. He'd always hated guys like that. And for reasons unknown to him, they always seemed to get the girl—in the end.

"Who was your first?" she asked.

His eyes widened. "That's a rather personal question, don't you think?" he asked. It was automatic. This wasn't a subject he'd ever been comfortable talking about.

"I'm sorry," she said and suddenly he felt bad. He didn't know what it was, but the look she gave him, it pierced right through him and somehow, it became very hard to not be as open with her as she was being with him.

"I only ever had one," he admitted. "Christine was my first and my only. Don't get the wrong idea. I had several relationships growing up... but... they were all empty," he looked away. Several choice memories flowed through his mind followed by a parade of unwanted ones. He had many regrets.

"So where is Christine now?" asked Summers.

He swallowed hard and, for a moment, debated whether or not he should tell her the truth. It had been years since then and mostly he'd managed to block out the memory, but lately it had haunted his dreams night and day, making him wonder if closure was ever really possible.

"You remember that story I told you, about the Trinity?" She nodded and he continued. "The young woman at ops, the one who was infected and died later at the hospital... her name was Christine."

Summers didn't say anything with her mouth, but her eyes spoke volumes. And, very tenderly, she placed her hand closer to his. Not touching his, but almost. She hesitated. Like she wasn't sure it was the right thing to do. But Calvin took her hand and held it, drawing comfort from its warmth.

"We met when I came aboard. In fact, we were in the same transfer. And we really hit it off right away, she was very playful and fun," he shook his

head once, feeling hot dry tears burn behind his eyes. "God, I loved her. Everything about her." He was again staring off into the blackness of space, wondering if that's where Christine was now. Some kind of peaceful, mindless, bliss.

"We—" he couldn't get himself to speak further. In part because he'd never really confronted the memory of their time together. It was still too painful. What was a few years later anyway? It felt like nothing. And Calvin didn't want to appear weak or overly sentimental in front of Summers. He bit his tongue and kept his emotions inside.

She came even closer, until she was pressed up against him. He felt her warmth against his shoulder and against his leg. He wanted to reach around and hold her so much... but he resisted.

When he felt he'd regained his composure he looked her in the eyes once more and, to his surprise, he thought he saw conflict in her. Uncertainty. And then it dawned on him that she might be regretting this little heart-to-heart chat she'd initiated. Perhaps he'd said too much.

"I'm sorry if I went overboard there," he made a half-hearted attempt at a laugh and wiped his left eye.

"No, no, it's not that," she hesitated. "Do you ever think... have you ever had to do something that felt wrong and you hated having to do it, but you knew you had to, like you had no other choice?"

He thought about her question for a moment. At first wondering why she asked it. Was her mind conflicted over something or was she just trying to change the subject from where it had strayed? Perhaps both.

Then he considered the question itself and said, "I think sometimes we do what we have to do. Medicine can taste bad. Physical therapy can hurt..." he looked into her eyes "or apologizing to someone and making peace with them, that can be hard too." Strangely, she looked away when he said that. That bothered him and he let go of her hand. But didn't move away.

There was an awkward pause and he started thinking it was best for him to escape the situation. He'd make sense of it all later, if that were even possible, but now he needed to get away. He started thinking of excuses but before he could use one she spoke again. "Look at us..." she glanced up at him with a weak smile, their reflections were somewhat visible on the window's surface. He returned the smile gently.

As he thought of his excuse to leave, and thought the peaceful silence was the perfect opportunity to get away, he couldn't get his mouth to open. Feeling her there, how warm she was, and being able to open up about things that he'd kept bottled inside for years... it was hard to walk away from that.

So, as he went to explain why he should go he ended up saying, "What about Raidan?"

"Raidan?" She looked genuinely confused, not defensive.

"It's obvious to me that Raidan, what he did, affected you deeply. You had some kind of feelings for him. What were they? What are they? What is he to you?" She seemed surprised by the questions and, honestly, he was too. Because it took her off guard she withdrew, just a bit, before answering.

"In the past, Raidan was a mentor and a friend. And we were ... close, once. But not anymore. That ended when he showed his true colors and hurt a lot of innocent people."

"How close were you?"

"We were never really... you know. We'd spend a lot of time together, and talk and... he manipulated me. Made me believe we were building something, the two of us. But he became more and more secretive. And he lied to me," she closed her eyes, jaw clenched. "He lied to all of us. Again and again. And we didn't know it; we trusted him. Then one day he ordered the ship to do terrible, terrible things and... I just let it happen."

Calvin actually felt pity for her. And, for the first time since she'd arrived, he understood why she'd kept such a hawk's eye on him. Not just because she wanted revenge on Raidan, though that was certainly true, but because she didn't want to repeat past mistakes. And now here he was, another CO keeping secrets from her, and he too had ordered the ship to go dark. If only she could understand why he did what he did. He tried to find words to explain it to her. But he feared they'd start an argument and erase the beauty of the moment.

"I said too much," Summers looked down. And then, without thinking about it, he stepped behind her and massaged her shoulders. She was extremely tense. She retreated at first, ever so slightly, then she encouraged him.

He could feel her relaxing as he rubbed her for several minutes and they made small talk. He tried the whole time to keep his mind from thinking about her body, but smelling her hair and feeling her soft back and shoulders... he lost sight of himself. And before he really understood what had happened, he took her by the arm and, as she turned, he pulled her in tight. She cooed and he began kissing her. Just as his hand slipped to her waist she pulled away.

"Stop," she said gently. He didn't know what to think and let go of her completely. Just as he felt ashamed for letting it happen, she grabbed him by the hand and with a smile said, "not here, let's go somewhere else."

They moved quickly through the corridors, resisting the urge to run. Wanting to keep up proper appearances, they made a silent agreement not to touch in the halls, not even hold hands. Before long they were in her room. As the door closed he went after her but she stopped him.

"Not here."

"Why not?"



"The walls are paper thin; let's go to the *captain's* quarters."

"Okay," he said, excited by the idea of satiating his appetite for her. Even though a tiny alarm inside him was urging him to slow down. *This is too fast. This can't be right.* He ignored it and asked, "so why are we here?"

"To get this," she opened her small liquor cabinet. In it were two low-proof bottles, the maximum allowed for an officer on a starship.

Before Summers could, Calvin reached in and snatched a bottle. "Okay, here we go then."

"No," she snapped. Her reaction was sharp enough to take him off guard. But she softened immediately. "No, it has to be this one." She took out the other bottle and made him return the one he had. Then, together, they left.

They passed two crewmen and Summers made no effort to hide the wine in her hands—Calvin had no idea where she could hide it anyway. Instead she spoke up so the other officers could hear. "And then, Captain, I found this contraband in his room!" she barked.

Picking up immediately, Calvin replied. "Now, now I don't think there's any need for serious discipline."

Once they were alone again they both snickered. "Did you see the look on their faces?"

They soon arrived at his quarters and, just before pressing his thumb to the plate, Calvin remembered the bottle of equarius sitting open on the desk.

He hesitated. Part of him wanted Summers so unbelievably bad he would have done almost anything. But another part held back, reminding him of the consequences. If she did find the equarius... that would be the end of everything.

She seemed to notice his hesitation. "What's the matter?"

"Oh nothing," he said and pressed his thumb to the plate, certain he could dart into the room and stash the pills away before she could get a good look at them.

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Summers watched Calvin unlock the door and race inside. Was he really as eager as all that? He didn't seem the type to be that desperate, it was unbecoming.

Once inside, she saw him pick something up from the desk and stuff it away in his safe. It looked like pills. She raised a curious eyebrow.

"What was that?"

"Just a prescription," said Calvin with an innocent shrug as he hurried back over to her. The door slid shut, leaving them alone. She made it a point to look around the apartment before he could make his move on her. It was somewhat messy but not overly so, though his bed wasn't even made and he

still had a couple of boxes he hadn't unpacked. At least the room didn't smell bad.

To her dismay, nothing incriminating was in sight. Calvin didn't even have a liquor cabinet. And the only drinks, true to his word, were water bottles.

In hardly a moment, he was there again, reaching for her. She stopped him. "Wait a sec," and popped the cork. The bottle smoked a bit, giving the authentic impression it had never been opened—something she'd achieved by injecting her surprise through the cork rather than removing it.

She offered him some. "Go ahead and drink it right out of the bottle," she gave him the sexiest smile she knew how to give. His eyes lit up and he returned the smile, but refused the drink.

"I really hate the stuff, can't stand it. It all tastes like ethanol to me."

She felt her heart race. She'd come way too far for this plan to fail now. "Come on, smell it," she said. He took a whiff and started coughing. Her mind panicked, seeking a way to salvage the situation if she couldn't get him to take a drink.

"I was hoping we'd drink it together," she said with big eyes and a pouty face. She absolutely hated resorting to that but Calvin was making this hard. And she was so very close.

"Sorry, love," he said.

She paused for a moment, he'd called her *love*. That bit her, so she blinked it from her mind. *Must focus on the mission!*

She took a large drink herself, careful not to swallow, and then invited him to take her in his arms. He scooped her up like a feather, the quick motion almost causing her to spit out the wine.

The two of them collapsed to a sitting position on his bed and she pulled off his shirt. He gave her a firm squeeze and pulled her even closer. As soon as she felt his hands under her blouse she knew this could go no further. She pressed her lips against his in an open mouthed kiss.

It must have been surprising for him to get a mouthful of wine laced with chloral hydrate. He stiffened up and made a slight effort to disentangle himself from her to spit it out, but she wouldn't budge and kept kissing him until he swallowed.

After that it was just a matter of keeping him shy of second base until his grip slackened and he passed out. "Thank god," she said as he finally lost consciousness. She removed herself from his now empty embrace and stood up.

She wasn't sure how long the effect would last, but felt safe taking a minute to brush herself off and wash up using Calvin's sink. She hadn't worn any makeup on purpose so it wasn't too much effort to clean her face and smooth out her clothes. But seeing her hair made her frown. It would be

difficult to set properly. Instead she put a rubber band around it and wore it up.

Feeling a bit more like herself, she set to task combing over the apartment. She opened drawers, checked under the desk and the bed, browsed through the boxes, but ultimately didn't find anything incriminating. That only left the safe and Calvin had sealed it tight.

With a heave, she gripped his wrist with both hands and yanked him off the bed and onto the floor. She half expected him to wake up but he was still out cold. She dragged him along the floor until they were close enough for her to press Calvin's thumb against the plate. It beeped its approval and unlocked. She popped it open.

To her surprise, and mixed delight, she saw a mountain of pill bottles. They were kept in translucent orange containers that were unmarked. One was open and half gone. She pulled out her tiny camera and took a picture—intending to take it, and a bottle of pills, to the lab on the lower decks. Her guess was that after they analyzed the chemicals it would be discovered that Calvin had possession of illegal drugs. That was more than enough to take his command away.

She felt a surge of victory swell her lungs, but it was a bittersweet victory.

As she looked at him... crumpled on the floor, and thought of what he'd said to her on the observation deck... she couldn't just leave him like that. She spent the next minute or two dragging him back and hoisting him onto his bed. She didn't go out of her way to make him comfortable, but she couldn't stand seeing him on the floor. When he was back in place, or close enough, and she didn't feel as bad, she headed for the lab.

## Chapter 22

Monte Blair couldn't sleep after Summers had torn into the infirmary and demanded to speak with him. The audacity of that woman to demand he declare Calvin unfit for command, it was... *unthinkable*. Calvin was a good friend of many years. And Monte didn't make it his business to judge what Calvin did with the ship and crew.

Having the XO make demands of him helped nothing. He had enough on his mind as it was. Trouble with the Khans. And, as he lay still, he wondered whether the new cartel leadership would kill him. Or if his lung condition—which was worse than he let on—would do him in first.

He wasn't as much in the dealing game as he used to be. He only had two people under him now, and they were stealing from him; he knew it, but could do nothing about it. He was an old man with a cane, on the other side of the galaxy. Hardly intimidating.

For the millionth time he thought back on his glory days and wished he hadn't taken as many hits over the years. He'd turned to drugs initially to latch onto something that could offer him peace of mind, something that could keep him going when the world felt too heavy. And, for a long time, the drugs had worked, or seemed to. But then, as if overnight, everything came apart. His life, his mind, his body... He wasn't sure exactly when he *realized* the drugs were hurting him permanently but it had been too late.

The chronic pain. The dizziness. The vomiting. Before he knew it, he was coughing up blood and who knows what else. One morning he couldn't even see for twelve hours. But when his sight returned he was back on the stuff, searching for something to cope with the loss of his friends, family, and wealth.

His marriage had suffered the most, short-lived as it had been before crumbling apart. *Poor Bonnie... if only I could have actually been someone, like I promised. Instead of the trash I became.*

It wasn't as bad when he'd finally stopped using and began dealing. That paid off his original debts and allowed him to get away from the planet that had once been home—where all his painful memories were. He left them there, as far away as possible.

But when he had trouble sleeping, like when people barged into his room on the warpath, it left him startled and miserable. Picking at his brain for anything and everything. Decades of fears, mistakes, and pain. It was pure agony. He only kept himself going now because he believed he was finally contributing to the universe. Here, on this starship, he could put his

knowledge to use and actually help people. It would never undo a lifetime of regrets, but it helped him ignore them. And if he could end his life on a high note, all the better.

Then suddenly, like a re-occurring nightmare, Summers was back again. Banging on the door because Blair had disconnected his comm. When he opened it, she invited herself right in, waving a folder of documents, a picture, and a pill sample. She wore a smile big enough he expected her to say she'd won the lotto.

Unfortunately it was much worse.

"You say 'bring me evidence,' well here it is, Dr. Blair!" She handed him the folder. He opened it and browsed through a standard report from the science lab. There wasn't much to it. Basically they'd proven that a sample of drugs found in Calvin's quarters was Xinocodone—or "equarius"—which was a controlled substance. Monte would have liked nothing more than to claim he'd prescribed it to Calvin, but they'd found far more in Calvin's inventory than Monte was allowed to prescribe. Apparently Calvin had taken to stockpiling it. The implication that followed was simple. Calvin had to be removed from command.

Monte cursed inside and wondered how Calvin could have been stupid enough to let Summers, of all people, find equarius in his room. The next logical question would be "how did he get the equarius?" and before long, Monte knew, all fingers would be pointing at him.

"I expect your formal declaration that Cross is unfit for command right away," said Summers. She seemed too arrogant. And he hated that she was right. That he really had no choice. Not if he valued his career anyway. But somehow the thought of Calvin being dragged off to some jail and this witch in front of him, this beautiful nasty witch, sailing away with Calvin's ship... it was just too damn wrong.

"No," he said simply.

She looked genuinely shocked. "What did you say?"

"I said no. I won't do it."

"But you have no choice," Summers took back the folder and flipped it open, again showing him her evidence. "Here's the proof. I know Calvin is your friend but you have a duty to do."

"I am not convinced that the equarius you found was actually in Calvin's room, despite the picture," he said, folding his arms.

"It's still there if you want to see for yourself," she snapped.

"You could've put it there," he said. "You had a motive, after all, to get Calvin removed from command. Don't think I've forgotten your visit. You woke me the hell up... twice!"

Her eyes narrowed and he could see rage inside them as she shook her head slowly. "*Unacceptable...*" She stormed out, folder in hand. He watched

her go, knowing he could delay her but there was ultimately nothing he could do to stop her.

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Summers had only been to Special Forces Head Quarters once, when she'd toured the ship that first day. She really liked the atmosphere there. The rigid discipline. The soldiers with crisp, unwrinkled uniforms and proper salutes. A place where structure and order prevailed. How the military should be. Seeing the grey sliding door guarded by two perfect soldiers made her smile.

"Commander," the leftmost soldier acknowledged her and they both saluted and let her pass.

"I need to see the Major right away, it's urgent," she said to the attending soldier, a busy looking female in grey fatigues. She paged the Major.

"Commander Presley here to see you, sir, she says it's urgent."

The Major's husky voice could be heard over the comm speaker in reply. "Send her in."

The Major's office was not as brightly lit as the HQ's main room, but the hazelnut paneling made it feel warmer. Behind a matching brown desk the Major sat up straight, hands curled together on his desk. He looked up at her with deep brown eyes that made him seem younger than his greying hair let on.

"What can I do for you, Commander?" He waved for her to sit. Summers accepted and slid her folder of notes across the smooth table.

She cut right to the chase. "I have proof here that Lieutenant Commander Cross has illegal drugs in his possession. He is therefore unfit for command."

The Major didn't seem the type to show his emotions, but she could see surprise in his eyes as he flipped through the lab results and photographs, shaking his head. "This is very alarming, but, I don't have the authority to relieve the Captain of command. You should take this to Dr. Blair."

Summers knew this was protocol and she hadn't come here expecting the Major to relieve Calvin of command—her goals were slightly different. "I've already spoken with the good doctor," she said. "And he refuses to declare Calvin unfit despite this evidence. My opinion is that Dr. Blair is putting his friendship with Calvin ahead of the well-being of the ship."

The Major frowned and leaned back, his chair creaking. "I'm not sure what you expect me to do," he said. "The regulations are very clear, I don't have any jurisdiction over the ship's command." She liked that the Major was a man who operated by the book.

"I am aware of your position," said Summers. "The usual procedure here is to contact Fleet Command and present this evidence. But Calvin has locked out all outside communications. Only you have the security access to override that lockout. I'm asking you to do that so I may contact Fleet Command and present them with this information."

The Major hesitated for a moment, looking conflicted. "Calvin said the lockout was a necessary precaution, that outside communication represents a security threat."

Summers looked him squarely in the eyes. "I have every reason to believe Calvin is using that as an excuse to keep the Fleet from revoking his command."

The Major stroked his chin for several seconds. Summers was about to speak again, to strengthen her argument, when the Major nodded his assent. "Yes, I think you're right. Fleet Command should have this information and they can give us further instructions. We can also ask them whether or not they authorized Calvin to lockout communications."

Summers felt a rush of excitement. "I believe that is the right course of action."

The Major turned his attention to his computer and typed a series of codes, including one that required voice recognition. "System Override Alpha Victor One Whiskey Bravo Niner." The computer confirmed his order with an affirmative beep. He nodded to Summers. "All yours, Commander." He moved aside so she could use his terminal.

Without hesitation, she walked around his side of the desk and input the proper command lines to link up with Fleet Command over a secure channel. Before long, Commodore Yitzen's lightly-bearded face appeared.

"We've been having trouble contacting you, IWS Nighthawk. What is your status?" He seemed tense.

"That's because Lieutenant Commander Cross locked out all outside communication. Major Jenkins overrode Cross's order so we could give you this report." Summers pulled a disc out of her pocket and plugged it into the Major's computer. At her request, the lab had given her a digital copy of all the information that incriminated Calvin.

As she forwarded it over the kataspace connector, she continued to explain. "In addition to the fact that Calvin disobeyed a direct order by not engaging the Harbinger, it's also been discovered that Cross has in his possession a controlled substance which he has been using. It is my opinion that it is impairing his judgment and he is unfit for command. Dr. Blair does not agree, I am therefore appealing to you."

"This is a matter of serious concern," said Commodore Yitzen, his eyes scanned back and forth and Summers knew he was reviewing the notes she'd

sent him. After a few seconds he said. "Did Cross provide a reason for locking out communications?"

"He said he was under orders from Intel Wing. That incoming kataspace messages were a security threat."

"There was no such order," the Commodore's eyes lit up. "We have no other choice but to relieve him of command. As of this moment you, Commander Presley, are the commanding officer of the Nighthawk. I am sending this notice to all senior staff. Is Major Jenkins nearby enough to hear what I've just said?"

"Affirmative."

"Good. Your new orders are to proceed directly to station CC-Platform B in the Xerxes system where you will be given further instructions."

Summers felt a wave of confusion. Xerxes System? "Shouldn't we follow the Harbinger to Zendricun Alpha?" she asked.

"Not yet. Proceed to Xerxes with all speed. Fleet Command out." The screen winked off.

"You heard him, Major," said Summers.

"Yes, and I just logged it," he looked up from the computer screen. "You have command."

"Time to spread the good news," she couldn't hold back a broad smile.

The Major nodded and opened a channel to the whole ship. "Attention all hands, this is Major Jenkins. As of this moment, Commander Presley has command of this ship. Calvin Cross has been officially relieved of duty by order of Fleet Command. That is all." He released the button and looked at her. "I'll send two soldiers with you to make sure the transition on the bridge happens smoothly.

"Thank you."

"And Commander," he said as she turned to leave. She looked back at him. "Would you like Cross detained?"

She felt a stab of guilt as she imagined Calvin knocked out in his quarters, and how she'd used him. And, technically, she was guilty of battery against him. It had been necessary and he had deserved it. But now that she had command there was no need to add more insult to injury.

"No," she said softly. "I don't think that will be necessary."

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Calvin awoke to the sound of a loud knock. His eyes, well-adjusted to the darkness, stared at the door but he didn't say anything. It didn't seem real. He rolled over, half-expecting Summers to be next to him, but when she wasn't there he knew it had all been a very vivid, strange dream.



The pounding came again and Calvin managed to sit up, scratching his bare chest—which was frozen with sweat. He stared down at his crumpled sheets and blinked several times, trying to clear away the blurriness. He felt light-headed and somewhat dazed and struggled to collect his bearings. He knew where he was but had no idea how long he'd been here in his quarters or what time it was.

Whoever it was knocked a third time, louder than ever.

"Come," Calvin croaked with his hoarse, groggy voice, desperate for the knocking to stop. The door slid open and a large silhouette rushed inside. "Lights," Calvin ordered. They snapped on to reveal Miles who looked tense, maybe even angry. His face burned red and his eyes seemed larger than usual.

"Is it true?" he asked, panting. Like he'd sprinted the whole way.

Calvin's head hurt and he combed a hand loosely through his tangled hair, wishing Miles would lower his voice. "Is what true?"

"That Summers has command?" Miles didn't hide his panic.

Calvin shook his head slowly. "I'm sure I have no idea what you're talking about..." Feeling the torture of dry throat, he looked around for a water bottle and noticed the open safe. Bottles and bottles of equarius still in place but perfectly visible. One, however, was missing. He felt his heart squeeze with fear and he realized what must have happened.

Summers had used him. And he'd let her. Let her in his room. Let her somehow incapacitate him. And let her break into his safe and discover his dark secret. And all because he was too blinded by her brilliant green eyes, seductive smile, and superbly carved physique... *She beat me!* He shook his head in disbelief.

"We got this nasty memo from Fleet Command and the Major made an announcement to the whole crew a couple of minutes ago. Summers is in and you're out. I guess they worked it out with someone up the food chain or whatever."

Calvin felt slow, like his mind wasn't working properly. He closed his eyes hard and rubbed his temples, gently coaxing himself to a more alert state. While he did this, he realized he was in real trouble. And there was no one to blame but himself.

"So is it true?" Miles pressed. He said it in the kind of way that meant he already knew the answer but desperately hoped otherwise.

"I suppose it is," said Calvin, unmoving. He didn't even feel like standing up.

So that was that... it was such a bitter flavor. The grim future that awaited him in Xerxes didn't feel real. What bothered him most of all—even more than knowing the Raidan mystery would never be solved—was that Summers had taken advantage of him so severely and bested him so easily. He was a

smart guy. Always proud of his intelligence. How the hell did he let this happen?

He thought of his encounter with her on the observation deck, what they'd spoken about, how it'd gone. How she'd leveraged her beauty against him. And the more he realized what a fool he'd been, and how he'd been played like a toy—a simple, stupid, foolish toy—the tighter he clenched his jaw.

"How could you let this happen?" Miles demanded, shocked and frustrated. The question cut into Calvin deeply and he could think of no answer he liked, because they each ended with it ultimately being his fault. Like the bad bishop move he'd made in his chess game with Summers earlier. A fatal blunder. Only this time, others had to share the consequences of his mistake, maybe even the whole Empire.

"I got careless," said Calvin, staring blankly at the wall as if he could see through it. "And I let my guard down." He tried to block out the fresh images of Summers' eyes playing with him, and her siren smile... again he shook his head, ashamed. She'd betrayed him. And by letting her do that he'd betrayed himself. Ever since Christine, he'd kept his heart closed to the women around him and now that he'd let someone squeeze past his defenses, his life was in permanent ruins.

He realized how it happened, he'd somehow projected his feelings for Christine onto Summers—and that had been his fatal mistake. With that knowledge, all his romantic feelings were crushed like splintering ice under a steel hammer. And he blocked out the pain and confusion.

"So what happens next?" asked Miles.

Calvin shrugged. "We go to Xerxes. They launch a full inquiry and put us on trial. I'll be discharged, my assets frozen, and they'll leave me stranded on some two-bit border system where I can't do any damage. As for the ship, they'll swap out most of the personnel—probably stuff it full of Navy officers the way things are going, and then go kill Raidan, if they can."

Silence filled the air and Calvin took in a deep breath. "And if Raidan dies, his secrets die with him. What a waste."

"So you're just gonna roll over and that's it?" asked Miles, his voice gaining volume.

Calvin finally let himself look Miles in the eyes. "I'm not sure what else to do at this point."

"Yeah, but..." Miles faltered for a half second. "I don't want that bitch to win. *I wanna fight!*"

Strangely, hearing Miles say that gave Calvin the slightest burst of energy and the tiniest smile cracked his lips—but only for an instant.

He may have lost everything else, but he still had the loyalty of his closest friends. And seeing Miles there, eyes lit with rage, Calvin wondered if

somehow he could still salvage his situation. If his senior staff—*his friends*—put it all on the line for him.

"Maybe you're right..." said Calvin. "We're already condemned by association anyway, may as well hang together and do something to deserve it."

"Now *that's* more like it," said Miles, pumping a fist into the air. Calvin nodded, feeling excitement pour slowly into him as his mind raced, trying to think how best to twist the situation to their advantage.

"Okay, Summers will probably keep two vigilant eyes on me," said Calvin. "So that limits what I can do for now. But it's also an advantage. If she's busy watching me then she's less able to watch you, Shen, Sarah, and the others. What I want you to do is feel around for me, find out who's loyal. See who's in if we make a move."

"*When* we make a move," said Miles.

Calvin smirked. "Right. But for now, we have to keep things quiet. Spread the word around cautiously and when you have a good idea of who's with us, arrange a meeting."

"I'm on it," Miles whirled for the door.

"And Miles," said Calvin before he could leave. "Be *subtle*." He knew that wasn't one of Miles' strong suits.

"You know I will," a smile spread across his round face.

Calvin nodded. "You're a good man."

## Chapter 23

When Summers took over the command position from the Second Officer, Mister Rose, she encountered no more resistance than surprised faces. When no one objected to her orders, she dismissed her Special Forces escort who left with a salute.

Every person on the ship had heard the Major's announcement and, like she'd expected, many were in shock. They'd admired Calvin and his loss of command was a much needed wake-up-call. A first step in restoring discipline.

Her first order was to re-open all communication. This was possible now that the Major had overruled Calvin's lockout. The ops officer, Cassidy Dupont, handled it in only a few seconds. Satisfied, Summers turned her attention to the man at the helm.

"What is your name, Second Lieutenant?" She noticed the insignia on his collar.

"Me?" He pointed at himself.

"Yes, *you*."

"Jay."

"What is your full name."

"I don't like my full name, I prefer Jay," he said very casually. Summers shook her head realizing that even though she had command of the ship, it would still be a long uphill battle before she had a ship worth commanding. Again she told herself this crew could be retrained. It would just take time and a firm hand.

"I asked you a question and I expect an answer immediately. Do you understand?" she snapped.

"Yes, sir."

"Now, what is your name and rank, mister?"

"Second Lieutenant Jay Cox, sir."

"Sit up straight, Mister Cox."

His face reddened but he did as ordered. Summers nodded approvingly. Then she turned her attention to the young man at the defense post. He was just a boy, maybe eighteen or nineteen. It felt strange to trust someone so young with something so vital. But, despite his youth, his black-and-silver uniform boasted the white bar of midshipman. He was an officer and Summers would treat him as such.

"And what is your name, mister?"

"Midshipman Patrick O'Conner, Commander."

She knew everyone else's names already.

"All right, Mister Cox, set a new course. Heading, Xerxes System."

"Aye, Commander," he input the new course. To adjust quickly, the ship had to slow down to basic speeds, stars once again filled the windows as the ship turned.

"New course plotted, engaging primary engines and commencing altered space jump in forty-five seconds. Standard jump depth. Estimated time of arrival... eight hours."

"Good," Summers stood up. "Lieutenant Commander Rose, you may resume command of your shift."

He saluted and Summers left the bridge.

Next she'd put in an order to have the illicit drugs seized from Calvin's quarters. Then she hoped to get some sleep without thinking of him, and what had happened between them.

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"It's all set up."

"Good. Where and when?"

"One hour. Observation deck."

"We're not all getting there at the same time are we?"

"No, no, of course not. Everyone arrives at different times, at least ten minutes apart. Don't worry, I got it."

"I hope it isn't too much time. I don't want anyone to notice people are missing."

"It's still Red Shift for another few hours, I doubt anyone will notice."

"They'd better not."

\*\*\*

Summers tried for all of thirty-five minutes to sleep.

Her bed just wasn't soft enough and she couldn't get the temperature exactly right. But that wasn't unusual. The real problem, she knew, was her racing thoughts. She had command now and that meant many more responsibilities. In the quiet darkness she picked through everything she knew about the ship and tried to plan how she'd restructure it. She wanted to streamline everything so they could catch Raidan as soon as possible. That meant getting to know the crew's capabilities better.

She toyed around with different configurations, imagining which personnel she'd move where and what the new shifts would look like. But it wasn't *just* logistics that kept her awake.

The encounter with Calvin bothered her. She was certain she'd done the right thing. Or, at least, the necessary thing. Everything had come to a head. Calvin had to lose command. And the only way to do that, that she could think of, was to do what she'd done. It hadn't been her first choice. And it sickened her to think about it. But it was what she'd had to do. And now everything was back on track.

So... why did it still upset her?

After tossing and turning for some time, she sat up and forced thoughts of Calvin out of her head. She dressed herself, deciding if she wasn't going to sleep then her time could be better spent in the CO's office ... *her office*.

\*\*\*

On the way to the elevator, Summers ran into Calvin.

He didn't make eye contact for more than a second and when they reached each other he veered away. Summers couldn't guess where he was going, but since he really had nowhere to go, she didn't blame him for wandering aimlessly. She could understand that. He must be dealing with a lot of complex thoughts and emotions, and she understood how being cooped up in one's quarters might feel like torture under those circumstances.

"Calvin," she said.

He didn't stop walking. Simply acknowledged her with a cold word, "Commander." He didn't even look at her.

Seeing him reduced to this bothered her. "Calvin, stop," she'd meant it as a command but it came out as more of a plea. He stopped but didn't look up.

"What?" There was no edge to his voice but no softness either. More like apathy.

"About what happened earlier..." she searched for the right words but couldn't find them. "I hope I didn't give you the wrong idea or anything." She didn't want him to think it was personal between them, nor did she want him to think they had, or ever could have, the romantic spark he seemed to have wanted. "We will keep things professional from here on out."

He looked at her finally but said nothing. And his eyes betrayed no emotion. She didn't see seething hatred in them but there was no compassion there either.

"What I did was necessary, the ship was off mission, I had to do it," she couldn't help but explain. He didn't move or reply. It made her feel even more uncomfortable.

"No hard feelings?" she asked.

"No hard feelings," he said. His voice was quiet, like a ghost's whisper, and carried no more emotion than a stone. No sarcasm. No bitterness. Not even resentment. Just... emptiness.

"Well, okay then," she said and straightened her uniform. She hadn't expected him to be so cooperative. Perhaps acceptance had set in and he too realized he was defeated. And now that there was nothing more he could do, his eyes were distant and thoughts introspective.

She saluted but he didn't salute back. Instead he turned around and continued on his way. Like a zombie. A sad, pitiful zombie.

"I hope you get the help you need," she whispered, watching him go. "I truly do."

\*\*\*

Calvin entered the observation deck and saw five people waiting for him, chatting nervously. Some looked more anxious than others. Only Monte seemed perfectly calm.

"Thanks for coming," said Calvin, after the door closed. Everyone clustered around.

"What the *hell* happened?" asked Shen. "Summers is CO of the Nighthawk?"

"It's a long story—" said Calvin, hoping to dismiss the question.

"So what's the plan?" asked Miles.

"I'm not going to lie," said Andre, the chief engineer. "I'm a bit nervous about this whole thing. Don't get me wrong, I want to help you if I can. But I'm just not sure how."

"Same here," said Shen. "But I owe it to you to hear you out—we all do." Sarah nodded. "What can we do for you?"

Calvin looked each of them in the eyes before responding. "You can help me by retaking the ship."

Their reaction was about what he'd expected. Surprise and skepticism. Miles flashed a big toothy grin.

"I can't believe I'm hearing this," said Andre, perhaps the most trepidatious of the bunch.

"I... don't know what to say," said Shen.

"Then just listen," Calvin knew he had their complete attention.

"Summers only has command as long as the people aboard this ship think she's been given command. But since the good doctor here never *officially* declared me unfit," he waved toward Monte who bowed slightly, looking smug, "then everyone on this ship is just taking Summers' word for it. We need to challenge that claim."

"How?" asked Sarah. "We can't possibly fight Special Forces."

"Sure we can!" bellowed Miles. "We outnumber them forty-six to twenty-four."

"Actually it's forty-six to twenty-three," said Shen. "We lost a soldier on Aleator One."

"Excellent," said Miles. Then, when he realized what he'd said, he added. "Um... Bless his soul."

"Yeah—that's out of the question," said Calvin. "Even if we *could* rally the entire crew, which is... doubtful, we'd still get our asses kicked. That's why my plan is about deception. If we get the crew to go along with us, or at least not get in our way, we could probably seal off both the bridge and engineering. After that, Special Forces can beat against the doors all they want while we take the ship anywhere we want to go."

"So how do we *deceive* the crew into not opposing you?" asked Andre, clearly uncomfortable with the idea.

"We fake a message. Make the computer think it recorded a message when it didn't. It'll be text only and state that I have command. Sent, ostensibly, by Director Edwards, and we display it on every station and in everyone's quarters."

Shen looked intrigued. "Yes, that would be possible. With a little work. But once they get that message someone is going to contact Intel Wing and see if Director Edwards actually sent it. And he can deny its authenticity."

"Which brings me to my second idea," said Calvin. "Remember what we did to the Brimm servers? Made them think they were busier than they really were, causing them to crash."

Shen nodded. "Yes, that's roughly correct."

"Can we do the same thing here? Make the comms system overload because it's being bombarded by countless ghost hails that don't connect to anything?"

Shen sighed. "Theoretically possible though practically difficult, but I can try."

"After that we simply take back command. Hell, if we contain Summers the Major might not even know any transition happened."

Shen nodded. "I think this might work."

"Everyone good with this?" Calvin looked at each of them. No one objected.

"Okay, let's get to it."

"Wait," said Andre, now finding his voice. "What if this doesn't work?"

"Then I'll take credit for deceiving you and anyone who believed our fake message. You were just following orders as best you understood them. I'll take the fall for everyone."

"Just like Raidan," said Sarah.

"*Exactly* like Raidan."



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Vincent Rose sat at the command position. He'd been on the ship for five months and he still felt like he was wearing shoes that were too big.

It wasn't bad when he didn't have the deck. He had full confidence in Calvin and the XO—at least when it had been Anand—but since Rose had command a third of the time, he knew he had a one third chance of being in that chair when a major crisis happened. And, knowing that all life on the ship depended on him during such a moment, he felt uncomfortable.

It didn't help that Calvin had been replaced by someone who was, more or less, a complete stranger. She wasn't even part of Intel Wing, she was a Navy officer! Rose didn't know Summers well, but he already didn't like her. She was uptight, rigid, condescending, and dispassionate. Like a machine.

He especially hated how his eyes would sometimes flick to her. And notice aspects of her beauty. And she *was* beautiful. Even around other beautiful women she would stand out like a rose among daisies, and here... in the middle of space... she contrasted the grey bolts and grim metal of a starship like light against darkness. He couldn't help noticing that. And he hated it. So, whenever he realized he was looking at her *that way*, he'd think of his lovely wife and child back home. That strategy worked most of the time. But he held it against Summers when it didn't.

And now she was CO! The whole change in power felt wrong. Everybody sensed it. If a two-time silver star recipient like Calvin could get the axe, no one was safe. Which only added to his anxiety.

"Status?" he asked, wanting to break the silence.

"Flight controls normal," Jay reported from the helm.

"Defense Systems operational," said Patrick, flashing a youthful smile.

"And... all internal systems are good," Cassidy said from the ops station.

"Good," said Rose.

Several more minutes passed in silence and he did what he always did. Thought about home. Anne cooking his favorite meal, pleased to see him after a long deployment. And little Selene rushing down the apartment steps as fast as her tiny legs could carry her, screaming ecstatically "Papa, papa!" How cute she was... he hadn't seen either of them for almost three months, and wouldn't for at least another three. He'd miss Selene's birthday again... if only he could explain in small enough words for her to understand.

"I've got something here, sir," said Jay with a hand on his headset's speaker. He looked confused. "Message coming in on all stations and all decks."

"Display it," Rose said casually.

"I... can't."

"Then on speakers."

"It's text only... for some reason."

Rose sat forward. "What?"

"Yeah, priority one message from Intel Wing, Office of the Director."

"I see it too," said Patrick, eyes fixed on his monitors.

"Something seems... odd about it," Cassidy said from operations. Rose agreed that it seemed unusual, but not unheard of for Intel Wing to broadcast a text-only message. Its reasons could be any, and probably not worth speculating about. Orders were orders.

"Can you confirm the message is from Intel Wing?" Rose asked.

"That's what the computer says..." Cassidy replied, a whiff of skepticism in her voice.

"Then read it," Rose sat back again.

Jay cleared his throat. "Attention all hands of the IWS Nighthawk. This is Director Jack Edwards regarding an order from Fleet Command to terminate the current mission and change command. You are to disregard that order. Intel Wing has command of the Nighthawk, not Fleet Command. Lieutenant Commander Cross is the active CO of the Nighthawk and his orders stand. End Message."

"Well that was short and sweet," said Rose, scratching his head.

"Intel Wing contradicting the Fleet... and in such an unusual way?" asked Cassidy. "Doesn't that seem odd to you?"

"A little," Rose agreed.

"Even though the computer said the message came in with the proper encryption from Intel Wing," Cassidy spoke, "that doesn't mean it couldn't be a fabrication. I suggest we contact Intel Wing, just in case."

Rose nodded. He didn't want to think of it as a possible fabrication, but it was his job to be sure. "Very well," he said. "Send a message to Capital World. Hail Intel Wing priority one."

"Yes, sir," said Jay and then, a moment later, he looked dumbfounded. "Something's not right here."

"What now?"

Jay looked even more flustered. "I'm not picking up any audio but the computer says we're receiving sixteen thousand hails. No... twenty-nine million hails increasing exponentially. Now it's well over a billion."

Rose became alarmed. "What are you talking about?"

"I don't know," Jay said, looking completely bewildered as he scrambled over his controls.

"Where are these hails coming from?"

"Beats the hell out of me, the system just crashed. It's completely offline. I have no contact outside the ship *period*," he slapped his computer station, teeth clenched in frustration.

"Can you bring any of those hails over the speaker? Patch us through to one of them."

"No, I can't," Jay said. "The kataspace connector is offline. But before it crashed all I got from them was white noise. Not sure what to make of it."

Rose nodded, his mind racing to control the situation. "Patrick, are there any ships or structures nearby?"

"Negative."

"So outside communication is dead, but we still have inside communications, right?"

"Correct."

Rose was completely clueless. "We need to get the CO in here," he said.

"Which one?" asked Jay.

Rose didn't know the answer to that. He instinctively tapped his line to the CO's office, because of its proximity. "Commander," he said. "We've got a situation here."

"On my way," Summers voice crackled over the speaker. And, not more than five seconds later, she was there.

"What's the situation, Mister Rose?" She asked as he relinquished the command position.

"A moment ago the ship received a message from Intel Wing, broadcast on every deck. Have you seen it?"

"No."

Cassidy pointed to her screen and Summers read the message. "This is wrong," she said, ice in her tone.

Rose continued, "after that, the ship received billions of hails and now we can't send or receive outside communication."

"Why not?" Summers looked to Cassidy who was more than busy at the ops station. "I'm doing a diagnostic now."

"Try again to contact the Fleet," Summers ordered Jay.

"It won't do any good."

"I gave you an order, mister!"

After an exaggerated display of trying, he turned back to the center of the bridge and waved his hands. "Voila, nothing."

Summers looked perplexed. She glanced at Rose. "What's your opinion?"

She was asking him? He almost laughed. "I have no idea what's wrong."

"I've restarted the system a few times," Cassidy said. "But it just times out because it's overloaded and then crashes again. Oh wait, my diagnostic just finished."

"What does it say?" Summers again stared over Cassidy's shoulder.

"It... " Cassidy paused, looking stunned. "I don't know. All systems operating normally." She scratched her head. "Maybe... I think I could make this happen if I wanted to, if someone tampered with—"

The elevator door whisked open and Calvin, Miles, Sarah, and Shen stormed the bridge looking pleased.

"Make way," said Miles as they moved to their stations. Rose looked from them to Summers—whose confusion had only intensified.

"This isn't White Shift," said Summers. "And Calvin, you can't be here."

"Not according to the latest message from Intel Wing," he said as he took the command position and sat down. Summers was on him like a hawk, standing over him and glaring. Like an invader had just squatted her nest. Calvin's only reaction was to look up at her and grin.

"It's true," said Shen. "The official word is that the Fleet's decision to revoke Calvin's command was illegitimate and has been reversed by the proper authority, Intel Wing. Since this is, after all, an Intel Wing ship."

She gave Shen a menacing glare. "There's no way that message came from Intel Wing."

He shrugged. "Could have fooled me," he glanced briefly at Calvin. "Cassidy, did the computer verify the message's authenticity stamp?"

"Yes—" she said, unconvinced.

"There you see!" said Miles. "Now move over ex-bosslady." He moved closer to Summers and she shifted her attention from Calvin to him, taking up a defensive posture, as if thinking Miles would strike her. But Miles stopped a few feet away and they just glared at each other.

"And we can't call Intel Wing to confirm this because, conveniently, outside communication is offline," said Cassidy.

"That's technology for you," said Calvin.

"Right, now move over," said Miles again, inching closer. Summers looked like a cat trapped in an alleyway full of dogs.

"What I find interesting," said Summers, refusing to back down, "is that we haven't heard anything from Special Forces yet," she dared a quick glance at Calvin.

Calvin ignored her comment. "As CO of this ship, I order you to go to my office and remain there until I say otherwise."

"Since you are not legitimately the CO of this ship and *I* am," said Summers, "I refuse."

"Well you heard her," said Miles. "You all heard her."

"For disobeying a direct order from your superior officer," said Calvin. "I arrest you for insubordination and you are now a prisoner on this ship until we make port and you are transferred to the proper authority." He stood up.

"Insubordination?" she said the word like she'd never heard it before

"Lock her in my office," he waved to Miles.

"With pleasure." He closed in.

She took up a defensive stance.

He charged her but relied too much on size and brute strength and Summers used his momentum against him. She deflected his hands and darted aside as he passed, giving him a firm shove in the direction he was headed. Unable to stop, he crashed into the CO's chair. Calvin darted aside in the nick of time.

Before anyone could stop her, Summers ran for the elevator.

Miles scrambled to his feet and charged her way, almost overtaking her, but the door closed before he could snatch her. He slammed his hands flat against the elevator door to keep his head from crashing into it.

"That slippery *witch!*" he said, looking more embarrassed than angry. He turned to face Calvin. "I'm sorry."

Calvin said nothing for a few seconds. "This does present a problem."

Shen moved to the center of the bridge, looking nervous. "We needed to keep her here so she wouldn't contact the Major. I was going to disable the office's comm and everything."

"I said I was sorry."

"That's not our only problem," said Calvin. "The beacon."

"Oh right," said Shen.

"Is there anything we can do about that?" Calvin asked. "Block it somehow?"

"No. Not unless you have a room with tungsten walls a hundred meters thick. We'd do better to capture it. If we had it, we could keep it from being turned on."

"What are you talking about?" asked Miles.

"The emergency beacon. A silent signal that can only be picked up by Imperial Military starships," said Shen. "It's a Fleet standard, it came aboard when Summers did. And she's the only one here who's been trained how to use it. How do you *not* know this stuff?"

Miles shrugged. "I dunno. I'm a government employee. I don't have to know everything."

"Even when your business is all about acquiring information?"

While they discussed it, Rose's eyes moved from them to the other Red Shift members, who seemed equally confused and quiet. They too weren't sure what to make of it all.

"So what do we do?" asked Shen.

"We have to seal off the bridge and engineering."

The whole thing felt suspicious to Rose who saw that feeling in the eyes of his fellow Red Shift officers. But none of them spoke. Calvin seemed to pick up on this.

"I have command," Calvin insisted. "*Legitimately*. But I'm afraid there really is a fight going on between Intel Wing and Fleet Command. And Summers, an agent of the Fleet, will try and trick the Major into thinking the Fleet has control of the ship and not Intel Wing."

"How could they be fighting?" asked Patrick. "They're on the same side!"

"You have a lot to learn now that you're in Intel Wing," said Calvin. "But let's just say, it's no secret the Fleet and Intel Wing don't see eye to eye on this investigation. Now the Fleet is making a play for control of the ship, but it isn't going to work. Because we won't let it. Set a new heading—Abia System. Let's do a deep jump, maybe ninety-five percent potential. Miles take your station. Sarah, give engineering the order to seal themselves off. Red Shift, you're relieved. Shen, put up those defense walls once Red Shift is gone."

## Chapter 24

When Summers explained to him—in full—everything that'd happened on the bridge, the Major's first instinct was to try and contact Intel Wing.

It was plausible, he thought, that Intel Wing—who had jurisdiction over the Nighthawk—might contradict and override an order from Fleet Command. But what bothered him was that all communications had gone offline again, somehow, and that Intel Wing, if they did return Calvin's command, didn't seem very concerned over his proven equarius habit.

*Command Failure: Network is busy. Try again. If the problem persists please contact the operations administrator.*

He did as the computer asked and tried again, with the same result. "The Network is busy? I don't understand." The Major felt he had extensive knowledge over a great many subjects but computers wasn't one of them.

"Calvin somehow sabotaged our outside communications, now nothing can get in or out," said Summers. "That way we *can't* verify if he has command of the ship or not." She looked impatient.

The Major frowned; the situation wasn't as clear to him as that. She might be right. But she might not be. "So why would he do this? That doesn't sound like Calvin."

"But it does sound like someone who wants to get his command back."

He considered this quietly. When he didn't say anything, Summers leaned forward and looked him in the eyes. "If someone knew he could have his command revoked again by just one word from the outside, what do you suppose he might do?"

Good point. If Calvin *were* going to war to take back his ship, the obvious first strategy, like in any war, would be to disrupt communications. Being able to put words in Intel Wing's mouth, knowing they couldn't be reached to refute his claim, would be an incredible advantage. One anyone might take in his situation.

The Major opened his internal comm-line, adjusting it for all decks.

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A broadcast filtered over the bridge speakers.

"Attention all hands, this is Major Jenkins of Special Forces. You are to disregard the message from Intel Wing restoring command to Mister Cross. That message is likely a fabrication. Until Intel Wing can be reached,

Commander Presley is the CO of this ship. Her orders are to be followed to the letter. And she has the full support of Special Forces. Jenkins out."

Calvin wasn't surprised by the ship-wide announcement, but it was still a crushing blow. Hopefully the crew in engineering wouldn't be swayed by it. As long as they stayed loyal, and engineering was sealed off, they could at least get to Abia. *Probably...*

Calvin tapped his direct line to the Major. "Major, this is Calvin."

"Calvin. I advise you to surrender yourself and the bridge immediately."

"Major, I have command of the ship. I've always had it. There is information in Abia," he said, "and people in the Fleet don't want us to see it. They'll sacrifice me and you and the whole ship to keep it hidden. But it's there. And so long as it's there I have a job to do. And so do you. Your job is to enable me."

"I don't know what you're talking about, Mister Cross, but I have orders to follow. And I see no evidence of any kind of conspiracy. Only evidence of your substance abuse."

"This isn't about equarius! Give me time and I'll prove it to you. I can get you all the evidence you need," said Calvin. "I guarantee I can make you believe me."

"Maybe you can, maybe you can't. Frankly, I don't care. You lied to the ship, you lied to the crew, and I don't trust you. Surrender or we'll take you down. Jenkins out." The comm clicked off.

"Well I see he's not a man to be reasoned with," said Calvin.

"Lied to the ship?" Miles scratched his head. "That doesn't even make sense."

"I could have told you he wouldn't listen," said Shen.

Calvin ignored them and set the comm for a ship-wide broadcast of his own. "Attention all hands. This is Calvin Cross. And I'm speaking to you not just as your commander, but as your friend. I've had the honor of being your CO for some time now, I even handpicked many of you because I knew we could trust each other. I am asking you for that trust *now*."

"We are flying to Abia to continue our investigation, but Fleet Command has tried to take over our ship—even though this is an Intel Wing ship. Obviously, we cannot let them." He hated lying to his crew like that, pretending that Intel Wing really wasn't part of the maneuver to remove his command—though the Intel Wing he knew would never have been party to such a thing. It was sickening to think they'd been corrupted every bit as easily as the Fleet. But his crew *had* to believe otherwise for now.

"The Fleet thinks it can control us and keep us from uncovering the truth. But we have a job to do and *dammit*, we're going to do it! Because we're Intel Wing and we've sworn an oath to protect the Empire—even from itself. An oath that requires us to do whatever it takes to complete our



mission. And right now that means standing together, as one, to defend this ship!"

He clicked off the comm, thinking charismatic speeches were not his forte. But if his words didn't rally the crew, they at least helped him rally his own nerves and desire to fight. Ultimately, he knew, their success depended less on the crew's opinion of him than it did on the Nighthawk's defense walls.

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A young soldier with the name "Erdene" stitched to his lapel marched into the Major's office. "Report from ODA, sir." He saluted then stood perfectly still, resolute, and attentive. Summers was glad to see the discipline.

"Go ahead, private," said the Major, still sitting.

"Unit One was unable to reach engineering because the defense walls are in place. Unit Two reports the same about the bridge. And elevator two is disabled."

*Dammit, Calvin. Must you make everything so difficult?* Despite her annoyance, Summers kept silent since the Major had command with regard to security matters.

"Thank you, private. Dismissed," The Major waved him off. The young man saluted and left. Once the door closed Summers returned to her seat.

"I had hoped it wouldn't come to this," said the Major.

"But we *can* get past those defenses can't we?" Summers asked. "I mean, your men are trained to breach defenses like that in order to capture hostile ships, right?"

"Yes there are breaching protocols, however our equipment and training are more suited to smaller ships with less advanced defenses. ODB will lead our response."

"ODB?"

"Operational Detachment Bravo, they are more specialized than ODA for this kind of maneuver." He tapped his comm panel. "Jackson, tell ODA to lockdown all access points to both engineering and the bridge. Then tell ODB to prep for a code six response."

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Andre paced back and forth in main engineering, constantly glancing between the various computer displays and the main entrance. The great grey doors were sealed shut and behind them a defense wall had been raised. He

was safe for now. He knew that. But it didn't in any way lessen his anxiety about this whole ordeal.

Calvin, who before today he would have considered a great friend, had finally asked too much. And now Andre was sweating bullets, telling thinly veiled lies to his subordinates, and had tossed his career completely in the toilet. Sure Calvin said he would take the fall for everyone, and he and his puppet Shen had made it *seem* like Intel Wing legitimized Calvin's mutiny, but... given how poorly the deception had worked on the Major, Andre wasn't about to believe the Fleet would be satisfied with just Calvin. They were all on the chopping block now. Easier for some than others. They were mostly single with almost nothing to lose—even the old doc had no family to speak of—but Andre had a wife and three children waiting for him on Capital World. What would their lives be if he were imprisoned? And all because his friends twisted his arm enough to get him to participate in what was clearly mutiny.

His thoughts of a dark future haunted him as he fidgeted, moving about, checking screens that didn't need checking, trying in vain to distract himself.

But the damage had been done. Even if he surrendered engineering now, which was tempting, and admitted the whole message from Intel Wing was a sham, he couldn't avoid consequences. He'd still be punished in addition to going to bed every night thinking about how he'd betrayed his friends. No, he couldn't do that—or so he kept telling himself.

They'd been en route to Abia for about half an hour now, traveling much faster than what he'd normally recommend, and all that was left to do was wait.

"Any word from the outside?" he asked Inaya, his second. The young woman was walking around with a clipboard giving minor orders to the five other engineers keeping tabs on the systems. She stopped what she was doing and came over to his side.

"The bridge made a course correction that might save us an hour," she said. "But otherwise we've had no contact from the outside."

Andre turned his attention elsewhere and resumed his pacing. It bothered him that things had been this quiet. Not even a peep from Special Forces, or the rest of the ship—aside from the bridge—in half an hour. He couldn't decide which was worse: hearing nothing and waiting in silent hellish anticipation for something bad to happen, or else seeing that something happen and getting it over with.

"What is that?" One of the engineers said and everyone's eyes jumped to the main door. It was sealed tight but the tiniest sparks could be seen glowing in a round pattern no larger than a hand.

"I don't know," said Andre, afraid to go closer. "Everyone get down," he ordered, not sure where to take cover or how they could possibly defend

engineering. They had no weapons and no hand to hand combat experience outside of basic training.

A round piece of dark metal, part of the door, collapsed to the floor. Not large enough for a person to move through, not even close, but it broke him into a panic knowing there was a chink in their armor now. "It must have been a laser drill," said Andre.

He wondered how long it would take them to carve a hole the size of a door, probably awhile. They were safe for now... he tried to tell himself. But seeing the hole in front of them forced them all to realize there was nothing they could do. If the defense wall and locked door couldn't stop Special Forces, it was all over. He wished he were on the bridge which was much harder to breach.

"Now everybody just stay calm," he waved to get their attention but everyone's eyes were glued to a silver canister that slid through the hole and dropped to the ground. Instantly an enormous shriek filled the air. Andre tried to cover his eyes but not in time. An incredible blinding whiteness filled his vision and he stumbled to his knees, completely disoriented.

It wasn't until he felt firm hands grip him and pull him to his feet that he began to regain his bearings. He couldn't walk straight but sound started coming back. What should have been loud noises were like whispers. And his vision was blurry. Even the outline of his own feet looked strange.

"Move along," a soldier said from his side. Andre watched the man's lips and knew he was shouting but he could barely make out the words. They were quiet to him, almost lost in the buzzing, ringing ambience.

They pulled him along toward where the door used to be. It lay flat on the ground in several pieces. The angle and condition of the remains, and a few unfired caps, made Andre suspect plastique explosives. As they cuffed his sluggish arms into restraints, he realized the answer to his question.

Watching something bad happen was much worse than the silent anticipation.

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"We've captured engineering," Erdene reported over the comm.

"Good," said the Major. "Send in the replacement officers and shutdown the engines. When you've overseen that, leave some soldiers from ODB to stand watch. Once we have control of the bridge we'll correct the course to... what was it?" He looked to Summers.

"Xerxes System."

"Right, Xerxes System. Then we'll power up the engines again but not before."

"Yes, sir," the soldier said.

The Major closed the comm and let out a sigh. "Am I correct in assuming the ship's course cannot be changed from engineering directly?"

"You are," said Summers from the other side of the desk. "As for these replacement engineers, how do you know they won't sympathize with Calvin?"

"They won't because the soldiers with guns won't let them."

"And the captives?" asked Summers.

"They'll be processed here at HQ. Where we'll decide which to detain and which to return to duty."

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"Our engines have shut down," Sarah looked up from the helm station. "And I can't contact engineering. I think we lost it."

"That's probably a safe assumption," said Calvin, tapping his armrest.

"Our current position is six point one light-years from Abia, six point two from Xerxes, sitting in open space, all stop. Not even a rock on our scopes."

"I wonder how they breached engineering..." said Calvin.

"Does that mean we're next?" asked Sarah.

"Over my dead body," said Miles.

"I don't think they'll have any trouble with that," Sarah shot him a look.

"The bridge is twice as secure as engineering," said Shen, his arms folded. "So no I wouldn't say we are in any immediate danger. Down in engineering the designers didn't have enough space to put up as many defensive measures as on the bridge."

"Well at least that's some good news," said Sarah. "But we're still sitting ducks."

"I assume there's no way to override the controls in engineering and get the engines back online from here is there?" asked Calvin.

"Nope," Shen and Sarah both replied.

"So it's a stalemate," said Calvin.

The comm switch beeped and Sarah patched the message through the main speaker. Summers' voice came over the line. "Calvin, we have control of the whole ship apart from the bridge."

"Well the bridge is really the most important part," said Calvin.

"Enough games, Calvin. You had your shot and you blew it. Now the whole ship is against you and we're not going anywhere. There's nothing you can do from up there, and you can't hold out forever. The Major and I urge you to surrender. Then we can put in our reports that you surrendered voluntarily. And you will be treated with dignity."

"Dignity my ass," said Miles.

"We're not going to surrender the bridge," said Calvin. "For the same reason we started this whole thing. It has nothing to do with dignity or pride or anything like that. It has to do with defending the Empire. You'd see that too if you just looked hard enough."

"You flew the ship off mission and let a condemned criminal get away. That has nothing to do with defending the Empire."

"Don't you see? That has *everything* to do with it."

"I'm not going to argue. I'm just going to tell you. Either surrender the bridge or we'll take it by force. Your choice."

Calvin motioned for Sarah to cut the line. When she did, he spoke. "Other ships are certainly looking for us now, since they haven't heard from Summers in awhile. And, with the help of her beacon, they *will* find us eventually. But, in the spirit of being found as slowly as possible, let's engage the stealth system."

"Can't they just shut that down too?" asked Sarah.

"Not from engineering," Shen replied.

"It's done," said Miles.

The usual purr of the vents stopped abruptly and, after checking his console, Shen confirmed that all ventilation to the bridge from life support controls had been cut off. "But it's not all bad news," said Shen. "We have an emergency air supply for the bridge. I'd say we have at least six hours before we begin to suffocate."

"So it's a war of attrition," said Calvin.

"With time not on our side," Sarah added.

"If it takes us six hours to think of something to do then we're as good as dead anyway. We need to come up with something *now*. Who knows what's in Abia and for how long?"

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"ODB is prepped for phase two, requesting clearance to execute, over."  
"Clearance granted."

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"I keep telling you that a fight won't work, Miles," said Sarah. Calvin glanced from her to Miles since no one else was talking.

"It's either that or we sit here doing nothing. If that happens, we lose by default. We should at least try."

"Can you make him listen to reason?" Sarah asked, looking at Calvin now.

"Don't look at me," said Calvin, raising his hands.

"But we do need an executive call on this," said Shen. "We need you to make a decision."

Calvin knew that was true but a no-win scenario sat before them. He was content to wait a bit more, hoping to find some way to dull either the rock or the hard place.

The trouble was, Special Forces' position offered no obvious weaknesses for him to exploit. He had the loyalty of most of the crew, he thought. And, if he could rally them, he had superior numbers. But whether or not they'd be willing to put it all on the line for him was another question. They did like him better than Summers. And several of them, most likely, did believe they were under orders to assist him. But they might not be convinced of it enough to fight hand to hand, especially against a superior adversary like Special Forces.

"You're both right," said Calvin. "Unless the situation changes somehow, a fight is unacceptable. *But*, if we don't fight, we might have no other choice than to surrender. Which is also unacceptable. Our job, then, is to change the playing board so a fight is practical."

"And how would we do that?" asked Shen.

"Deceive, cheat, lie, make our position look better than it is." Before Calvin could pitch any of his zero ideas, the vents turned back on and began sending air to the bridge again.

"Now, what do you suppose that's about?" asked Shen.

"I don't know, but I don't like it," said Calvin as he saw white smoke pouring onto the bridge.

Shen looked at him, "you don't think..."

Miles, who was closest to the gas, began coughing violently and let out a wail, red eyes streaked with tears. "Son of a..." his words were lost as he coughed again.

The smoke spread quickly and Calvin felt a surge of pain in his nose, mouth, and throat, as his eyes watered. He too began coughing and wheezing and all of them, instinctively, retreated away from the main vents.

"Tear gas," said Shen, spitting up mucous.

Sarah kept herself together the best, but her eyes were brimming with tears and she was too busy sneezing and coughing to do anything else.

The burning sensation was overwhelming. Calvin felt like the insides of his nose and throat were literally on fire; his eyes watered and burned. He waved toward the exits. "We can't..." more coughing "... can't...stay."

Shen nodded. Miles rubbed at his eyes and cursed.

"You... go down... the... ladder," said Calvin, wiping his eyes and clearing his throat—or trying to. Shen and Sarah were closest to that exit and, Calvin was sure, one of them would know how to unseal the hatch and retract the

defense wall manually. They followed his orders and went into the corridor where the ladder was.

Calvin waved for Miles to follow him and they entered the elevator, unwilling to cross through the noxious gas to get to the ladder. And Calvin hoped that if they split up, maybe some of them wouldn't be caught.

Once inside, with the door sealed, they could breathe a little easier, but that didn't stop them from coughing, wheezing violently, and tearing up. Miles re-enabled the elevator and sent it below—to a much lower deck. Hoping they could shoot past whatever security Special Forces had waiting for them.

But, now that the elevator wasn't disabled, the main control overrode their order and the elevator came to a forced stop one deck below the bridge. The door slid open and Calvin caught sight of Summers and four soldiers, including Captain Pellew. Shen and Sarah were there too, already in restraints. A look of defeat on their faces. Seeing them only made Calvin more desperate.

"Hands on your heads," Pellew ordered. He and the others brandished stun weapons; only Summers was unarmed.

Calvin did as he was told and marched out of the elevator, his hands on his head. They took his wrists and cuffed them behind his back. For a moment he was worried Miles might try to resist and get hurt, but even he knew they couldn't win this fight. Despite all the big talk, Calvin knew Miles wasn't actually stupid.

"Confine them to quarters," said Summers. Then she gave Calvin a very disapproving shake of her head. "Why did you make me do this?"

Calvin didn't reply except to look away. This must have upset her because, for whatever reason, she felt the need to whisper "checkmate" under her breath as he passed.

"You're all a bunch of cowardly mangy dogs," Miles bellowed and they shoved him along. He stuck out his tongue at Summers when he passed.

"Double guard on that one," Summers snapped. She seemed to enjoy seeing Miles reduced to this.

*Very well, Commander,* Calvin thought. *You win this round. But the game isn't over...*

## Chapter 25

Summers sat in the command position watching Red Shift closely.

The tear gas had been cleared out and the bridge was again safe to operate. On her left stood Lieutenant Commander Rose who, normally, would have command of this shift. But, given the situation, Summers thought it best she take the deck for now. Either this precaution, or the presence of two soldiers on the bridge, seemed to make Lieutenant Commander Rose nervous and he had a habit of pacing back and forth.

"Please, sit down, Mister Rose," said Summers. Seeing him anxiously move about made her feel uneasy, even though she knew she had the situation well in hand. Ever since Calvin and his mutineers had been locked away, everything had been calm and uneventful—aside from Miles' several vain attempts to bribe his door guards with liquor.

"Ops, any progress on getting outside communications back online?" she asked. Cassidy spun her chair to face Summers.

"Maybe," she said. "I figured out what is blocking communications. Someone put a subroutine into our communications software that is causing it to think it's getting hailed over and over when it isn't. I cleared it out but it's in there redundant times. Hopefully," she said spinning back to her console "this is the last time."

"Keep me informed," said Summers. She turned her attention back to Lieutenant Commander Rose who had taken a seat but somehow managed to look even more uncomfortable.

"You're not in any trouble," said Summers. "So keep it together. Follow my orders and we'll be back on mission in no time."

The Lieutenant Commander didn't say anything. He didn't even make eye contact.

"Mister Rose," Summers raised her voice.

"Yes, Commander?" He snapped to attention in such a start it seemed his mind had been elsewhere completely.

"Are you able to perform your duties here?" she asked.

"Yes, Commander."

"Then look alive," she debated whether or not she should relieve him. He didn't seem unfit, necessarily. He wasn't tired or intoxicated or anything. Just nervous—a bad trait for the new acting XO to have.

"I did it, Commander," Cassidy said. "We have outside communication again!" she beamed, obviously thrilled she'd been able to solve the problem. Summers was at least as happy.



"Excellent work, Midshipman Dupont."

Practically the instant communications were restored they received a message from Capital World, this time from the office of Fleet Admiral Tiberon—one of only eleven such admirals, one for each fleet. The lighting in his room seemed a bit unusual, making his face a little harder to see but it was still recognizable. The diamond emblem of his rank gleamed and reminded them all of his absolute authority.

He kept his message short, expressing concern over their recent loss of communications—a situation Summers assured him was under control—and gave them new orders. Rather than going to Xerxes they were to meet up with the Andromeda and a flotilla of warships. Summers was surprised the Andromeda was deployed this close to their position but was all the happier for it.

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Calvin felt trapped in his quarters—not just physically, but psychologically also. He mulled over the situation, trying desperately to think of some new strategy he could implement. He thought about challenging his guard, his arms were free now, and Calvin—like all Intel Wing agents—was proficient with a mixture of martial arts. But the armed guard was probably at least as experienced, probably even more so. And should Calvin manage to beat him, what would that buy him? He had nowhere to go; he certainly couldn't defeat all of Special Forces with his bare hands.

Another thought he considered was that, should he be able to get to Shen, perhaps they could adjust the navigational software to trick the ship into auto-course-correcting its way to Abia while appearing to still be on course to Xerxes. But he didn't get too excited about that idea since he had no way to access Shen, no way for Shen to get inside engineering, and no reason to believe such an idea was even possible to implement.

As much as he hated it, and blamed it, his impulse was to take some equarius. It always had a way of making everything seem better. It could force him to smile for absolutely no reason in even the worst situations... but all the pills had been seized—and probably for the best. His open safe was as barren as the prison he was destined for. His weapons too, few that they'd been, were gone.

It was all too frustrating, to the maximum degree, that this was happening to *him*, on *his* ship, right when they were so very, very close. *Damn the Fleet!*

He was surprised to hear his door open, and even more surprised to see who'd entered.

"I told the guard I had to sweep your room for weapons," said Captain Pellew.

Calvin looked at him, his room had already been thoroughly cleaned out. "Why are you really here?"

Pellew made sure the door was closed before he spoke. "I'm on your side."

Calvin felt his heart quicken.

"A lot of us are still on your side, I think."

Calvin felt a surge of hope but at the same time a hint of suspicion. In his experience, nothing in life came that easily. "Why would *you* help me?" Calvin had served and bled alongside his shipmates, but he didn't hardly know any of the soldiers aboard. And certainly none of them owed him any favors.

Pellew smiled. "The good of the Empire, right?"

Calvin didn't say anything.

"Look, my reasons are my own. But I *am* offering you help, I suggest you accept it otherwise it may not be offered again."

Calvin nodded. Suspicious as he was, he couldn't afford to be picky.

"Then we need to figure out how to retake the ship," said Calvin. "Before we get to Xerxes."

"Actually we're on course to rendezvous with a flotilla of warships led by the Andromeda."

"That's not good," said Calvin. He wasn't sure why those in command thought meeting the Andromeda was preferable to going to Xerxes, unless the Andromeda was closer. Making it all the more important for them to beat the clock. "How far out are they?"

"I don't know," said Pellew. "Probably a few hours still. Maybe less."

Calvin nodded, that made sense. Especially if the Andromeda had been sent after them the minute he declared his intention to go to Abia. "Okay then. How much of Special Forces will side with me if you're behind me?"

"Six guys. Only a fourth of Special Forces but proven men all. Some of the best."

"I see," said Calvin. He was grateful for the newfound help—if they really were on his side. "We have to regain control of the strategic points. If we take the bridge we can lock it out and keep only a skeleton force there, but engineering will be harder to defend. I'm going to need all your men there. As for taking those areas, coordinating two simultaneous strikes would be best."

"Yes, though that may not be possible," said Pellew. "Without freeing your people, or else recruiting more sympathizers from the crew, there might not be enough of us."

Calvin nodded. "In the meantime you'd better get some extra weapons too. That way, should we get more help, we can arm people."

"I already have a guy on it."

"Good. And, if we can, I'd like to avoid causing fatalities. We'll need non-lethal weapons. Hopefully that will be the Major's strategy too."

"It will be. The Major is a by the book CO and the book is very clear on this. Because the enemy combatants—that's us—are Imperial citizens, we have to be taken-in as non-violently as possible. If we don't switch to lead they won't either. They can't."

The door whisked open again and in stepped Calvin's door guard.

"What are you doing here, Simms?" Pellew snapped. "You're supposed to remain outside. Return to your post now, soldier!"

"I'm unable, sir."

"Why?" Pellew asked.

Simms remained silent. Calvin could think of only one explanation, someone higher up the chain than Pellew had given him contrary orders which he had to obey. Probably he'd reported in that Pellew was secretly visiting Calvin and he'd been sent, by the Major, to see what it was about. Whatever the case may be, he had to be dealt with. Calvin made eye contact with Pellew who seemed to understand.

"Simms," said Pellew. "You're a good loyal man of the Empire, aren't you?"

"I am, sir."

"Then you want to do the right thing and defend it?" asked Pellew. "From threats inside and out?"

"I do."

"Then you must realize that what is happening on this ship is very wrong, and that Calvin's command must be restored. And as a good man of the Empire, you have to support him," Pellew squared his shoulders, preparing for the man's reaction—whatever it turned out to be.

Simms tensed. "As a good man of the Empire I must obey my orders."

"I respect that," said Pellew. Then, in the blink of an eye, Pellew withdrew his stunner and took a swing at Simms—who blocked it with both arms, knocking it aside.

Calvin bolted for Simms and exchanged a series of grapples and blows with the man, keeping him from drawing his own stunner.

Pellew came up from behind and put Simms into a chokehold, slowly increasing the pressure until Simms could no longer breathe and passed out.

"I *tried* to be reasonable," said Pellew, bending over to retrieve Simms' stunner and radio. He tossed them to Calvin then withdrew some thin cables from one of his cargo pockets.

"There's no going back now," said Calvin.

"Had to be done," Pellew said as he dragged Simms across the floor and began cable-tying him to Calvin's desk. "The way I see it, we only have two choices: fight or give up."

Calvin nodded. "Whatever our next move is, we'd better act quickly."

"I've already given my men orders, it's time they execute them." With that he clicked on the radio and spoke a command into it." No reply came but Calvin thought that was probably deliberate.

"So how do you and I factor into this plan?" Calvin asked as he followed Pellew out of his quarters at a brisk jog.

"We're going to help take engineering."

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Summers was surprised to see two additional Special Forces soldiers step onto the bridge. She was going to greet them but they spoke first. There was something... familiar about them.

"Mitchell and Adams reporting, sir," the older-looking one said.

"Adams" was stitched to his lapel.

"I didn't ask for additional security," she said, raising a curious eyebrow.

"We're reporting here as their relief," he motioned toward the other two Special Forces soldiers who'd been with her since she'd retaken the bridge—not very long ago. Being inferior in rank to Adams, they saluted when he addressed and dismissed them.

Summers' curiosity faded as she realized what was happening was perfectly routine. Probably the others were being reassigned to some other task their skills were better suited to. She turned back to face the front of the bridge.

"Where would you like us to set up, sir?" Adams asked from behind.

"Wherever you think is best," Summers replied.

At that moment her direct line to the Major beeped and she answered it. "Bridge."

"Commander," the Major's voice could be heard. "I've lost contact with the soldier standing guard outside Calvin's quarters. What is your status up there?"

"Everything is fine up here, Major," she said. "Thank you for sending fresh soldiers to relieve my guard."

"I didn't send any relief soldiers."

At that moment she felt a cold hand on her neck and something hard press against the side of her head. She screamed, startled, and heard Cassidy gasp.

"Push that button again and tell the Major everything is fine," Adams said from behind her. "Tell him that you were mistaken. There are no relief

soldiers here.” Summers felt a surge of fear swirling inside her but, as she focused on the situation at hand, she suppressed it and instead felt only cold, merciless anger.

She pushed the button. “And one more thing Major.”

“Yes, Commander.”

“Seal off engineering!” Her finger came off the button as she was thrown forward, crashing to the ground on hands and knees. She jumped up resiliently and spun around to see both Mitchell and Adams holding stunners. Mitchell was forcing Patrick to seal off the bridge while Adams instructed them all to remain calm and not resist.

Summers saw her chance and sprinted for the operations console.

## Chapter 26

By the time Calvin and Pellew arrived outside engineering, Pellew could tell it had been sealed off. His soldiers reported back to him, saying their individual missions had all been successful, but Calvin was surprised to learn that exactly none of them had been given the task of breaching engineering. A veritable fortress that—now that the Major was surely onto them—would be daunting to tackle because they'd lost the element of surprise. But, unlike the bridge, it was at least *possible* to storm. All they needed was superior numbers—and soon.

“My men report they’ve freed Miles, Sarah, and now Shen. We couldn’t get to Andre because he’s still locked up in HQ,” said Pellew.

Calvin was both surprised and pleased by their success. “So where are they now?”

“On their way here. Would you like to give them any special instructions?”

Calvin thought about it for a minute. “Keeping two of your men on the bridge leaves us with four soldiers—including you—and four crew members—including me. I don’t think that’s a strong enough force to take engineering, do you?”

Pellew frowned. “It depends how they’re set up, but if they were warned to prepare for an attack then the odds aren’t great.”

“So we need more assistance,” said Calvin. “It’s time we gather up more sympathizers.”

“We’ll have to be careful since we’re in small groups and there’s an overwhelming hostile force bound to be patrolling the ship.”

“Agreed,” said Calvin. “But it’s our only chance.” He then used the radio to relay specific instructions to Miles, Sarah, and Shen. Giving them orders to scour the crew quarters decks and appeal to whoever they thought would be sympathetic to their cause. Then they’d all meet up on the observation deck where weapons would be distributed. “Most of all,” Calvin said into the radio. “As you sneak around the ship, take no unnecessary risks, refrain from engaging the enemy, and follow the commands of your Special Forces escort.”

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It had been a process, and there were small firefights in the corridors—one involving Miles and his escort, who had to practically drag Miles away

from the combat zone, and a second involving Sarah's team, though she heeded her escort's instructions and they escaped more easily. In total, they managed to recruit an additional ten sympathizers. Giving them a standing force of eighteen people able to attack engineering. More than the seventeen soldiers the Major had at his disposal but his superiorly armed and trained force was still more powerful.

Pellew worried that the Major, who must have known they would be forced to attack engineering, had placed most of his force there. Without a numbers advantage, Pellew and Calvin knew it would be impossible for their rag-tag force to overcome Special Force's fighting skill and defenses. Which was why Pellew suggested what he did.

"We're going to assault engineering and you don't even want to be there to help?" Miles asked with genuine surprise.

"I *am* going to help," said Pellew. "But I don't have to be there to do it. Look, I know the Major. He will defend HQ more than anything else, if he perceives there is a threat to it. The threat won't even have to make sense, he'll follow his instincts. It's his training. He will protect HQ and that means, if we make enough noise down there, he will divert forces from engineering to HQ. Enough, probably, to let us take engineering."

"That's an interesting idea," said Calvin. "But if you don't make enough noise, or you're taken down too quickly, it will be a complete waste. And your command expertise and fighting skills might be more valuable breaching engineering."

"I'm flattered," said Pellew with a mock grin. "But if I don't create this diversion, we probably won't be able to take engineering—with or without me."

"I could do it," one of the other soldiers spoke up. "Osbourne" was stitched to his fatigues.

Pellew didn't say anything. Osbourne continued. "I will create the diversion. Give me several flashbangs and smoke canisters, and that'll free you up to help take engineering." He looked from Pellew to Calvin.

"I'm good with that," said Calvin.

Pellew nodded, looking almost disappointed. "That works too."

\*\*\*

They waited. And when the time felt right, they attacked.

Osbourne's diversion must've worked beautifully because they found engineering abandoned, except for a few crewmembers who were manning the equipment. They didn't attempt to resist.

"No one's here?" Miles shouted and then he laughed. "The Major doesn't know anything!"

“He must have wanted to keep his force together,” Pellew said. “So we don’t pick off more of his soldiers in small groups. But you can bet his force will return shortly, maybe with some of the other soldiers we knocked out and cable-tied earlier. That means we don’t have a moment to spare.”

Pellew and Calvin shouted orders to their subordinates and began a process of fortifying engineering and evicting two of the engineers who wouldn’t sympathize with them. They’d just about finished erecting a barricade—since the engineering defense wall had been destroyed—when they got a message from the bridge.

“Problem up here; flight controls locked out; XO protocols in place; need a command override, over.”

“Roger that,” Pellew replied, clicking off the radio. He looked at Calvin and they both knew what that meant. Calvin would have to get to the bridge to undo Summers’ lockout—meaning he’d have to sneak his way to the top of the ship.

Pellew offered him an escort but Calvin chose to go alone, opting for a stealth approach. He knew every hand was needed here to defend engineering and, should the Major retake it, they’d never get it back, and certainly couldn’t rely on the diversion tactic again.

Calvin knew the Major probably had soldiers scouring the ship to recover any soldiers Pellew’s men had previously incapacitated, and he probably had men on their way to control the corridors around engineering, so his chances weren’t great—but Calvin had little choice. He hoped, with a little luck, he could slip through unnoticed. But, just in case, he brought a stunner.

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As Calvin moved through the silent empty halls, he skirted the corners carefully.

He scrambled up a deck, using the ladders, but had to cut his ascent short and hide because he heard voices. He moved down a main corridor but the voices continued to follow him.

He wondered if they knew he was around or if this was just a bad coincidence. He hushed his breathing and moved on. Knowing if he couldn’t get around them, he’d have to outthink them.

The voices didn’t go away. Making him more and more certain they knew where he was. Yet they didn’t run, just kept pace. As Calvin turned another corner, making yet another attempt to get around, he realized they were corraling him. They didn’t know where he was exactly, but they were closing the window. And there must be other Special Forces soldiers coming from the other side, or perhaps waiting in ambush.

He wasn’t certain what to do for a moment.



If he stayed, he'd be caught. But if he kept moving, he'd spring their trap. He had to invent a third option... If only he could get the incoming men to move past him. Then he could go back the way he'd come and access the ladders without a problem.

He looked around. He was in a small corridor with crew quarters on both sides. His first thought was to hide in one of them. But they were certainly locked. Maybe someone would sympathize with him, and hide him?

He sprinted to the nearest crew quarters and rang the chime. Then he stood out of view of the small camera that would have identified him to the occupant. Hopefully the crewman was someone sympathetic to his cause and would take him in. *If not...*

He tightened his grip on his stunner and waited.

The approaching soldiers were almost to the corner now, they were loud enough Calvin could understand their conversation. It was about "tightening the gap" and the need to "search some of the rooms."

The door opened, revealing the surprised face of Third Lieutenant Rafael Te Santos, one of the analysts from the lab.

"Can I help you, sir?"

Calvin practically tackled Rafael as he darted inside and closed the door. Rafael looked both confused and a little angry. But Calvin didn't have time for apologies.

"Do you trust me?" he asked, tightening his grip on his stunner.

Rafael's eyes were difficult to read but he nodded. "Yes. Can I help you somehow?"

"Let me hide here for a few minutes."

Rafael agreed, waving for him to go into the closet but instead Calvin chose behind the bed where he'd still be out of sight but could fight more easily—if it came to that.

Unfortunately, from this view, he couldn't see Rafael. And wasn't sure whether the analyst planned to actually help him—at great personal risk—or give him up as soon as the soldiers were near.

The seconds passed. It was too quiet. A trickle of sweat beaded slowly down his forehead. He didn't wipe it away until it stung his eye. All the while he tried to resist the voice inside telling him *Stun him! He's going to give you up!*

Calvin didn't stun Rafael. He didn't even move to where he could see him. Instead he waited, trusted, and hoped. He'd made a real effort to get to know his crew personally—including Rafael—and he'd proven himself to them again and again. Now it was Rafael's turn to prove himself to Calvin.

Seconds turned into a minute and then two and still nothing happened. But he didn't let himself relax, he continued to wait. Feeling the burn in his knees as he crouched, the pain forcing him to shift positions.

Timing was critical, and judging when to leave was hard to decide. It had been awhile, but if the soldiers were searching rooms—like they'd discussed—they could easily still be in this hall. But if they weren't searching rooms, they were long gone.

He decided he'd make Rafael be the one to step out into the corridor to see if it was clear. Just as he cleared his throat to speak, the chime rang. Calvin cut himself off and adjusted his grip on the stunner. Not too tight, not too loose, finger over the trigger. Ready to pop up with the element of surprise. Maybe, just maybe, he'd get lucky.

He heard Rafael's footsteps approach the door. Then the soft whoosh of it sliding open.

A soldier spoke. "Is Lieutenant Commander Cross in this room? The Major has ordered his arrest."

Moment of truth. Calvin held his breath and steadied himself. His whole body tense.

"No, he isn't," Rafael said smoothly.

Calvin restrained a sigh of relief.

"It's very important we find him," the soldier said. "He was spotted on this deck. We think someone may be hiding him, and anyone who is hiding him will stand before a tribunal unless they come clean now. So, have you seen him?"

"Well, yes, come to think of it," Rafael said.

Calvin clenched his teeth. *No! You're going to sell me out after all?*

"I heard someone earlier. Not three minutes before you rang my chime. Sounded like running. I thought it was nothing but it might have been him for all I know."

"You heard running on the other side of this door?" The soldier asked skeptically.

"It was partially open at the time."

"Then did you see who it was?" The soldier demanded.

"No. It was only partially open. I was trying to get a little bit of airflow since these vents aren't as good as advertised."

"And you didn't look when you heard the running? That didn't stand out to you as something you should investigate?"

"I thought it was my imagination. But, if it wasn't, the man ran that way."

Calvin didn't see which way Rafael pointed, and for a moment he feared Rafael had pointed at the bed, where Calvin was hiding. But there was no reason for him to do that. He'd protected Calvin thus far, so Calvin suppressed his paranoia and tried to focus completely on what he had to do next.

“Thank you, sir,” the soldier said and he left. The door slid closed and Calvin popped up, stunner still in hand, and saw Rafael looking back at him darkly.

“I hate lying to soldiers, you know,” he said.

“And I hate running from them,” said Calvin. “But thank you for your help. And I promise you, I really *am* on the right side of all of this.”

Rafael just looked at him. “I believe you.”

Calvin nodded. “Thanks. If everything goes the way it should, things will be back under control soon. Now, which way did you send those soldiers?”

“That way,” Rafael pointed. It was the direction Calvin had hoped, leaving the path to the ladders clear.

*Okay, bridge, here I come.*

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An explosive bang cracked as the barricade blew apart and a gust of smoke filled the air. "LOOK AWAY!" Pellew shouted.

Shen raised his arm to shield his eyes but too slowly. A bright white flash burned his retinas and a shrill whine filled his ears, blocking out all sound. He stumbled backwards and crashed to the ground. He rubbed at his eyes and slowly his vision returned. He saw blurry images of soldiers exchanging fire, and smoke filtering through the room. People were coughing and hiding behind cover, many plugged their ears. Shen still couldn't hear anything.

He felt a hand grip his shoulder and looked up to see Pellew shouting at him. Shen couldn't make out a word and pointed to his ear, which was still ringing. Pellew seemed to understand and he pointed to a terminal nearby. He wanted Shen to move to better cover. Before he could, several bursts of energy flashed their way. Pellew knelt down and returned fire while Shen, unable to find his stunner, rolled to a prone position and made himself as small as possible.

Everything was clearer now; most of the smoke had been blown away by the vents. Several people were on the ground but it wasn't clear to Shen how many or who. With a pop his hearing returned.

The Major's soldiers advanced further into engineering.

That was when Pellew sprang his trap.

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The Major took the news without expression. But deep inside he felt a wave of shame. He'd failed to defend the ship and now the rightful commander was a prisoner on the bridge and the ship was in illegitimate hands. And there was nothing he could do about it.

He had attacked engineering, of course. But it proved better defended than he'd anticipated. He'd thought he'd sent an overwhelming force, smaller numbers but superior training and equipment. His soldiers even reported initial success—they'd breached engineering. But at the most inconvenient moment his force was caught unaware from behind, by a force Pellew—the *traitor*—had hidden in the corridors. The pincer movement was so successful that the Major's soldiers had been forced to withdraw. Now, with many of the men unconscious or unarmed—since Pellew had stolen or destroyed most of the weapons stockpile—the Major lacked the resources to try another attack.

The ship was lost.

He tried to think of another way. He even sent forces to the bridge to begin cutting the defense walls with a laser drill. But it would take hours, maybe even days, before they could break through.

So now he waited. Quiet as usual. Wondering. Would the Andromeda's flotilla find them? Surely Calvin couldn't keep his hold on the ship forever...

And yet there was something else bothering him. Seeing the unquestioning loyalty several of the crew and some of the soldiers gave Calvin, despite clear orders to the contrary, it made the Major wonder—could Calvin be onto something? He still doubted it. He still believed the crew had been deceived and that Calvin had no right to command anymore. But he wasn't as certain as he'd once been. And with that he decided, as bad as the situation was, there was still one benefit. Once they arrived at Abia, as they surely would, they could all see once and for all what was there—if anything. And then, and only then, would they know if they'd made the right decision.

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With both the bridge and engineering secure, Calvin gave the order to go to Abia. It felt good to have his command again, even illegitimately. He kept from thinking about the consequences of his actions by imagining what secrets awaited them in Abia.

"ETA?" he asked for what must have been the twentieth time.

"Two hours and fifty-three minutes," said Sarah. With the Major's force in ruins, Calvin had ordered his White Shift officers to the bridge and relieved the Red Shift, which he'd sent below. Fortunately the exchange of personnel had happened before more Special Forces soldiers appeared—who were now drilling futilely into the defense walls.

Only Summers had been kept against her will, she was cable-tied in the CO's office where, presumably, she could do no further harm. Miles had taken a break earlier to go and surprise her with a beanbag round from a shotgun—enough to knock her unconscious. Only he would think to do such a thing to an unarmed prisoner. Calvin scolded him and forced him to resume his station, but deep inside he was a little bit pleased. Not enough to condone the action, but he also hadn't forgotten the jagged wound she'd given him earlier. How she'd slipped into his heart and ravaged it mercilessly from the inside.

"Is everything still fine in engineering?"

"As of last report... one minute ago," said Sarah.

"Good, good," said Calvin. He stood up and started pacing around the bridge.

"Are you okay?" asked Sarah.

"Yeah, yeah, I'm fine." He hovered over Miles' screen and examined the defense systems.

"All's good here, Cal," said Miles.

Calvin nodded and wound his way over to Shen's station.

"Everything's fine over here too," said Shen.

"And is the Andromeda and its flotilla in sight?" he asked.

"Negative. Nothing on our scopes bigger than random space debris."

He breathed a sigh of relief. His biggest concern now, aside from the perpetual threat that he'd somehow lose control of the ship... *again*, was that the Fleet would overtake him. The Nighthawk had spent a lot of fuel and taxed its engines heavily; as a result, they couldn't do as deep of a jump as Calvin wanted. Their present depth still translated into a fast speed, but whether it was fast enough was difficult to say. Not without Andre's input, and the poor guy was still locked away in HQ.

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Summers was in a confused state. She was sitting on the ground, it was cold, and her hands were tightly restrained, cinching her wrists. She felt a throbbing localized pain and her muscles were tight.

She wiggled, trying to get comfortable, and looked through foggy eyes at the vaguely familiar shapes of the CO's office. She held out hope the Major would retake the ship, and restore proper order, but as the time went by, her hopes dimmed. But not her zeal to fight.

She tried to curse under her gag, despite her self-discipline. She was no longer able to contain the swirl of boiling frustration eating her insides. She let out a string of curses with the word Calvin tossed in intermittently. It sounded incoherent with the gag in place. Eventually she calmed down but couldn't hold back a river of silent tears as she waited for what felt like an interminable amount of time.

## Chapter 27

"Coming up on Abia," said Sarah.

"Is our stealth system still engaged?" asked Calvin. He wanted to make sure that, whatever was out there, the Nighthawk saw it before it saw them.

"You know it is," said Miles. "All defensive systems are operational and standing by."

"Good. Sarah, drop us deep into the system. About three million mc's from the outpost. I want a good look at what's out there."

"You got it. Entering Abia System in five minutes."

Calvin tapped his armrest nervously. He couldn't believe they were actually going to arrive. They *finally* were past the many obstacles that'd stood between them and Abia... *between Calvin and Raidan*. Abia was the key, it had to be. He wouldn't let himself wonder what he'd do if there was nothing there.

Anticipation filled the room, thick enough that even Sarah, who was always so relaxed, sat on the edge of her seat. "I've got something on the scopes," she said.

"What is it?"

"I... can't tell, it's all scrambled."

Calvin felt his heart quicken. There was definitely something out there then, something that didn't want to be seen. "How come you didn't see it until just now? We're practically there!"

"I did, but I thought it was the planet. Now that we're this close... I can tell it's a scrambled reading. Very impressive. I didn't know this kind of technology existed."

"It doesn't," said Shen grimly.

"Standby Condition One."

"Standing by."

"You'd better strap in," said Calvin; his crew looked surprised. He'd never given the order to strap in before. But he'd also never had to lead the Nighthawk into a serious combat engagement before. And since he didn't know what to expect, he thought a battle was quite possible. "I'm serious," he continued. "If we have to shift power from gravity, or if the system is blown, I don't want my bridge officers floating around the bridge."

"Good thinking," said Shen.

"Oh *very well*," said Miles as they all strapped in. Calvin did too, taking a moment to figure out how the restraints worked. It really *had* been a long

time. Then he tapped the intercom control and set the broadcast to ship-wide.

"This is your captain and I want you to listen very closely to what I have to say," he paused. "I know there has been tension and even violence among us on this ship. And that we are divided. But we must unite ourselves right now to survive. Our ship is fast approaching Abia System and something is scrambling our scanners. Something that will probably want to kill us.

"So now I'm asking you... no, I'm *begging* you to look past our differences and cooperate once more. When this is over, if it turns out I led us here without good justification, I will resign my command..."

Miles shot him a glare but Calvin continued unabated. "You have my word. But for now, let us be one."

He pointed at Sarah who sounded General Quarters.

"All hands to battle stations and strap in, CO out." He clicked off the comm.

"What? Resign your command?" Miles looked like he was about to burst.

Calvin nodded. "Yes, if that's what it takes. If I led us here for nothing then I don't deserve command. But don't worry about it," he said. "Because something *is* here."

"Okay... whatever you say."

"Dropping out of altered space into Abia System in four, three, two, *one*," said Sarah. "*And...* here we are."

If Calvin hadn't been tied to his chair he would have jumped up. "What do we see?"

The view from the window was dark and empty, despite how deep in the system they were. As the ship rolled starboard the bright glow of the lonely sun filtered in.

"Large objects," said Sarah. "Two are directly adjacent to the station, three hundred thousand mc's away. One is orbiting the dwarf planet and three others are holding position one point five million mc's out."

"I confirm that," said Miles from his console.

"Ships?" asked Calvin.

"I think so," said Sarah. "But I can't be sure. Our sensors are still mostly confused, but based on their relative gravities I'd say the objects are equivalent in mass to... heavy cruisers."

"She's right," said Miles. "But, if they are ships, I don't think they're ours. The mass of each individual ship puts them between a Telarian Cruiser and a Whitefire Battleship. We don't have any ships in that range."

"Not military ships, anyway," said Shen. "They could be commercial vessels. Heavy freighters?"

Miles shrugged. "They could be, I suppose."

"Can we confirm that there are exactly six objects?" asked Calvin.



"Negative," said Sarah. "Two smaller objects close together might look like one larger object, plus if they have anything on the other side of the planet we wouldn't be able to see that—"

"And," Miles talked over her. "If they have anything a lot smaller than these it'll be too small to get any idea of its gravity so we wouldn't see it, unless we move closer."

"How is our stealth system doing?"

"Operating normally."

"Good. Let's move in for a closer look, nice and easy. I don't want to get noticed."

Now it was time for a peace offering. He tapped his line to the CO's office.

"Commander Presley," he said, trying to appeal to Summers' formal nature. "I'm requesting your presence on the bridge. Your insight at this moment would be most valuable. Our position is deep inside Abia System and we're approaching several unknown objects that are not yet identifiable. We're guessing ships, maybe alien ships. We both know the XO's position at a time like this is on the bridge. I'm going to release you. I ask that you help us, but I will not compel you."

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Summers listened carefully to what Calvin had to say. Nothing lessened her resentment for him and what he'd done to her and her ship. But, for the first time, she wondered if he'd blundered his way into something important. If there really were unregistered alien ships this deep inside the Empire, that had serious implications.

Or perhaps Calvin "suspected" alien ships simply to try and grab some validation for his illegal takeover of the Nighthawk. It might turn out that these objects were asteroids. Or space junk. Or maybe even nothing at all. When Calvin finished speaking, Shen came in and unlocked Summers' restraints. As he did, Summers remained silent, still wondering at Calvin's ulterior motive. Even when Shen returned to the bridge, Summers remained in place, thoughtful. Wondering why Calvin should want her advice now. After disregarding it at every turn since she'd come aboard.

Most likely Calvin thought the image of them cooperating would help secure his hold over the ship. Make the crew think his actions were legitimate. She couldn't allow that.

But then again... if there was a danger to the ship, duty was very clear, her place *was* on the bridge. For now she'd have to swallow her pride and see what Calvin had put everything on the line for.

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"Incredible," said Shen, staring out the window.

"That makes four of them," said Miles as another large grey object became visible through the window, gliding almost invisibly in the darkness.

"Emitting very little heat and flying no identifier lights and giving off no signals," said Shen after conducting a short scan. "Just like the others."

"They're definitely ships," said Calvin. "But what kind?" The fast distant glances they caught, while carefully maneuvering around the strange objects, made it impossible to get a good view. Most of the hulls were still shrouded in darkness. And the projector didn't have enough information to display them.

"If we move even closer," said Shen. "Like to exact center. We'd be able to get a pretty good scan. The scrambling device wouldn't be as effective."

"I say we go for it," said Miles.

"It's risky," said Sarah.

"Relax," said Miles. "They can't see us. We have the best stealth system in the galaxy."

Despite Miles' confidence, or perhaps because of it, Sarah looked unconvinced. She glanced at Calvin for instructions and he hesitated before giving any.

On the one hand, the Nighthawk was no match for any of these ships. If they were spotted, and a fight ensued, it was curtains for sure. But on the other hand, if he didn't take the chance, he might lose out on what could be vital intelligence. He needed to ID those ships to make this worth it. And the stealth device seemed to be working so far.

"Let's do it," said Calvin.

"Okay," replied Sarah.

The ship closed in, silently and swiftly.

"What I'm still surprised by," said Shen. "Is how the station is fully lit up but not reacting to any of these ships. Its shields are down, weapons powerless, communications array inactive..."

"Do you think they can even see the ships with their sensor jamming device?" asked Sarah.

"Probably. All these deep space outposts have large, powerful sensors."

"Too bad we can't hail them," said Sarah. "Without giving ourselves away."

"Their comm array is down anyway," said Shen.

"I bet they've been boarded," said Miles. "Even though no distress signal was ever sent to the Fleet."

"Or a distress call *was* sent to the Fleet and the Fleet ignored it," said Calvin.

"If they did board it," said Shen. "The staff would have had no chance to defend themselves. There are only a handful of scientists and technicians. There are no sophisticated defenses at tiny outposts like this so deep inside the Empire."

Sarah interrupted them. "Approaching nearest object at twenty-five thousand mc's per second, zero range in twenty-eight seconds."

As the ship swung about, the object came into view and gradually filled the window. "It's a Rotham ship," said Miles. "No doubt about it. Thorpian Attack Cruiser." Calvin knew better than to doubt Miles' knowledge of starships and their defenses.

"I suspected this," said Calvin. "But it still surprises me."

"I know..." said Shen. "Rotham warships this far inside the Empire. It's crazy. How did they even get here? They should have been spotted by at least a dozen of our listening posts along the DMZ, unless they came from Polarian space..."

Sarah was intently focused on her display and controls, ready to go into a defensive maneuver at any moment.

"Do all the ships match the design of this one?" asked Calvin.

"Hard to know," said Miles. "Most of them seem to. But not all."

Just then the CO's office opened and everyone looked to see Summers stride to the center of the bridge.

"Welcome, Commander," said Calvin. "Take your seat and strap in."

"What for?" she asked, her eyes flicked to the ship out the window. "Is that a...?"

"Rotham ship," said Miles.

"But how can you tell? There are no identifier lights."

"*Trust me*," said Miles. "It's a Rotham warship—Thorpian Attack Cruiser."

"I don't—" Summers was almost speechless. "What is it doing way out here?"

"That's what we need to find out," said Calvin. Then, while Summers sat down and strapped herself in—with some hesitation—Calvin turned to Miles. "Tell me about those ships."

"They are full-on warships. Superior to any destroyer, larger than our battleships but not as much bite, and nothing compared to one of our dreadnoughts. Though they could squish *us* like a bug."

"And what about the ships that are not Thorpian Attack Cruisers?"

"There are four that don't match the design. Three ships are light cruisers. The fourth is totally different."

"What do you mean?"

"It's hard to explain..." Miles looked flustered. "It's the one orbiting the planet. There's some kind of weird energy band or something, it's in flux, increasing and decreasing like clockwork. Not sure what to make of it."

Shen did a quick scan. "I see what you mean, Miles," he said. "There's some kind of field its main accelerator is giving off. My best guess is that its propulsion technology is distinctly different than Rotham or Imperial standards."

"Bring us in closer," said Calvin. "Focus on that ship."

"Yes, sir," said Sarah. "Moving to new position."

"Do you think that's wise?" asked Summers. She was now eyeing the XO's personal display.

"What do you mean?" Calvin turned to her.

"If we move to that position, we'll be totally surrounded by those ships. If they are hostile, and they see us, we won't be able to escape. Their proximity will physically prevent an altered-space retreat."

"She's right," said Shen.

"That's only *if* they see us," said Miles. "And if we do move to that position that will give us the best view of everything here."

"He's right about that," said Sarah. "And there is no other really good position to scan from without dealing with distortion from the planet. Should I proceed as directed or not?"

"Proceed as directed," said Calvin. He knew the risks and decided they were worth taking. He had to know more.

The attack cruiser disappeared from view, quickly replaced by the dwarf planet. It was dark grey and only partially lit by the star. It looked like a barren lifeless husk of a world. A floating rock in the middle of nowhere with absolutely nothing of interest or value upon it.

"New position reached, answering all stop," said Sarah.

"What are the ships doing?" asked Calvin.

"Holding pattern. No one is moving except for the ship in standard orbit."

"Now that we have a better view, project everything we can see."

The projector lit up with simple three-dimensional models of a basic planet, an orbiting outpost, a ship in orbit, and five other ships all around the Nighthawk, sitting idle.

"An entire alien squadron..." said Calvin.

"Looks like it."

"Tell me about the unusual ship." He rubbed his hands together.

"It's a cruiser," said Miles. "Polarian..."

Calvin felt a potent wave of both intrigue and dread. "The *Polarians* are here?"

"Or a ship that once belonged to them," said Shen.

"Could they be cooperating?" Calvin asked. "Polarians and Rotham."

"They were at war five years ago," said Summers.

"It sounds more likely to me that the Rotham captured or purchased a Polarian ship, maybe as far back as during the war, and are using it here," said Shen.

"That would fit," said Miles. "The Polarian ship looks like a Kesner type three cruiser, making it at least ten years old. It could have easily been captured during the war."

"Yeah that has to be it. The Rotham acquired a Polarian ship. You know probability, the simpler the explanation the more likely it is to be correct," said Shen.

Calvin agreed that was likeliest, but wasn't closing the book on it.

"Look at this," said Shen, staring at his scanner. The projected display of the ships' positions blinked once and then they all noticed one of the ships—the closest one—move slowly away from its position, toward the Nighthawk.

"Do they see us?" asked Sarah.

"I guess we'll find out in a minute," said Shen.

Calvin knew everyone was thinking the same thing. If they *had* been detected, was escape even possible?

"Should I raise the shields?" asked Miles.

"No," said Calvin. "Then they'll see us for sure."

"Maybe they already do," said Sarah.

"I think we should leave this system, immediately," said Summers. "If we still can."

Calvin didn't like these options. "Shen," he said, deferring to his technology expert. "Is it possible for them to see us?"

"I suppose anything's possible," he said, "but I have no idea how. We're not leaking, we're not giving off heat, the stealth system is activated... I don't know."

"Not to mention they didn't seem to notice us before," said Sarah.

"Or they ignored us until we moved right in the middle of them, like a mouse going for the cheese," said Summers.

"Calm down, everyone," said Calvin. "There is only one ship moving right now. And since we're in the same direction as the planet, it's most likely the Rotham ship is just performing whatever regular task it's been assigned to do. Let's move out of its way, very carefully, and see what happens. Sarah, ninety-degrees pitch and give us a gentle push."

"Aye, aye," she said. The planet moved across the window as the ship turned and moved away. But, to their horror, the approaching Rotham ship matched their maneuver, though it did not accelerate and no other ships moved.

"Are their shields up?" asked Calvin.

"Impossible to tell," said Shen. "They're still confusing our scanners pretty well. I could barely get a reading on the station."

"Raise the shields now?" asked Miles.

"No," said Calvin. "Increase our speed by double and turn another fifteen degrees. Let's see what they do."

"Yes, sir," said Sarah and she complied. All eyes were glued to the projected display, watching as—at first—the Rotham ship continued on its course, but then changed direction and matched their maneuver exactly. Closer now than ever.

"Shields up, now, please, please, please?" asked Miles.

"I don't understand..." said Calvin, ignoring him. "They shouldn't be able to see us."

"They're sure acting like they see us!" said Miles.

"For once I agree with the buffoonish defense officer," said Summers.

"Hey I resent that—"

Summers talked over him. "We should clear for action and try to escape, *now*."

Calvin didn't want to leave and he didn't want to raise the shields. If he did, the Rotham ships would be on him like a flock of vultures and even though the Nighthawk packed a mean punch, it couldn't take much abuse. They would all die, and everything they'd discovered would die with them.

"I don't like this at all," said Shen.

"Rotham ship's approach vector is set and closing," said Sarah.

"We need a decision," said Shen, looking at him.

"Rotham ship will totally block all possibility of escape in seven seconds."

"If they haven't already," said Miles.

"Six, five, four—"

"Okay, okay," said Calvin. "Get us the hell out of here! Shields up and clear for action."

"You got it."

"Two, one—"

"And Sarah," said Calvin.

"Rotham ship has completely blocked our escape path," she said.

"Do your magic."

"I'll do my best," she jammed the controls and accelerated the Nighthawk to the peak of its short-range ability. They couldn't flee via altered-space jump from here, but, if they could get around the warship without dying or losing any major systems, they'd be all right. If anyone could pull off such an incredible feat of flying, it was Sarah, the cleverest pilot Calvin knew. Much better than he ever was.

"They see us now," said Miles. "Enemy ships moving to intercept. If they clear another hundred thousand mc's they'll be in firing range."

"Let's not let them," said Calvin. "We should be fast enough to keep that distance."

"There's still the ship dead ahead," said Shen, he was scrambling to make sure all primary weapons and defense systems had adequate power and priority.

Calvin watched the model of the Nighthawk soar to meet the enemy ship, which matched Sarah's maneuvers.

"Thorpian Attack Cruiser coming about and bringing weapons to bear, launchers primed and beams are charging," said Miles. In the window they could see their metal adversary like a grey phantom in the distance, growing larger and larger. Then a surge of energy flashed their way as beams of charged particles crashed into them, superheating their shields.

"How are we holding up?" asked Calvin.

"Shields are steady," said Miles. "I'm more worried about missiles."

Calvin nodded. If even one missile bypassed their shields and scored a direct hit on them, it could knock out a critical system. Ship armor was meant to deflect such attacks, but a stealth ship had little of it.

"How many launchers can it lock onto us?" asked Calvin.

"Ten," said Miles. Calvin's heart sank a little.

"We'll clear the enemy ship in thirty seconds," said Sarah.

"Or collide with them," said Summers. Her wide eyes were locked on the projected display. "They're matching us exactly. We can't get around them."

"You underestimate me," said Sarah, banking the ship at a new, steeper angle. But the enemy ship still managed to match the maneuver.

"Missile range in three seconds," said Miles.

Calvin wished there was something more he could do. There was no sense ordering Miles to do what he was already doing, preparing to shoot down incoming missiles. And the last thing Sarah needed was a CO distracting her with needless commentary.

"I won't let any of the explosions detonate within our shield radius," said Miles boldly, perhaps more to himself than anyone else. Then he tensed and started pressing buttons very quickly. "Six incoming missiles."

"Magnify," said Calvin to Shen, who adjusted the secondary display to project images of the incoming missiles.

"They can launch about five missiles per three seconds," said Miles. "If they're willing to dump that kind of payload." While he spoke, several missiles collided with energy beams and gunfire too small to see. One by one they exploded harmlessly outside the Nighthawk's shield radius doing no damage. But before Miles eradicated the last one, more appeared. And three seconds later another wave came.

"We're dead," said Summers.

"Readjusting," said Sarah. "We'll clear in thirty five seconds now... *hopefully...*"

"Thirty-five seconds, that's what... forty missiles?" asked Miles.

"Much closer to sixty," said Summers.

"Shut up," Miles barked.

The model of their ship jerked into an evasive pattern, still aiming to out-manuever and get past the attack cruiser—which tried to delay them long enough for its allied ships to arrive.

Sarah was an expert with such masterful control of the Nighthawk, it was like the ship was an extremity of her own body. Between her incredible skill and Miles' targeting ability, they managed to survive the next wave. But more missiles were fast in coming, progressively closer to their mark before Miles managed to shoot them down. Now they were at the edge of the Nighthawk's shields and Miles' face was red and sweaty as he struggled to compensate.

"Give me more space!" he yelled.

"I'm trying!" said Sarah.

Calvin thought only of what he could do to assist them. Which seemed like nothing.

Of the newest five missiles, Miles managed to detonate three outside the Nighthawk's shields, but the fourth and fifth slipped through. One exploded inside, blowing off a chunk of the Nighthawk's armor.

"No critical damage," said Shen.

"You let another one get through!" said Summers, unable to contain herself as the fifth missile soared unhindered. But Miles was too busy targeting the next wave to care about the missile he missed. "Relax," he said. "It won't hit us."

The fifth missile glided past them, a narrow miss. Miles flashed a grin and masterfully took down the next wave.

"Miles, did I ever tell you how much we love you," said Calvin. "And how glad I am I bought your release from Praxis."

"Yeah, you know how I said I'd pay you back?" asked Miles. "This counts. Worth every damn q and then some." He stiffened. "But if we don't clear this fast we won't make it. Our guns are starting to overheat and the beams are losing power."

"I'm working on it," said Shen. "I'm draining all secondary systems."

"It won't do any good," said Miles. "I need our guns. The two energy beams won't stop five missiles in time."

"Come on," said Sarah, twisting the ship into an even more complex pattern of movements that the attack cruiser, which was so close it completely filled their window, could not hope to match.



"Yes!" Sarah shouted. "We're above and going around them. I'm opening this all the way up," she accelerated the ship to its maximum and shot them forward like a deranged arrow. "Retreat vector calculated. We'll be clear for an altered space jump in five seconds."

A cheer filled the bridge. But it was short lived. As soon as they moved past the attack cruiser, and it vanished from view, the sight was replaced by another ship exactly as large. It sat there, weapons primed, like it had been waiting the whole time.

"What the hell?" asked Sarah.

"How did we not see that before?" asked Calvin.

"Jammed sensors," said Shen with a shrug of despair.

"Can we still jump?"

"No. Their gravity and proximity will mess us up."

Miles let out an enormously loud string of profanities then said "—we'll be in range of their missiles in ten seconds."

"Can you get us around it?" Calvin looked to Sarah, but knew their ship would never be able to out-maneuver both attack cruisers working together. And the other Rotham ships weren't far away. They were more trapped than ever.

"I can try," said Sarah, but she didn't sound hopeful and cursed under her breath.

The new ship unleashed a barrage of energy that slammed into the Nighthawk's shields, threatening to overpower them and bring them offline. It was such a brilliant display that Calvin had to look away from the window.

"We can't take many more of those," said Shen. The bridge lights blinked as he switched them to tertiary power.

Calvin knew they would never be able to outrun or outfight these adversaries. He removed his restraints and stood up, catching their attention. "Sarah," he said. "Tell them we surrender."

"What?" she asked.

"We *surrender!*"

"I'd rather die on my feet with a sword in my hand than live on my knees," said Miles.

"We're no good to anyone if we're dead," said Calvin. "Our only chance now is to offer our surrender and hope they take it."

"And hope we survive captivity," said Shen.

Once Sarah contacted the enemy ship, they accepted an unconditional surrender and transmitted instructions. The attacks stopped, but waves of Rotham starfighters deployed to doubly ensure the Nighthawk could not escape. A tractor-beam from the nearest ship latched onto them and pulled them in slowly.

"Now what?" asked Sarah.

They all looked at Calvin.

"Now we have to act quickly," said Calvin. "Shen, we'll need to roll back the computers so our databanks are what they were before Praxis."

His officers knew better than to question him until he was finished.

"We'll make it look like Anand is still the XO, and Miles, you get to play Anand."

"I don't look much like an Anand," he said. "But I'll do whatever you say."

"Summers, you and someone from Special Forces will hide and we'll erase all evidence that either of you were aboard the ship."

"Then what?" she asked. "We mount a two person assault on a ship that must have over three hundred soldiers?"

"No," said Calvin. "Then you and our soldier discreetly plant and activate the silent beacon you brought aboard. That will alert the Fifth Fleet to our presence and also let them know we're on the Rotham ship so it can be boarded."

"Good thinking," said Summers with a nod. "Let's do it."

Calvin was almost surprised to hear her agree with him. "Better hurry."

She sprinted for the elevator and disappeared below.

"I give it a fifty percent chance any allied ships will even see the beacon with the jammer in place," said Shen.

"Better than zero," said Sarah.

"The Fifth Fleet is coming to Abia already anyway," said Calvin.

"Because they want to track down the Nighthawk. My thinking is that they'll be able to see the beacon once they get here."

"That's likely true," said Shen.

"And if they see it from farther out, all the better." Calvin cleared his throat. "Open a simultaneous line to the Major and engineering." Once the line was established, he explained his plan as briefly as he could. Finishing with—"Summers is on her way as we speak."

"I'll have to destroy a lot of our files in HQ," said the Major. "It's procedure. The aliens may not like it but it's what we have to do."

"While you're at it, make sure you erase all evidence of whichever soldier you're sending with Summers and the beacon," said Calvin.

"Now the question is who," said the Major.

"I'll do it," said Pellew. "I'll go now. And when our ship is boarded we can hide in the secret containers Mitchell and Adams were discovered in."

## Chapter 28

Once the Nighthawk docked with the attack cruiser, Calvin and his bridge crew went to the main hatch unarmed to await capture—as instructed.

He stood with Sarah, Shen, and Miles in silence. Trying not to make eye contact with any of them. Whatever horrors awaited them on the Rotham ship—a people known for brutality—Calvin bore the guilt. Had his judgment been better, had he known more about the situation, he would have acted differently and spared them all what would come next: captivity, torture, perhaps even death. What kept him going was the hope that Summers and Pellew would not be found.

The hatch unsealed with a snap-hiss and slowly retracted. "Here goes," said Miles.

The first group of Rotham swept in, their movements lithe and swift—like lizards. Gold eyes shining, crimson scaly skin, black hair, and the distinct uniforms of the Teldari—the invasion force that raided so many worlds in the Great War. They held a variety of small arms, mostly energy rifles, and ordered Calvin and the others against the wall.

Calvin raised his hands and the others followed his lead. They were searched and pushed along through the hatch and onto the deck of the Rotham ship's main hangar.

Once they were clear, a column of about sixty Rotham Teldari swarmed onto the Nighthawk to turn everything upside down and capture everyone aboard. Calvin watched them go with a mixture of anxiety and forlorn regret. No captain should ever have to see his ship taken by the enemy.

"Move along," a Rotham said, knocking Calvin in the back of the head.

"*Ouch!*" He suppressed a wave of fresh anger as he looked at his assailant, a Teldari with a yellow collar—a captain. He was probably one of the few Rotham here that spoke Human. After their eyes met, Calvin looked away, not wanting to provoke the captain further. Instead, he moved forward—as directed—to the corridor.

The hangar was a basic structure, almost boring in appearance; its only standout feature was how large it was. It could easily fit three Nighthawks. Most of the fighters stored here had been deployed making it feel empty, despite piles of crates and scattered equipment.

A gun pressed into Calvin's back told him they didn't like him looking around. He put his head down and marched forward in silence, like they wanted. Surrounded by Teldari who looked grim and eager for violence.

The detention block was strategically located near the hangar. Far enough away that a rogue prisoner couldn't slip off and steal a fighter, but close enough that new prisoners could be processed and locked up without much opportunity to escape or see ship operations.

Before he knew it, he was in his cell. No bed. No chair. Not even tall enough for him to stand. He could sit on the floor, crouch, or lie down—curled into a ball. The Empire would never treat prisoners this way. And, unlike detentions on most Imperial ships, he was held in place by metal bars instead of a proper forcefield. Either to save money or to prevent prisoners from escaping in the event of a power failure. But the downside was that a practiced criminal might exploit a weakness in the lock and hinges. Too bad Calvin had no such talents.

Straight across from his cell, with its limited view, was Miles. He gave Calvin a weird look—like a kicked cat. Calvin wasn't sure what it meant.

"Do you think they'll feed us to each other?" asked Miles.

Before Calvin could reply—or decide if he wanted to—one of the guards yelled at them, probably ordering them to be silent. His staccato language seemed impossible to understand. Calvin knew a few phrases of Rotham—it was a required course at the academy—but he didn't remember much beyond the inane and completely useless practice phrase, "The book is on the table."

He heard footsteps and, by scooting over and arranging his head in such a way, Calvin caught glimpses of familiar faces marching with hands on their heads between forceful Rotham guards who—despite their height disadvantage—looked vicious and domineering. He saw Rose and his shift, other crewmembers he knew, and before long men and women in Special Forces uniforms. Last of all was the Major, who they pushed into the cell next to his—out of sight.

The top ranking Rotham had some kind of alien discussion, but whatever they talked about was totally incomprehensible to Calvin. After one dismissed the others, and most of the Teldari filed out, the same captain in yellow collar approached Calvin and bent down to look him in the eyes. He uttered something that sounded like gibberish.

Calvin said nothing. Only stared into his adversary's golden eyes, unblinking.

"You don't speak Rotham?" the captain asked, now in Human.

"Nope."

"A pity. Your language is... limited. But it will have to do."

Calvin said nothing.

"You're the Captain?"

"I am."

"And that is your first officer?" he waved a toned arm toward Miles' cell.

"Yes."

"Calvin Cross and Anand Datar?"

"Yes."

"Good. I have questions for you."

Calvin looked away.

"What are you doing in Abia?"

"I could ask you the same question. We're humans in human space, what are *you* doing here?"

The Rotham pulled a baton from out of sight and jammed it between the bars and into Calvin's ribs so quickly he couldn't react. A surge of electric shock crackled through him and he stiffened, hitting his head on the ceiling as he tried to withdraw himself but found he could not. A moment later the pain was gone, just as fast as it'd come, and the Rotham withdrew his baton.

"Let's try that again," he said. "What are you doing here?"

"Routine patrol," said Calvin. "The outpost went silent, we were sent to discover why." It was the most plausible thing he could think of but, like he'd expected, this Rotham didn't buy it—and he gave Calvin another painful jab with his baton. In the cramped cell, Calvin had no way to retreat or dodge.

"What about the Harbinger?" asked the Rotham, once he'd removed the baton a second time.

Calvin's muscles were still tight and his heart beat faster than he thought it should. He wondered if this captain knew that shocks like these could kill a human more easily than a Rotham. If he did know, he didn't seem to care.

"I said, what about the Harbinger?"

"What about it? It's a ship that's gone missing. I'm supposed to find it. No idea where it is."

"Where does it make port?"

"I don't know what you're talking about." Calvin really didn't. For all he knew the Harbinger hadn't made port anywhere since Aleator. And even then it hadn't docked.

"I said *where does it make port?*" The Rotham raised his voice and again jammed his baton through the bars, but this time Calvin was ready and managed to catch it with both hands just outside the shock point. For a minute the two of them wrestled for control and ultimately the Rotham managed to pull it back through the bars. "I gave you a chance, Human Captain, but now you get to pay like the others." He took out a key.

"What others?" asked Calvin.

"The ones who died in the Inquisition Room."

Calvin knew what that was. A torture chamber. And given the Rotham's reputation for brutality, he didn't want to go there. Despite the little bit of torture he'd been forced to endure, as part of his Intel Wing training, he knew that most people put under Rotham torture for any amount of time

died, whether or not they cooperated. And that if he went, he wouldn't be coming back.

As the Rotham began to work the lock, Calvin's mind raced for a way to escape the situation, maybe find a place to hide until the Fifth Fleet made its move. But, as two more armed guards showed up next to the Rotham captain, Calvin's hope of escape left him. With great effort he tried to steel himself, hoping that, should the unthinkable—but extremely likely—happen, his trusted friends and officers would still continue on without him. And uncover the truth for the whole Empire.

"Wait," said a nearby voice, stalling the Rotham who was about to open Calvin's door.

"What did you say?" the Rotham asked, looking more confused than angry.

"That one is useless to you," it was the Major's voice, coming from the adjacent cell. "He can't answer your questions because he doesn't know anything. But I do."

"You are volunteering to tell us everything?"

"No," said the Major. "I'm telling you that I'm the only person who can answer your questions, and I never will. You're wasting your time." He sounded convincingly bitter and Calvin could see the mixture of irritation and intrigue on the Rotham captain's face.

"Is that so, foolish human? Perhaps a visit to the Inquisition Room would change your mind."

"I doubt it, lizard." The use of the pejorative *lizard* would offend any Rotham who knew the Human language well enough to recognize the word. This worked on the captain whose breathing changed.

"Take this one," he said, locking Calvin's cell once more. He then opened the Major's cell.

It all made sense to Calvin. The Major didn't actually know anything, he was just goading the Rotham into taking him to their torture dungeon instead, wherever it was. Giving Calvin that much more time to hold out for the cavalry. He was awed by the noble act and wondered, had their situations been reversed, if he would've done the same.

"Don't think you're out of this," the Rotham captain said, tapping his baton against Calvin's bars while his underlings cuffed the Major and escorted him forward. "Because we're coming for you next." He turned to Miles' cell. "And you." He disappeared and a replacement set of guards entered.

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They whipped him. And when that didn't work they applied electric shock.

Major Jenkins writhed in agony, strapped to the cold table that was far too narrow for his broad shoulders. Aside from the noises of anguish he couldn't keep back, he remained silent. Telling them nothing. Enduring the bone twisting, muscle ripping pain that scorched him head to toe.

"Where is the Harbinger?" a voice asked.

He said nothing. Bracing for their next action as best his weakened body could. Scrapes, bruises, and deep lacerations graffitied his arms and torso. And some kind of fluid was poured over them, amplifying the pain.

"What did Asari Raidan tell you?"

Even if the Major had known the answer, he wouldn't have revealed it. This treatment only made it harder to think clearly. His vision blinked in and out and he could scarcely understand what was going on.

He held to a singular thought and pushed everything else out. Calvin *had* to survive to lead the others to freedom. He was their best chance. Nothing else mattered.

He gritted his teeth as more pain followed. Thin rivers of blood snaked down his arms and chest. The tickling sensation only added to the torture. And the chemicals they poured onto his wounds! Who knew pain like this existed? But everything began to fade and he knew it would all be over soon.

"Where is the Arcane Storm?"

He didn't understand the question. He couldn't. Before his brain could even try to process the significance of it, they poured a different, hot liquid over his damaged skin. It was so terrible he lost his bearings and for several moments did not comprehend where he was or what was going on.

"Where does the Harbinger make port?"

The words felt strange and alien. Like sounds he'd never heard before.

"What Asari Raidan stole on Aleator. Where is it? What does he plan to do with it?"

He had to keep fighting. He *had* to! But his strength and will to live faded like shadows in the light.

Until he couldn't fight anymore.

## Chapter 29

It wasn't easy from her restricted position, but with a little struggle Summers managed to input the command codes and activate the beacon. It blinked once, then made no sign it was on. Just like it was supposed to.

"The silent beacon is activated," she whispered to Pellew.

He said nothing, and they waited, smashed against each other in the cramped container for what felt like forever. With their two bodies, Pellew's carbine, the beacon, two handguns, and her submachine-gun, there was literally no wiggle room. She could tell Pellew—at least partially—enjoyed being squished against her, but she could have done without the experience. At least she was closer to the tiny vent that provided them with fresh air.

"You're nervous," Pellew whispered.

She shushed him quietly. But she *was* nervous. The fate of the crew depended on them and they were surrounded by hundreds of hostiles.

Not to mention her confusion and mixture of emotions regarding recent events. What the hell were the Rotham doing here? Was Calvin onto something after all? Had he been right? No... he'd flown the ship right into this mess, he didn't know what he was doing... but still, he *had* discovered something... she tried not to think about it.

Every time a noise filtered in, regardless of how quiet or muffled, her heart lurched at the fear their cover had been blown. If that happened.. she didn't know what she'd do. Or could do. She forced herself to be calm, or tried to, by reminding herself the Nighthawk's blueprints were so classified that, even when she'd been made executive officer, she wasn't privy to that information until she was actually aboard the ship. So, until the Rotham mined the ship's hard drives and decoded everything, they couldn't possibly know about these containers.

"We could just wait for the Fifth Fleet here," whispered Pellew.

She didn't like that idea. "I don't know if the beacon can be detected through both the Nighthawk's *and* the Rotham ship's hulls."

"I suppose you're right. It's too bad, really. It's kind of nice here."

She grimaced. "Think it's clear?" she asked. They hadn't heard anything for awhile now.

Pellew listened. "Yeah, let's go."

Very stealthily, they opened the container and crawled into the narrow corridor of deck three. No one was around. They fixed silencers to their weapons and Summers followed Pellew's lead.



They moved as fast as they could, sneaking around corners, through hallways, and down ladders, pausing whenever they heard voices until the coast was clear again. Eventually they reached an airlock.

"I doubt anyone's looking at this one," said Pellew, unlocking it. "Cover me."

Summers held her submachine-gun at the ready and kept her eyes vigilant. The beacon, which she carried by its handle in her other hand, was beginning to feel heavy but she knew she couldn't let that distract her.

"Okay, we're through," said Pellew. He pulled the metal fixture open and poked his head out. "Looks clear, let's move." He climbed down an external ladder and Summers covered him from above. Once he reached the main floor of the Rotham hangar, she dropped the beacon to him and climbed down herself. When she reached the ground he returned it and she looked up.

The hangar was enormous, even by heavy cruiser standards. At full capacity it could fit a large number of fighters or shuttles. For now, though, only the Nighthawk and a few fighters were on the flight deck. Summers could hear a half dozen or so Rotham voices out of sight, presumably working, they didn't sound alarmed.

Pellew moved ahead and assessed their surroundings. He flashed her the hand signals for three enemies to the left, clear on the right, follow him. She did. They snuck around stacked crates and various equipment.

It was an annoying process, forcing them to backtrack at times, and it took several minutes. But they managed to escape the hangar into the corridor without incident. It was empty and they picked up the pace. Summers wasn't sure where they were going, but knew, ultimately, they were looking for a hiding place for themselves and the beacon.

"Over here," said Pellew, waving his rifle toward a nook. It was a stubby dead-end of a hallway, complete with a ventilation grate, some crates, and a computer terminal. She followed closely.

As they approached, two Rotham crew members could be seen at work. One popped up from behind the computer console, some wires in his hands, and the other came around a stack of crates, carrying something she didn't recognize.

Pellew steadied his rifle and took two quick shots, dropping both aliens. Summers didn't fire, knowing Pellew with his carbine was much more accurate than she would be with her one-handed submachine-gun.

"Cover me while I move the bodies out of sight," said Pellew.

He set down his carbine and dragged the first corpse behind a crate, leaving behind a mess of blood. Summers had seen her share of blood, but Rotham blood looked strange.

"We'll have to do something about that blood," she said.

"Move a crate on top of it," said Pellew, now dragging the second body out of view. Summers kept an eye on the corridor and followed his command, moving one of the smaller crates. Pellew then adjusted the computer table so its shadow covered the rest of the blood.

"So I guess we hold out here?" asked Summers, retrieving the beacon.

"No, let's stash the beacon in one of these crates," said Pellew, "and then rescue our crew."

Summers felt uneasy about that plan. "The beacon is more important, we have to protect it."

"We can't protect it if they find us here," said Pellew. "They'll kill us eventually. All we can do is hide it. Staying to guard it will only draw attention to this area—and it."

She knew he was right, but didn't want him to be. "What about the dead bodies? That'll draw attention to this spot too. Maybe we should find a new spot."

"I don't think we'll find anything better. We're lucky we found *this* spot. The longer we delay, the more we carry the beacon around, the more likely they'll find us—and it—and everything will be over."

"Fine, then what do you propose we do?"

"Leave it and attack the detention center. You don't have to come if you don't want to but my men are locked up in there and *I* have to do *something*."

"We don't even know where that is."

"Yeah we do. We passed the door on our way here, didn't you notice it?"

"No. All these Rotham halls and doors look the same to me."

"There are subtle differences," said Pellew. "But it helps if you can read and speak Rotham, like I do."

She should have realized that by now. The way he so easily reacted to the Rotham's movements as they snuck through the hangar. Rotham fluency wasn't as uncommon as most people suspected; the academy she went to, for instance, taught it at all levels. But she hadn't made that her focus and felt in the dark now.

"Have you heard anything interesting?" she asked. "Maybe what they're doing here and what their plans are?"

"No. The people in the hangar weren't talking about any of that. But I do know where the crew was taken. And I'm sure we could take the guards by surprise."

"We could die."

"Yeah," he said with a crooked grin. "And if no one helps them, they could die. And for that matter, if we hang around here, we could die. And even if we succeed at everything, we're all going to die anyway. Eventually. Don't you want to at least die doing something meaningful?"

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Calvin couldn't see it from his cramped cell, but he knew the sound of gunfire when he heard it.

Automatic weapons with suppressors, shouted orders in Rotham, the distinct whine of alien rifles, and of course the thud of bodies smacking the deck.

He got on his knees and tried to catch a glimpse of something, anything. He saw black boots and the bottom of camouflage trousers moving his way, stepping over fallen Rotham corpses.

Farther away he heard Summers' distinct voice, "there we go," she said from out of sight, followed by the snap hiss of dozens of cells unlocking. Calvin tested his but it wouldn't budge. As if in answer, Summers said, "I can't unlock the priority cells from this switch."

"Use this," it was Pellew's voice. Calvin wished he could see.

"Good timing," Calvin shouted through the bars, thinking his back couldn't take much more of this contorted position. "Is it clear out there?"

"For now," said Pellew. "Where's the Major?"

"They took him. No idea where." He could hear several people moving around and cell doors opening. Hearing them roam free and knowing he was still trapped in this claustrophobia-inducing cell was unbearable.

Summers came into view and bent down to unlock his cell with a key from one of the dead guards. He tried to read her expression but her face was mostly obscured. What he did see, though, seemed cold and neutral.

"Summers Presley ..." said Calvin. "I can't believe it but I'm actually glad to see you." His door unlocked and she opened the cell.

"Pfft, I'm not," said Miles from the other side. "And I never will be."

"I don't have to let you out you know," she said.

Miles made a face. "If you don't, Calvin will."

Calvin crawled out and stood to his full height. Even though he hadn't been in the cell for long, it felt truly liberating to be out. It was too small for an adult human and a prolonged stay would probably drive a grown man insane.

Calvin scanned over their surroundings; the detention block was effectively a long corridor with cells on both sides, able to hold up to a hundred prisoners, much more than the Nighthawk's crew. And fortunately everyone, except the Major, was here.

"Pellew what have we got?" asked Calvin, moving to the raised platform in the center.

"Twenty two soldiers, thirty-nine crew. Everyone is accounted for except the Major."

"At least they were kind enough to put us all in one place," said Calvin. He looked over their faces and saw a lot of angry, healthy, mostly youthful people. They were tired. They were confused. But they were ready and willing to fight. Only one looked unfit for a lot of action. "How are you holding up, Monte?"

"Don't you worry about me," the old doctor said, pointing a crooked finger. Calvin knew better; he knew Monte was in pain and wouldn't be able to keep up well. But he also understood that Monte would not let himself be seen as a liability.

To Calvin's surprise, there was only one prisoner in this detention block who wasn't from his ship. It was a Rotham in grey prison garb with long black hairs on his chin that seemed out of place on his scaly-like skin.

"Let me out too," the Rotham said desperately.

Miles looked like that was the most ridiculous thing he'd ever heard.

"You wish, *lizard*."

"I'm telling you, I know things that can help you."

Calvin was intrigued. "What do you know?"

"Anything you want, just get me out of here."

"Why is the Rotham squadron here?" Calvin pressed him.

"I'll tell you once we're safely away from here," said the Rotham.

"Tell me now."

"We don't have time for this," said Pellew.

Calvin knew he was right. "Very well," he turned briefly to look at him.

"How many weapons do we have?"

"Eight," said Pellew. "My carbine, two pistols, the XO's sub-machinegun, also two Rotham rifles and two Rotham pistols off the guards here."

"Distribute them to Special Forces," said Calvin. He wanted a firearm for himself, but knew his best chance, *everyone's* best chance, was to put their resources into their most capable hands. Summers relinquished her weapon without complaint.

"Ready, sir."

"Everyone conscious and able to move?"

Pellew did a quick check. "Affirmative."

"What about the Rotham?" asked Shen. "He could be useful."

"He's a waste of space," said Miles. "Drop him. Or give me one of those guns and I'll do it myself."

"Bring him along," said Calvin, making a snap decision. He reasoned the Rotham didn't represent much risk and could prove useful.

"Whatever you say," said Miles. Summers unlocked the Rotham's cell.

"You won't regret this," the Rotham said.

"Don't speak unless spoken to," said Miles.

"What's your name, Rotham?" asked Calvin.

His reply was impossible to understand, though it sounded vaguely like Alex.

"I'm going to call you Alex," said Calvin.

The Rotham, now Alex, didn't seem offended.

"Good. Fall in line with the others. We'll let you come with us so long as you don't do anything stupid and you don't slow us down." He turned to Pellew. "We need to take a defensive position."

"I agree completely. We won't be able to escape on the Nighthawk, even if we could take it and blast a hole in the hangar doors we'd just get shot down. We have to defend somewhere and wait for the Fleet."

"Why don't we hold here?" asked Rose.

"It's a deathtrap," said Pellew, citing several of its weaknesses. "It didn't work for them," he gestured toward the fallen guards, "and it won't work for us. We need to move, now."

"Where to?" asked Calvin. "Did you see anything on your way in, somewhere we could hold out?"

"Not for this many people," said Pellew.

"Does anyone know anything about Rotham ships?" asked Calvin. "You, Rotham, I mean Alex, any bright ideas where a good holding spot would be?"

"I don't trust him," said Miles.

"Have any better ideas?" Calvin whirled to face him, though he didn't trust Alex either.

Shen spoke up. "Maybe. The blueprints of alien ships are well kept secrets, but our agents learn things from time to time. Unfortunately, you can never be sure what you have is up to date. I had to study designs of a ship like this back at the academy. But that was several years ago."

"Give me the short version."

"The most defensive positions are main engineering and the bridge," said Shen. "But those are also the hardest to take for the same reason. Especially on a ship designed to repel full-on marine invasions involving hundreds of soldiers."

"So...?"

"The auxiliary bridge," Miles blurted out. "Every Rotham ship C-class and above has a secondary bridge in case their main bridge gets blown away. I don't know where it is, but since the real bridge is on the other side of the ship, my guess is the secondary bridge is far away from that. Like, say, around here. If we can find it, that would be an awesome place to hold out."

Calvin looked to Shen.

"My thoughts exactly," said Shen.

"See, Summers, I'm not useless," Miles made a face at her.

"Alex," said Calvin. "Where is the auxiliary bridge?"

"Two decks above us and a little to stern and starboard, right below main engineering."

"That's good, we can use that," said Calvin. "Hopefully they'll think we're going for engineering and divert soldiers from the auxiliary bridge to there. What do you think, Pellew?"

He nodded. "Better than waiting around here another moment."

"What about the Major?" asked Summers. "Are we going to just abandon him?"

"I don't want to," said Calvin. "But we have no choice, we don't even know where he is." He looked at Alex. "Where is the Inquisition Room?"

Alex said nothing for a moment. Then, "you won't be able to save your man. Getting to the Inquisition Room involves going through most of the local garrison. You'll all die trying to save one man who is almost certainly dead already."

It was a harsh statement but Calvin had expected nothing less. "So we have to look to ourselves," he said.

"The Major would insist we go on without him and take a good tactical position," said Pellew. "If he knew we put ourselves at risk to try and help him, he'd kill us himself—if the Rotham didn't."

Calvin gave the signal and Pellew ordered the group to move out. His soldiers took up the front position, and cleared the hall. The crew followed in a wide column, as fast as they could. Calvin stayed up front with Pellew.

"Where's the beacon?" asked Calvin.

"Safely hidden," Pellew nodded toward a small alcove.

"We should get it," said Calvin.

"No we shouldn't."

"It's mission critical; we have to protect it."

"I agree with Calvin," said Summers, to his great surprise. "We should keep it with us. If nothing else, the signal might be better coming from the auxiliary bridge."

"And if we take it, they may capture the beacon and destroy it. All our eggs would be in one basket."

"If they capture the beacon from us," said Calvin. "Then we won't need it. Because we'll already be dead. They'll have to pick it off our corpses. The whole point of it is just to alert the Andromeda and all friendly ships that we're aboard."

"As you wish," Pellew waved for one of his men to clear the nook and take the beacon. "It's in the bottom-most crate on the far side."

Their leading soldiers reached an intersection and went prone as blasts of energy came from the left. Pellew raised a closed fist to halt the group while his soldiers mounted a counter attack. Two men kept the enemy's attention

with sporadic but strategic fire while another army-crawled farther into the open with some kind of scoped Rotham rifle.

"Clear," he called back. He and the other soldiers jumped to their feet and continued forward. Pellew and the soldier with the sub-machinegun covered the sides while everyone else ran for the ladders. Calvin stayed with Pellew and took a long look down the adjoining hallway.

Three Rotham soldiers were dead on the ground. "Routine patrol team, I'm guessing," said Pellew. "They weren't expecting us." Calvin saw three rifles among the bodies.

"Miles, help me grab those weapons." He bolted for them, hearing Miles thunder behind.

"It's wide open, I can't cover you out there," Pellew called after him.

"No risk, no reward," Calvin replied. He reached the fallen enemies and scooped up the weapons, with Miles' help.

The closer look at the splattered alien brains and empty eyes was something Calvin could have done without. With some revulsion he wiped their fluids off the guns with his own shirt. At least it wasn't nearly as bad as seeing dead humans.

"Okay, let's go." He looked up, surprised to see Pellew had come along in an attempt to cover him, despite this inferior position.

They ran, Pellew facing backwards, weapon keenly aimed at the distance, expecting to see Rotham soldiers charging them at any minute. Calvin distributed the weapons to more Special Forces soldiers—again fighting the temptation to keep one for himself. Miles too looked hesitant to relinquish his, but did as ordered.

"Look at that," said Pellew. Calvin glanced up to where Pellew was pointing his carbine. A security camera.

"They must have thousands of those to keep tabs on a ship this size," said Calvin. "I wonder how long it'll take someone to notice us."

"They probably already—" Pellew's words were lost to the sound of gunfire as their sergeant's sub-machinegun blasted toward a group of Rotham approaching from behind. He called for support.

Pellew and three other soldiers, those most recently armed, moved to the rear and opened fire on the enemy, who took cover and returned fire. It was too far away for either side to be very accurate but the size of Calvin's group made them an easier target. A fiery blast hit a young blond crewmember. She was dead before she hit the ground.

One of the unarmed soldiers, a field medic, moved to check her vitals. But there wasn't much point.

"Make yourselves small," said Pellew, not looking back. He scored a hit of his own on the killer, who collapsed.

By now, half of Calvin's group—including the leading four soldiers—had begun climbing the ladders, which were three across. They just needed a bit more time. He didn't know what he could do, except go prone like the others and cover his ears.

He looked back at his fallen crewmember, a young woman new to the ship, and felt a wave of both remorse and anger. He hadn't known her well, but she was more than just a face and a name. It saddened him to see her dead, knowing she was supposed to marry in only a few months.

The lights turned red and a roaring klaxon filled the air.

"Well they're onto us now," said Calvin, no one could hear him, though. His voice lost to the sounds of fighting and the alarm.

He crawled all the way to the ladders. It was almost his turn to go up.

Both sides exchanged fire from positions of relative safety and Calvin wondered why the Rotham side wasn't being more aggressive, using smoke canisters or flashbangs, or sniping them with superior weapons.

Then he saw why. More forces were arriving. A surge of Rotham soldiers, Teldari, with helmets and combat vests. They charged from the side hallways like a swarm of bees. Weapons leveled and blasting, flowing like an organic tidal wave. Their fire was clumsy, hard to be accurate at a run, but they closed in fast.

Pellew and his men, now in a crouched position to keep very steady, managed to overheat their weapons in a spray of automatic and concentrated fire meant to maximize casualties. Never before had Calvin seen such expert shooting. Twelve or more Rotham fell wounded or dead, including a lead commander; it was enough to stall their advance.

But two Special Forces soldiers were hit, one in the chest and one in the head—Calvin saw them both recoil. As soon as their hands went limp around their weapons, other soldiers scooped up their armaments and took their places.

He heard a scream as a narrow beam of light grazed Monte's forearm. It torched his fair skin, blackening it, and his eyes went wide with pain. But he managed to keep his feet and most of his composure.

Calvin yelled at him. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine, I'm fine," Monte lied. A field medic came over and tried to treat him but Monte shrugged him off. "Oh leave me alone, you." Then, like a tough old bird, he moved for the ladders—wincing as he went up.

As the remnants of the Teldari's first wave regrouped with what was sure to be the second wave, Pellew and his men scooped up additional weapons from the enemy's failed offensive and passed them to the other soldiers, arming the rest of them. In this retrieval process another soldier was lost. A youthful black-haired boy. His blood soaked the ground. Calvin grimaced but couldn't look away.



He was about to start climbing when he heard something slide across the ground. It was a conventional handgun. He picked it up and looked back to see Pellew nod at him, and then return to fighting. Now ordering his men into a tactical retreat to the ladders.

Calvin pulled back the slide—making sure there was a bullet in the chamber—then started his ascent.

The ladders were fixed to the walls of what was a very large, very long, cylinder running through most of the ship's decks—which were about a hundred in total, many more than Calvin was used to. He had to be careful climbing one-handedly, while also holding a pistol. Above him, his crew was already shuffling onto the higher deck and, presumably, taking up a defensive position.

About halfway to his destination, he craned his neck to see two Rotham crewmembers on the ladders on the opposite side, several decks above. They had energy pistols and opened fire on his crew.

Calvin aimed his handgun with one hand, keeping his other firmly glued to the ladder and returned fire. He was a decent shot with a pistol, but one-handed while dangling made it hard to steady his aim, and as brass jacket after brass jacket ejected, falling out of sight, he couldn't hit his mark. But he did get their attention.

A firefight ensued.

His enemies had even more trouble being accurate than he did, since they weren't trained soldiers; their weapons burned marks all over the place. Not even singing his hair.

He took a moment to steady a more careful aim, certain he'd lined up the iron sights perfectly. But his shot ricocheted off the bulkhead uselessly with a spark and a ping. His enemy's return fire was even farther off mark. Or so he thought... until he realized they'd switched targets.

Just as the Nighthawk crew members directly above him were reaching their destination, they came under fire again from the two Rotham. In the chaos, a beam clipped Monte's good arm and he lost his already weak grip on the ladder. He slipped off the railing and plummeted, yelling all the way down. Calvin watched, horror struck, as his friend fell fifty decks to his death.

Seeing it... he felt his own grip weaken for a moment as hot white mindless wrath consumed him. Raging inside him! But he forced himself to keep control, knowing that heightened emotions would only hinder him, cause him to lose concentration, and right now he had to be objective. Compartmentalize. Mourn tomorrow. Focus today. It wasn't easy, but he kept his cool and stayed logical, made possible by years of training.

He climbed a little higher and fired again. His first two shots missed but a third hit one of the Rotham in the chest. The alien's grip slackened and he,

like Monte, slipped off the ladders and plunged to his death. But he did not scream. Simply stared up with empty eyes until he was gone.

The second Rotham started scrambling higher up the ladder. Calvin wasn't about to let him escape. He took careful aim and fired—a narrow miss. “*Damn!*” He muttered, realizing his pistol’s slide had stuck back.

A silenced carbine whined from below. The Rotham's head exploded and his corpse flew off like a ragdoll.

"Move it, Calvin," Pellew shouted from below.

"Nice shot," was all Calvin could say. He avoided looking down knowing that, despite his concentrated effort not to, it would be too easy to think of Monte and let his emotions get the best of him. They burned, wanting to be set free. But he remained objective. Focused now on how everyone above him had already reached their destination deck.

"Do you have any more rounds for this handgun?" asked Calvin.

"Yeah I have another clip," said Pellew, now at his side. He passed it over and Calvin awkwardly reloaded the gun while he ascended.

They reached the deck together and saw the small army of crew and soldiers in a defensive posture. They'd cleared the area and were watching the adjoining halls. Exchanging sporadic fire with hostiles out of sight.

The remnants of a firefight were clear. The ground was blood-soaked with two dead bodies, both human. One a medic and the other an engineer. Conversations he'd had with them in the past flashed through his mind. He couldn't help but think of how their futures were completely erased now. Both had been young, like he was. But, like Monte's death, he forced it from his mind. They were casualties. That happened in war. He couldn't let himself get distracted.

"We have to keep moving," said Calvin.

After consulting with Alex, their Rotham *friend*, who'd managed to keep up and stick with them, they had a better idea of the location of the secondary bridge. Pellew split the group into two and sent them along different routes.

"We shouldn't split up," said Summers.

"In these narrow hallways numbers are a liability," Pellew waved his men forward. "We're just a bigger target that's easier to trap, and our angles of attack are more limited. We crowd each other out; we're much better covering more angles and more ground."

She didn't argue further and they moved, quickly as they could. Those with weapons took the lead—a gamble that they wouldn't be taken from behind. As he ran, Calvin remembered to pull back the slide of his handgun just as they reached a major intersection.

There was a large firefight again as the enemy, already placed around the corner, attacked. Pinning Calvin and his people back. They couldn't cross the

intersection without sustaining heavy losses, but they had to get across somehow. They all looked to Calvin and Pellew for solutions.

"How many?"

"Ten or more. All armed soldiers."

"We can't just run past them?"

"No. It'd be a bloodbath."

"We can't wait here either, their reinforcements could take us from the rear."

Calvin looked to Pellew whose only answer was to stay in cover and wait for their other group to take the enemy from behind.

Calvin did as ordered, but moved to the back of the group to keep his eyes on the path behind them. The handgun wasn't a very effective weapon at a distance, as he'd proven, and he only had one magazine, but figured it was better than nothing. If the enemy did come from behind he could warn the others, try to resist, and if they were overwhelmed it was best to die quickly.

Several seconds passed, maybe a minute, maybe two. Calvin couldn't be sure. All he knew was that he could hear his heart pounding in his ears while nothing seemed to be happening. He dared a quick glance back to see Pellew facing opposite him, crouched against the corner, ready to blast anyone who came around.

It was almost too much to take. The silence. The tension. Knowing that the longer they waited the more likely it was they'd be flanked. Their enemy had already reported to the other hostile detachments via radio, Calvin was sure. It was only a matter of time. He and his crew would have to do *something*. Double back? Maybe try to find another way around? They couldn't just storm forward, Pellew was right about that. They'd be mown down.

And then he heard it. The popping of automatic fire from around the corner. A Human submachine-gun. Joined quickly by the whine of Rotham weapons.

After giving it just a second, long enough for their enemies to change their focus from this group to the other, Pellew ordered his soldiers to move around the corner with him and go prone immediately.

One was killed in the effort, Calvin winced to see him, face black, uniform on fire. The rest were able to engage the enemy.

The firefight lasted only a few more seconds before Pellew shouted the all clear and Calvin and the others moved forward. Calvin split from them and ran to Pellew, who stood amidst a pile of corpses. Mostly Rotham. But a few humans too. Calvin's group had only taken the one loss. But he counted three bodies among the other human group—which had come to their rescue.

One was a Special Forces soldier he didn't recognize. The other two were crew. A man, face down, and a woman who was too scorched to recognize. Gruesome enough to set off the gag reflex. But he remained strong.

"How many?" asked Calvin, now helping Pellew scoop up and distribute the leftover weapons as quickly as possible.

"Ten Rotham, no survivors."

"And us?"

"Four deaths, one wounded."

Calvin looked up to see an injured crew member being patched up by a field medic. His head was obscured by bandages and his limbs were weak, like jelly. His uniform was torn open at the chest revealing a deep wound and some serious third degree burns. He looked up and made eye contact with Calvin. It was Vincent Rose.

Rose's anguish was obvious but, somehow, in his immense suffering, he seemed distant. Like his mind was no longer there. When he looked at Calvin his eyes sharpened for an instant, as if to say something, but then they were empty. And his body slumped like a ragdoll.

The medic confirmed he was dead. And Calvin stared at him. It seemed so surreal. Monte, Rose, probably the Major, and too many others. Just like being on the Trinity all over again. Except, instead of seeing acquaintances cut down, these were people he'd known much better. Well enough to understand that Rose's death widowed a young, sweet wife, and the happiest little girl Calvin had ever met. Someone so young shouldn't have her life marred in tragedy so early. He felt himself start to tremble but, once more, his training took over and he forced himself to be calm. He would mourn Rose, Monte, and the others properly, he promised himself, but not now. Now he had to be a leader.

"Let's move!"

They made it the rest of the way without trouble. A few Rotham technicians and crew were around, but they scattered as the humans' footsteps thundered closer. Pellew forbade anyone from shooting anyone unarmed. Not because he was a peace-loving person, he wasn't, but rather because it was a waste of ammo. The Rotham weapons were especially taxed, many of the energy cells nearly exhausted. And the human weapons were all on their last magazines. Pellew and Summers hadn't been able to smuggle too many clips into the cargo container with them.

And then they were there. Standing before a large grey, side-sliding door. It was locked but Shen and another engineer were able to cut into the control panel and brute force it into opening while the rest watched vigilantly for Rotham soldiers.

"Okay we're in," said Shen as the door started sliding.

"Do you think they set up defenses in engineering instead of here?" asked Sarah.

"I sure hope so," Pellew replied. "Because if they did set up here, we're all dead. But no time for worrying about that now." He squared his shoulders, weapon at the ready, and ordered his soldiers into assault formation. And, like shock troopers, they stormed into the auxiliary bridge, followed by a slew of armed crewmembers, including Calvin.

The first ten seconds were pure chaos, weapons-fire erupted from all directions. Calvin and the others moved to any kind of cover they could find—he crouched behind a set of stairs. Those without cover went prone and tried to make themselves as small as possible, shooting at everyone and anything hostile while trying to ascertain where all the enemies were.

This bridge was large, much larger than the bridge of the Nighthawk—which didn't even have an auxiliary bridge. And tucked away along the rim of the mostly-round room was a platform with several controllers. The enemy had the high ground.

Behind everything was a large window that made up the far wall, hugging the lip of the platform. Calvin looked it over thoroughly, popping his head up from cover for seconds at a time, trying to find a good shot. When he saw an enemy's head appear, he pointed and squeezed the trigger. A direct hit. The Rotham's mess of a face fell back behind cover. Dead as dead. Calvin felt no remorse.

At first the humans took the greater casualties but in very little time Special Forces swept in and captured the room through superior expertise. Before long, they'd killed off all resistance and combed the room for hidden enemies.

Pellew authorized deadly force against the unarmed Rotham crewmen who'd survived the firefight. He said they were in no position to take prisoners and couldn't risk sending them outside to report that the auxiliary bridge had fallen. And now that the humans had obtained more weapons, it wasn't such a waste of ammo. Not everyone was comfortable with this kind of brutality, even in a state of war, but no one objected.

Calvin watched them die swiftly, execution-style, their wide eyes seemed almost too stunned to be afraid. He looked at Alex, their Rotham tag-along, expecting him to object to this treatment but he didn't. He remained as silent as ever, as silent as Calvin was, but his crooked face seemed almost pleased at the grim business that made Calvin uneasy to watch. Apparently he didn't value the lives of his own people.

Next, Pellew ordered his men to barricade the room and raise defenses. Overturn desks, make chairs into obstacles, use anything and everything available. Calvin helped two other crew members drag the dead into a corner

and situate the wounded into a more comfortable position against the far wall.

In total, they'd lost three more and an equal number were wounded. Among the injured was Shen, who couldn't keep back a quiet howling, his shoulder was black where his uniform had been burned. One of the medics was tending to him, looking over the injury while Shen's good arm was trying to scratch away the burned part of the uniform. The medic was engaged in stopping him with one hand and putting a loose sterile cloth around the affected area with his other. Like those in the corridors, the medkits on the bridge had been pilfered immediately.

The medic noticed Calvin standing over them and looked up to say "he'll live." Then moved on to the next of the injured.

Calvin looked at Shen. "You okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine," Shen lied through gritted teeth, eyes watering.

"Hang in there," said Calvin. "We'll get out of this yet. Just keep it together. And remember, the *Andromeda* has its own burn ward."

Shen nodded trying to force a smile.

"And Shen," said Calvin, reluctant to disturb a man in pain. "Since we *are* on the auxiliary bridge, is there anything we can do from here to sabotage the ship? Make it less able to fight the *Andromeda*. Lower its shields? Drain its power? Jam its firing systems? Anything that might possible make this ship easier to subdue?"

Shen looked up. "I don't know, maybe." He struggled as if to get up but Calvin stopped him.

"No, no, you stay put. Just tell me and the engineers what to do." Some of the engineers had overheard him and Calvin waved them over.

"Okay," said Shen. "Go over to the main panels, they're on the platform above." He proceeded to coach them through several tactics to compromise the ship's systems. They had some difficulty, as the controls had few instructions—and the existing instructions were in *Rotham*. Alex assisted them and Calvin was again surprised by his willingness to work against his own people.

They shifted power levels and followed several other of Shen's ideas, who seemed unable to really concentrate. But, in the end, they had very little success. The main bridge locked them out of the computer systems. And, if nothing else, they only confirmed their whereabouts.

"It was worth a try," said Calvin, not really sure that it was.

While he and the others had been busy, Pellew had finished positioning everyone in their most tactically ideal places and set up all the defenses he could.

By scooping up the weapons from the dead, they now had enough to arm everyone who wasn't injured. They'd also managed to short out the door

so the control system on the outside wouldn't be able to force it open, like they had. The downside was that they couldn't open the door either.

"The Fifth Fleet better come fast," said Pellew. "Because this isn't going to hold off a few hundred Teldari for long."

In no time they heard banging against the door. Followed by a muffled drilling.

"Why does this seem so damn familiar?" asked Miles, standing next to Calvin. A hot white spark could be seen where the enemy was carving into the door with a laser drill. Calvin's muscles tightened and he steadied his handgun.

"Hey, look everybody," shouted Sarah from behind. She—like Calvin, Miles, and several other crew members—was on the raised platform. The Special Forces soldiers did not look to see what she was excited about. They kept a disciplined watch on the door, which threatened to burst at any moment. But everyone else turned.

Calvin looked and saw nothing. Sarah stood in front of the great wide window, which was black and empty.

"What?"

"Look!" She pointed, sounding annoyed.

Calvin moved closer.

"See them?" asked Sarah.

And then, in the blanket of darkness, Calvin caught a glimpse of phantom grey ships. With their identifier lights turned off, they blended in almost completely with the black space.

"It's the Andromeda!" Sarah announced and a cheer filled the bridge. Calvin too spotted the great white ship in the center, as lights from the Rotham ship bounced off of it.

"Use the projector display," said Shen from the ground, still hunched over.

"Yeah, turn it on," said Calvin to the nearest engineer, since he had no idea how. The woman complied and before long a huge three dimensional projection of the system appeared, filling the center of the auxiliary bridge where all could see. The engineer focused it on the Andromeda and all surrounding ships.

The vessels moved fast, in an attack posture, with two destroyers in the lead, then the Andromeda, two more destroyers at its sides, and three battleships at the rear. They closed in on the alien squadron, which couldn't be entirely seen from this view, but looked to be around four heavy warships and two smaller ones, along with a swarm of fighters barely more than specks.

"No chance, they have no chance!" Miles' voice boomed. "The aliens are roasted. Go Empire. Hell yeah! Fifth Fleet!"

The alien squadron moved to a defensive posture, ready to engage the incoming Imperial ships. Calvin was worried that the aliens would make a run for it, dragging them along to who knows where, but that didn't seem to be their intention. Which, aside from making him grateful, made him curious.

"Wow these guys are stupid," said Miles, managing to laugh. "They don't have a chance."

Calvin frowned. He thought the alien's confidence in taking the Fifth Fleet head on was a bit bold, even for them. Did they have a kind of weapon no one expected? One that might be a match for the Imperial Fleet? Unlikely. But then again, they had managed to see through the Nighthawk's stealth capabilities... perhaps this battle wasn't as decided as Miles claimed.

There was silence as the Fleets converged on each other and then, before they were in range to attack each other with any kind of major firepower, the darkness lit up.

"What the hell?" asked Miles. Calvin and the others watched as the Fifth Fleet's rearguard opened fire on its leading ships.

It was absurd, he couldn't believe it. But the display showed clearly that Human ships were attacking other Human ships, throwing the whole formation into disarray.

"Oh my god..." Sarah's voice trailed off.

Within seconds, two of the human destroyers disappeared. Calvin could see debris breaking up outside the window.

The Human ships were now in a panic, with the remaining destroyers completely abandoning formation—obviously unsure who was an enemy and who wasn't. The battleships now fired on the Andromeda, which turned to attack them broadside. Destroying one battleship and crippling another in no time. Able to use all batteries at that range, its unparalleled firepower ripped through the warships' armor and bypassed their advanced shields.

The alien ships had now reached attack range and opened fire on the leading Human ships. The destroyers regrouped to hold them off, providing cover for the Andromeda as it fought the traitorous battleships, taking a severe beating itself.

Everyone who could, watched breathlessly as the Fifth Fleet incinerated itself. The alien ships took no losses as they pulverized the Human destroyers, while the Andromeda became scarred and battered, and part of its hull broke off just as it finished wiping out the last Human battleship. Leaving it alone as the sole Human ship in the system, against several alien ships in mostly-perfect condition.

The Andromeda changed direction and, while being pounded by alien fire, swiftly jumped away into altered space. The Polarian ship bolted after it, it too vanishing into altered space. Leaving the Nighthawk's crew alone once



more. Trapped on a Rotham ship, in the middle of a Rotham squadron. Hopes blown out like candles in a storm.

"Why...?"

"I don't believe it..."

"Did our ships fire on our destroyers...?"

Perhaps no one was more shocked and heartbroken than Summers. She stared forlorn out the window and eventually lowered her head. And for the first time, Calvin saw no fire inside her. She was crushed. Like someone who'd just witnessed everything she'd ever believed in vanish like a midday shadow. Her face was pale as a corpse's. And she slouched, barely able to stand. He was filled with pity seeing her.

And then inevitability sank in. They all looked to him for answers, but he had none.

"What do we do now?" someone asked. He felt only barely aware it was Sarah. And made no response.

"What's our next move?" someone else asked.

The banging and drilling was louder than ever now. And as Calvin looked at the door, he saw it was about to come apart. A gateway opening to oblivion.

"Calvin?"

"They're almost through!"

"How do we get out of this one, Cal?" Miles asked from directly to his left.

"We... don't," Calvin whispered. Then, a bit stronger, "this is our final stand." He raised his weapon, and the others did the same.

"I never thought I'd die on an alien ship," said Miles. "That's why I didn't join the damned marines."

Pellew gave his final orders to his men, making doubly sure they were ready and optimally positioned. Then, just as they heard the Rotham drill finish breaking through, he glanced up at Calvin and nodded. As if to say "it's been an honor, sir."

Calvin returned the nod. Then took aim.

## Chapter 30

The instant the door was blown aside, a storm of enemy fire surged into the room. Behind the flashes and the smoke, it was impossible to see how many they were up against.

A wave of five Rotham shock troopers charged in and were cut down instantly. The covering fire from their end was worthless against Pellew's superiorly positioned troops. The second shock wave also failed. They died trying to clear away the mess of chairs and obstacles Pellew had placed, and their bodies joined the debris. Holding that chokepoint was something the humans could manage for awhile. But both Calvin and Pellew knew their weapons would soon be exhausted. And when they tried to pick up more, off of the new Rotham dead, they'd be the ones getting cut down.

And since they had the men to spare, wave after wave of Rotham soldiers charged into the room only to die violently. They managed a few lucky shots and hit token humans here and there; it was uncertain who was dead and who was just wounded. The heat of battle kept Calvin focused on the chokepoint.

He unloaded on two Rotham, killing one, injuring the other. His slide stuck back and he knew he was out of ammo, he rolled into cover and waited. Marshaling his courage to slip out of cover and try to retrieve a new weapon. Knowing that death came swiftly for him, whether he made the attempt or not.

It was from this position, facing the window, that he saw the planet moving and he knew the ship was repositioning. Was the alien squadron leaving the system?

And then the noise of fighting died down. He dared to poke his head up and see the smoky doorway starting to clear. Below him, the Special Forces soldiers and several crewmen were tense and ready for the next wave. But it didn't come. Had the Rotham decided they were losing too many men with their direct assault tactic?

"What are those lizards waiting for?" asked Miles.

"Do you think they'll gas us through the vents?" asked Sarah.

"Maybe they want us alive?" a soldier suggested.

The lights went dark and Calvin assumed power had been cut to them. The display flickered and died and several other systems seemed to be failing. "They're going to wait us out," said Calvin.

A deep rumble filled the ship. And several other consoles went dead. Calvin looked back at the window and saw the lights of exchanging starship

fire. It got brighter and closer. Piercing the darkness for brief moments, again and again, like ghostly flashes.

And, in the distance, moving ever closer, was the grim, steel face of the Harbinger. Its weapons ablaze, shredding the nearest Rotham ship like it was made of paper—the only ship standing between it and the one holding them prisoner.

Calvin lost sight of it as the ship they were on turned, trying to maneuver away from the Harbinger. But Calvin felt a flicker of hope return and he shouted.

"The Harbinger, I saw the Harbinger!"

"What?"

"It's attacking the Rotham ships!"

An engineer ran over to the nearest working panel—there weren't many systems still online. But he managed to confirm it. "The Harbinger is here. Along with three other Human ships—including the Liberty Sun."

They all cheered once more.

"Yes! Yes! I knew it! I knew it!" said Miles. "Eat death you bastards!" he screamed at the window as another Rotham ship was decimated.

"I don't believe it," Summers whispered.

"Maybe he's been misunderstood," said Calvin.

She didn't look up. "He has a lot to answer for."

"Yes," agreed Calvin. "But not right now."

"Oh look at that!" said Sarah.

They could see small rockets and larger projectiles penetrate their ship's shield and slam into the hull. Wiping out its engine before it could jump from the system.

"Pulsar torpedoes," said Miles. "They want to disable us."

The Harbinger attacked them broadside and as they exchanged fire, it was clear the Rotham ship was outmatched. A hailstorm of projectiles swept toward them like a crushing tidal wave. Many of them were intercepted by missiles, energy beams, and basic gunfire. But most weren't. And for each torpedo that failed to hit its mark it seemed two more were fired. Piercing the screen of defenses and scoring hits on the Rotham ship's critical areas.

In no time, the vessel was dead in space. At that point, the Harbinger changed angle and disappeared from view out the window.

"How are things down there, Pellew?" Calvin yelled down.

"All clear so far," he said. "Haven't seen another wave yet."

"Why aren't they attacking us?" asked Miles.

"I think," ventured Pellew, "the soldiers have been moved elsewhere to prepare for an invasion."

Shen hopped up then and wobbled up the ramp to the raised platform. The field medic moved to stop him but Shen just glared at the medic until the man moved aside.

Unopposed, Shen went to the nearest functioning console and, after using it for a few seconds, said, "it's true. The Harbinger has docked with this ship and cut and sealed several openings. They've begun a boarding operation."

"They must have detected our beacon," said Summers.

"It's not all good news," said Shen.

"*What?*"

"The auto-destruct was just enabled."

"How much time do we have?"

"Several minutes," said Shen. "It takes awhile to heat up the central core to where it can explode. They don't have enough weapons left to simply detonate them and wipe out the ship."

"Several minutes is still not much time," said Calvin. He looked to Pellew who nodded. They couldn't stay here.

"Self-destruct... damn the masochistic moron who invented that dumbass feature," said Miles, followed by a string of progressively stronger profanities.

"Shen, can you find out where the closest boarding point is that the Harbinger's soldiers have breached?"

"Yeah," he typed away. "Two decks above us, about mid-starboard."

While Pellew and his men cleared the outside, Calvin and Summers argued.

"Let's go help out the Harbinger's men," said Calvin.

"No," said Summers. "The Nighthawk is closer."

"They're almost equally close," said Shen. "But she's right. Maybe we can save the ship.."

"Maybe..." said Calvin. He wanted to save his ship, more than almost anything, but he was worried the launch bay would be sealed off and the Nighthawk couldn't blow its way out fast enough to fly away. Not to mention, if the tractor beam system were somehow still online, they might not be able to escape at all.

"We've got to decide now!" said Shen.

He was right, Calvin knew he was right. "All right, let's go for the Nighthawk," he said. Hating that the situation wasn't clearer. "It damn well better be flyable still." He imagined the Rotham data-mining the hard drives and tearing out systems to find every secret the Nighthawk had to offer. Hopefully they hadn't had enough time to do lasting damage.

They left, carrying their wounded. Leaving their dead. Moving as fast as they possibly could.

And though they couldn't feel it, they could hear the ship shaking. Booming sounds echoed along the halls, along with the screeching of warping, twisting metal. Some of the bulkheads were burning hot, deeply saturated with fiery red. And all around the temperature seemed to have increased several degrees. "What are they doing to their poor ship?" asked Sarah.

They hadn't gone far when a squad of heavily armed Rotham soldiers spotted them and opened fire. They had little choice but to drop and shoot back, trying to keep moving on their hands and knees in the other direction.

Pellew ordered everyone to stay low while he talked to Alex—who still seemed cooperative—about a separate path, and Calvin wondered if it wouldn't be best to just storm the enemy and keep moving forward. Time was a serious issue. Their losses would be heavy, and regrettable, but better that some survived than none.

A rocket-propelled-grenade soared through the air and exploded into a bulkhead nearby, sending shrapnel shooting everywhere. A thin piece grazed Calvin's arm, cutting him lightly. And his ears rang from the report. Everyone broke into a panic and began standing up. The first who did was cut down by energy fire.

"Covering fire!" Pellew yelled, while waving for everyone to run down a side hallway. He and his soldiers rose to their knees and unleashed a barrage of thundering gunfire back at the enemy, trying to force them into a more limited position.

Calvin scrambled to his feet and heard the faint words "help, help," barely coherent, and almost completely lost under the noise of weapons fire. He spun to see a soldier, one of the field medics, sprawled on the ground, writhing in agony, struggling to get to his feet. Several large pieces of shrapnel were stabbed into his shoulder, stomach, and leg.

While others scurried all around, Calvin double-backed and ran to the wounded soldier. As gently as possible, but hastily, he helped him to his feet and put his arm around his shoulder. And together, like an awkward three-legged animal, they ambled forward. Trying to escape the raging firefight, which was quickly ending as Pellew and his men retreated.

The ship creaked and rumbled and Calvin looked up to see several cracks and burn marks in the ceiling and bulkheads. He and the wounded man were falling behind, and their backs would soon be exposed to the enemy, who would certainly come around the corner soon.

"Wait up!" Calvin yelled ahead. Pellew turned and, catching sight of him, sprinted back to help. But, before he could close the distance, they heard an explosion and saw a brilliant flash.

The artificial gravity gave out for an instant and Calvin felt himself fly free, blown to the side as a small explosion ripped apart the wall next to him.

Debris crashed into his side, bruising his ribs. The soldier he was helping was thrown the opposite way.

Calvin landed hard on his back a second later, when the backup gravity system came online. Despite the pain, he got back to his feet resiliently. Wiping dust from his stinging eyes and face. When the haze cleared, he found himself on the wrong side of a debris pile where a major bulkhead had collapsed, revealing a mountain of metal, fireproofing insulation, and electrical wiring that had started a small fire—which ate the precious oxygen. A human arm stuck out of the pile, its owner certainly crushed. Calvin dug it out just enough to confirm the man was dead.

"Calvin!" He heard the muffled shout through a small hole in the shifted debris pile.

"Yeah I'm here," he replied. He tried to find a way through but most of the debris was too heavy to move and there was no hole large enough for his body to get through.

"You'll have to go around," said Pellew from the other side. "I can't get to you." Calvin could barely hear him.

"Okay," said Calvin. "Go on without me."

Then he heard Miles. "I'm coming."

"No!" said Calvin. "Just *go*. I'll find another way. Pellew, you and Summers have command. Now go!"

With that, Calvin about-faced and ran.

He had no concept of the ship's layout and, knowing that between a squad of enemy soldiers and a mountain of debris, the only ways back to the lower ladders were impassible, he'd have to come up with something else. His intuition told him there would be a set of emergency ladders on the opposite side of the deck. Most ships had similar features. It was worth a try.

His heart raced and footsteps thundered, and somehow he managed to ignore the mind-shattering pain that shot through his body.

He didn't dare pass the corner where the Rotham squad had been.

Instead, he went around, trying to cut corners wherever he could.

Defenseless against whatever he ran into. Luckily, the deck seemed to have been evacuated and he saw no one.

It turned out his intuition had been right, there was an emergency ladder hatch like he'd thought. But, after unsealing it, he realized it was damaged. The section leading down was crushed by a collapsed bulkhead making the only passable direction upwards—away from the Nighthawk.

So, without another thought, he scrambled up, now hoping to meet up with the Harbinger's soldiers. Trying not to assess his chances of failure. At least death would be swift.

"Two decks above us about mid-starboard," he remembered Shen's words. At two decks he stopped climbing and ran.

It looked like a crew-quarters deck, except on fire. The bulkheads and floors wouldn't burn, but several of the cheap doors were ablaze along with bodies—mostly Rotham, which littered the floors in droves. He began coughing immediately, the life support system wasn't online to combat the smoke, and he tried to stay low as he continued forward. On the distant side of the corridor he saw muzzle and energy flashes and the remains of a Rotham contingent in full retreat as camouflage-clad human marines swarmed the deck.

He didn't have to go far before he ran into a marine master sergeant.

"Friend," said Calvin. "Human."

"Who are you?" The soldier lowered his weapon once he spotted Calvin's somewhat tattered black-and-silver uniform.

"Calvin Cross," said Calvin.

"Where's your crew?"

"They're not coming. And this ship is about to blow. Autodestruct is active."

The master sergeant spoke into his radio and his superiors instructed him to escort Calvin back and begin a full retreat onto the Harbinger. They began their speedy withdrawal.

Calvin was constantly surrounded by dozens of soldiers as he ran for what he now recognized to be a gaping hole in the most distant bulkhead; an attack jetway had been crudely sealed to the breach to maintain air pressure. They practically dragged him inside and, once they'd all come aboard, the master sergeant sealed an emergency hatch and cut the jetway loose. Through a small window, Calvin watched the jetway tumble away into open space as they departed, putting some distance between them and the Rotham ship. His view was limited, but he kept searching for a glimpse of the little black Nighthawk flying away. But never saw it.

"This is going to be close," the master sergeant said.

Calvin held his breath, waiting for the Rotham ship to rip itself apart in a spectacular display of fireworks. But, when it finally did happen, it was over practically before it began. One moment a drifting crippled warship and the next a rotting black husk, pieces thrown thousands of kilometers apart. Many of which must have crashed against the Harbinger's hull.

When they all realized they were still alive, Calvin and those around him let out a cheer. He felt himself relax a little. The pain in his ribs returned to full strength, as if just given permission. And only then did he fully realize...

*He was on the Harbinger.*

The master sergeant grabbed Calvin by the shoulder and looked him squarely in the eyes. "Come with me."

"Where are we going?"

"To the bridge. The Captain wants to see you."

# Chapter 31

The Harbinger seemed like a massive, never-ending labyrinth of corridors and elevators.

Calvin, closely escorted by two marines—and a medic who had hastily patched Calvin's light flesh wound—walked through the endless maze of grey. They passed dozens of busy personnel as they went. Most were occupied with whatever tasks they'd been given, but few were too busy to pause and give Calvin a curious look. He couldn't help but wonder, as he saw their curious faces, if they knew even less about the situation than he did.

But then he remembered these were people who'd helped the Harbinger illegally escape with a condemned military prisoner. They had to know something. Either that or Raidan was truly a master of manipulation. It was hard to be completely sure of anything.

Somehow the steel-grey everything of the Harbinger felt much more bleak than the Nighthawk, which was mostly black inside and out. And Calvin wasn't sure if it was because he was a stranger here, and possibly a prisoner, or if it was for some other reason. The grim faces? The large number of soldiers? The vacant blankness on every wall? Maybe some combination of these factors. Perhaps the Harbinger was *designed* to look and feel grim, deadly, and ruthless. If so, it worked perfectly. Calvin couldn't suppress a chill as he walked, stomach twisting in knots, feeling cool air pour from the vents. *This is it. The Harbinger. The elusive Raidan. Everything.*

A part of Calvin's mind wanted to be afraid, to be alert and on his guard. But a much louder part was glad to be there. Rescued from the Rotham ship. Believing that, once and for all, he'd finally find the answers to his questions.

At long last the elevator came to a halt and Calvin guessed the entire journey had taken the better part of fifteen minutes. The door slid open, revealing a very large, very rectangular bridge. Lights from dozens of computer screens glowed, brightening the otherwise dark room, and a view of the Liberty Sun's port side blocked out most of the black sky. The stars themselves were lost in the Liberty Sun's bright lights shining through the windows. In front of them were two silhouetted persons. Calvin guessed one was Raidan.

"This way, Lieutenant Commander," one of Calvin's escorts said as he guided Calvin across the long stretch of path toward the silhouetted figures. As they crossed, Calvin felt in awe of the bridge's size. It felt as large as an entire deck of the Nighthawk, and it was staffed by more than twenty



officers attending to seemingly countless stations, whose functions he could only guess at.

For a moment he wondered what it would be like to be in command, and responsible for, such a large crew, and whether or not he would like it. And, for the second time, he wondered how in this crazy, crazy universe Raidan had managed to win the loyalty of all these people.

They neared the two silhouetted figures and Calvin could hear them talking to each other. Most of their words were lost to the noise of the bridge's staff, and junior commanders relaying orders to minor divisions throughout the ship. When Calvin's presence was noticed, the duo hushed their conversation and turned to face him. In the dimness, Calvin could more-or-less make out the features of Raidan's face.

"Ah that must be Mister Cross," said Raidan. "Welcome to my ship. You have no idea how glad I am to see you."

"The feeling is mutual," said Calvin. He wasn't sure what Raidan hoped to get out of him, but guessed the rogue captain wasn't the type to do something for free.

"Do you always keep your bridge this dark?" asked Calvin.

Raidan chuckled. "No, not always. But when I'm flying no colors I keep all decks with windows as dark as possible, anything that makes us that much harder to see is an advantage."

Calvin wondered if it was actually effective. Having the luxury of his advanced stealth system, he'd never had to worry about internal lights giving him away.

"But I think we're quite alone now, wouldn't you say so, Mister Ivanov?" asked Raidan.

"There's a lot of debris on the scopes, but nothing that could hide a ship. We're safe for now."

"All right then, bring up the main lights."

In a snap, the bridge filled with light from all angles. One light caught Calvin directly in the eyes, forcing him to squint. When he opened his eyes fully again he saw Raidan more clearly, looking neither happy nor unhappy, and the mysterious person standing next to him, wearing a commander's uniform, was none other than Tristan.

"*You—?*" asked Calvin, unsure what to think. Immediately his mind struggled to connect the dots. Tristan had been stranded in space, then he was taken aboard the Nighthawk—and he got loose, then transferred to the port authority on Aleator, then he'd shown up to help Calvin fight off his attackers on Aleator One, and now... he was here.

"Surprised to see me?" Tristan asked with a cocked eyebrow.

"Yes," said Calvin, he turned to Raidan, "what is *he* doing here?"

Raidan made a subtle grin. "I expect you have many questions," said Raidan. "But first we need to set course for Gemini and jump as soon as possible."

Calvin saw a piece of debris float past the window and his thoughts shifted. "Wait."

Raidan looked curious.

"What about the Nighthawk? Have you seen it? Did it escape the Rotham ship?" Calvin almost didn't want to know the answer. Any number of things could have prevented the Nighthawk from escaping in time. And, unlike the mighty Harbinger, it couldn't withstand a powerful shockwave or impacts with debris. "Did my ship survive?" he asked, keeping his voice calm even though his heart thundered.

"See for yourself," said Raidan, pointing at the window. "Fifty degrees starboard." And, much more lithely than Calvin would have expected, the Harbinger rotated until a small glossy black ship was in view. Only visible because of its white and blue identifier lights. *Of course Summers would turn those on, it's the law.*

Seeing the ship, in one piece, filled him with relief. And his breathing became easier. "I'm glad to see they're all right..." he said, almost laughing with relief, then he paused. "They must think I'm dead. Contact my ship and inform them I'm alive and aboard." He realized the last part sounded like a command so he added, "please."

"We've already contacted your ship," said Raidan. "That's why they're holding position. But it might mean a lot to hear your voice. If you'd like, we can patch you through a direct channel."

"I would like that."

"But, Calvin," Raidan paused, "when we go to Gemini, we *all* go together."

Calvin wasn't sure what to think of that.

"It is not safe here, trust me," added Raidan.

"What's at Gemini?" Calvin had nowhere else to go. He was a criminal now, and Raidan was his best chance at getting to the bottom of everything. But, on the other hand... Gemini was across the border into Polarian space.

"You'll just have to trust me; it's not safe here," said Raidan again, cautiously side-stepping the question.

"I see," said Calvin. "In that case, *who* is at Gemini?" he pressed him.

"I promise I will tell you what I can," said Raidan. "But we don't have time for that before we go. We have to leave at once." He was deadly serious.

"All right," said Calvin, not sure what other good options he had—if any. "I'll tell my ship to follow your flotilla to Gemini."

"Excellent," said Raidan.

"But I want immediate access to your medical facilities, and the transfer of all my injured personnel."

"Agreed," said Raidan and he ordered his officers to assist Calvin.

They ushered him over to one of the comm stations and he put on the headset while the comms officer hailed the ship. Calvin heard a beep and the comms officer gave him a thumbs up; the Nighthawk had accepted the connection.

"Hello," said Calvin, not really sure what was technically the proper thing to say.

"*Calvin?*" It was Sarah's voice and, despite her usual calmness, she shrieked excitedly and yelled in the background to the rest of the bridge. Calvin thought he heard Miles' deep voice in the ambience, but wasn't sure over the headset.

"Yeah, it's me," said Calvin. "I'm all right. I escaped the blast by coming aboard the Harbinger."

"I can't believe it..." said Sarah.

"What's your status?" asked Calvin. "Did everyone make it?"

Sarah's voice became sober. "Not everyone."

"I see," he wasn't ready to ask who didn't survive. "Do you have enough primary crew to operate the ship?"

"Affirmative. We can crew the ship. What are your orders?"

"Dock with the Harbinger to receive medical supplies and transfer our wounded; their medical officers are permitted aboard. Once that is complete, set course for Gemini, exact heading will be sent from the Harbinger. You're to consider it the flagship for the time being."

"Uh... yes, sir," said Sarah. She didn't hide her confusion well. And Calvin knew his crew was wondering if Calvin was giving these orders under duress, all he could do was hope Summers wouldn't countermand his orders and have the ship do something else. He tried to think of something to say, but knew nothing would convince her. Still... he had to try.

"And tell Commander Summers," said Calvin. He was going to try to pressure her but midsentence changed tactics, knowing a firm hand didn't work on her if she thought she out-ranked him, which she did. "Tell her... that I appreciate her efforts. And that all will be explained to her satisfaction once we arrive."

"*Okay...*" said Sarah, sounding even more confused, but she passed along the message exactly.

"Did she get it?"

"Message received," said Sarah.

"Good..." he paused. "Cross out."

The comms officer terminated the call.

"Summers Presley is on your ship?" Raidan asked as Calvin stood up.

"Yes," said Calvin, surprised at the incredulous look on Raidan's face. Somehow he'd always assumed Raidan knew this. After all, he seemed to know everything else.

"What a small Empire this really is..." he shook his head. "She's not still mad at me, is she?"

"I think she is."

"That's unfortunate," he sighed. "But I guess it can't be helped. She's fantastic. I'm sure you found her to be an exceptional officer."

Calvin hesitated. "Something like that."

Raidan chuckled then looked to his helmsman, "Mister Watson, once our docking operation is complete, get us underway."

"Yes, sir. Jump to eighty-five percent potential?"

"That'll do nicely," said Raidan then he turned to another officer. "Mister Mason, you have the deck." He looked back at Calvin. "Well then, shall we take this conversation to the privacy of my office?"

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Raidan's office was only slightly larger than Calvin's, and even more sparsely decorated.

The blank walls and dull carpet were clean and like-new, as were the basic amenities. Only Raidan's desk screamed for attention. It was large and made of a beautifully-lacquered cedar in the style of centuries long gone, and seemed profoundly out of place—certainly not warship standard. On its surface were a bottle of whiskey and an old-fashioned notebook with pens, there was no computer.

"Welcome to my home away from home," said Raidan as he took a seat behind his desk. Calvin sat opposite. Tristan, who had followed them in, remained standing by the door, which he closed and locked. Calvin wasn't comfortable with him being there, especially directly behind him, but knew it would only weaken his position to complain.

"Calvin," said Raidan. "It is very important that you tell me everything about the battle before we arrived. I want to know exactly what happened. Which ships attacked which, in what order, what weapons were used. I want to know it all."

Calvin was reluctant to give up what was probably the only useful card he had. Instead he asked a question of his own. "What happened after your ships arrived?" He hoped to glean useful information about Raidan's fleet and resources.

"We arrived. We took out as many Rotham ships as we could. But our priority was to disable the ship you were on and capture it. Because of that,

about half the squadron escaped. I have no idea where they're going to regroup."

"Did you take any losses?" asked Calvin.

"No. Some casualties and some damage, of course. A few fighters. But no capital losses."

Raidan didn't tell him how many ships he had. Calvin tried again. "You must have had quite a force to chase off the squadron."

Raidan eyed him cautiously, his words slow. "There are four of us here. The Harbinger, the Mary Gale, the Aurora and the Liberty Sun."

"They must be powerful ships."

Raidan's face betrayed no reaction. "I suppose."

"Where did they come from?"

"Private owners."

Calvin raised an eyebrow. "Private owners?"

"Yes."

"What about the Harbinger?"

"You know where that ship came from." Raidan cleared his throat. "Now tell me about the first part of the battle."

"My defense officer would be better than me at describing it. I will order him to answer all of your questions," Calvin paused. "Right after you answer all of mine."

He doubted his little information was a fair trade for Raidan's. But it was worth a try.

Raidan leaned back, tapping his fingers together. He was nearly double Calvin's age but still had a child-like glow in his eyes. "I might not be able to answer *all* of your questions," he said. "But I'll do what I can."

Calvin did not know where to begin. Being able to interview the subject of his investigation was a rare opportunity, but came with its own special considerations. For instance, the questions he asked would reveal what information he didn't have and what he was most interested in.

"Let's start at the beginning," said Calvin. "Why did you throw your life away to destroy a few commercial ships?"

Raidan looked amused. "Why do you think I did it?"

"I think you did it knowing your life was never really on the line. You knew you'd be set free," Calvin guessed, eyeing Raidan keenly. "Did you do it for the Harbinger?"

"Trade up, you mean?" Raidan leaned forward. "No. No. No. I preferred the Phoenix and still do. This is a beautiful ship, don't get me wrong, but the Phoenix..." his gaze became forlorn, "the Phoenix was *mine*."

"So then why?" asked Calvin. "I doubt you wanted to start a war."

"A war? No, a war's the last thing our delicate Empire needs. My motives go far deeper than that. Can't you see them?"

Calvin wasn't sure what to make of this game Raidan was playing. They both knew Calvin couldn't know Raidan's real motives unless he told him. Why the charade? *Maybe it's a test. He wants to know if I'm an asset before telling me more.*

All Calvin could think to do was continue playing the game. "I believe you sacrificed everything because you wanted to kill those Rotham ships. Not because of who they were, but what they were carrying."

Raidan nodded. "That's exactly right."

"So what *were* they carrying?" Calvin folded his arms. "What could possibly be worth giving up everything for?"

"They had Class One Cargo. A cargo worth dying for, if necessary," Raidan paused. "When I made the choice to strike, I did not know if I was signing my own death sentence or not. Because I didn't know if I *could* be rescued. I knew an effort would be made. I knew the plan and I knew the players. But nothing is ever really certain in games like this. Generals die, kingdoms fall, governments collapse. And all without a sound. The tendrils of the enemy go very deep. And if you cannot see him, you cannot be certain you've beaten him."

Calvin considered that for a moment, a very interesting response. Though perhaps a bit overly poetic. It showed that Raidan, at least, saw his actions as heroic.

"So what is Class One Cargo?"

"You know the old expression, seeing is believing?"

"Yes."

"Well, you'll have trouble believing what I'm going to tell you unless I show you." Raidan smiled mysteriously then ordered Tristan to "bring in the *special* guest."

While they waited for Tristan's return, Calvin speculated who this mysterious guest was and what link he or she had to the "Class One Cargo." Whatever *it* was.

The door opened, and Calvin swiveled his chair to see two heavily armed soldiers step in, followed by Tristan, who was forcibly escorting a man in handcuffs.

The prisoner's face couldn't be seen, since his head was bowed and his hair long, but he seemed middle-aged and rather thin. Hardly a match for an escort consisting of two stocky marines and an athletic werewolf.

"Show your face, coward," said Raidan. And Calvin watched the prisoner slowly raise his head and shake his hair out of his eyes to reveal *Raidan's face*.

Calvin did a double take, *What!? Another Raidan?* Aside from his longer hair and thinner physique, he looked in every way the same person.

"A twin," said Calvin.

"I have no siblings."

And Calvin knew from his investigation of Raidan that was true—or at least that's what had been recorded in all the databases referencing him.

"Cosmetic surgery?" Calvin guessed.

"We've ruled that out after thorough medical inspection."

"A clone?"

"Not possible," said Raidan. "First because it would be too impractical, since they would've had to take my DNA near the time when I was born—accelerated aging isn't the answer either, or else his age would only match mine for a brief window of time. Secondly, this imposter's DNA does not match mine. In fact, it's so profoundly different that he shouldn't look anything like me, and yet he does."

"Very strange," said Calvin. Now wondering which Raidan was the real Raidan.

"Perhaps he's a very close look-alike," said Calvin. But, even though it made the most sense, it didn't seem right. This Raidan copy seemed too perfect. The sameness was incredible. Identical imperfections and blemishes in all the same places, regardless of how minute.

"It's not just a random look-alike," said Raidan.

The imprisoned Raidan spoke up. "Don't believe him. I'm the *real* Raidan." He was silenced by a rap on the head from Tristan.

Calvin turned to face the original Raidan who was shaking his head.

"How do I know he *isn't* the real Raidan?" asked Calvin.

"Had this one been ready and deployed before The Organization got its hands on him, it might be much harder to tell. But as it is, this one was never really ready to be me. He doesn't know enough about me to actually replace me."

"Organization?"

"It's my amnesia!" the imprisoned Raidan said.

The original Raidan laughed. "I know my life backwards and forwards, I lived it. He doesn't have a clue. He doesn't know anything beyond my name, rank, and place of birth. When I went to Antiva and fought in that nineteen-day action during the Great War, he has no memory of that. He doesn't know what it was like."

"I do know. I do remember," the imprisoned Raidan said.

"I was never at Antiva," the original Raidan said. His eyes met Calvin's. "You see what I mean? He's desperate to get out of confinement and complete his mission, he'll say or do anything. But he isn't me. Not even close. Surely you must have studied my background enough, over the course of your investigation, to get a sense of who I am. Ask us anything, I'm sure you'll be satisfied."

Calvin had studied a lot, and it was true Raidan had never served a combat mission in Antiva. But what concerned Calvin was that his only facts,

everything he knew about Raidan, came from what was officially on record, and could have been modified to say anything. Not likely the case, but it was possible.

So, just to be sure. "You," he pointed to the imprisoned Raidan. "Name your primary crew on your last ship," he was certain the real Raidan would know his own crew, and though the question was basic enough both might know the answer, he figured it was a good starting point.

"I don't remember, you have to believe me!" the imprisoned Raidan said. "It was a head injury. I don't remember anything!"

*If only I had a q for every time I've heard a prisoner plea amnesia...*

Calvin turned to the original Raidan who still sat smugly behind his desk.

"My XO was Summers Presley. Impeccable posture, exquisite hair, and a captivating smile—which she rarely shows. Intelligent, competent, all-business, and completely dependable. My helmsman was Joshua Van Davin, dark hair, boyish smile, mid-thirties. Has a scar on his head from a childhood surgery—"

Calvin cut him off. "I've heard enough. I'm convinced." And he was convinced. There was still a small part of him that wondered if he was wrong, and there probably always would be, but given the circumstances, only a fool would see it the other way. There was a fine line between being a good investigator and a suspicious moron. Like so many people kept reminding him, sometimes a cigar really is just a cigar.

"You may take him away, you three," said Raidan, waving off Tristan and the others. They complied and left Calvin and Raidan alone once more.

"If I hadn't seen it for myself, I wouldn't believe it."

Raidan nodded. "I told you so. Impressive isn't it? However they did it. Wherever they found him. However they built him. Whatever they did, they got their hands on a very convincing looking version of me. And if the imposter had had more time, and had studied my life and habits in enormous detail, they just may have passed him off as the real me. And replaced me altogether. And then they'd have another warship in their pocket and no one would be the wiser."

"So who could do this?" asked Calvin. Almost anyone could have motive to take control of a ship. But means was another story. Coming up with an authentic looking Raidan and aiming to switch them—that implied serious resources.

"Someone powerful," said Raidan. "Someone who has to be stopped."

"And that's where you come in? You're the one stopping it, him, her, whatever."

"A duplicate person, like the one you just saw, is Class One Cargo. We call them replicants. The Organization doesn't know where they come from,



or how many there are, or who's controlling them exactly, just that they are slowly surfacing. And we've caught a few."

"I see," said Calvin, putting the pieces together as best he could. "You stopped being the dutiful Imperial captain the minute you came face-to-face with this other you. And that was proof enough for you to join some kind of fight against them."

Raidan's eyes lit up but his words remained calm. "I still am a dutiful Imperial captain, I never stopped. The decision I made to destroy those Rotham ships, and steal the Harbinger, was for the good of the Empire. If I hadn't, then several people would now be replaced. Hauled off to some prison, executed maybe, tortured, god knows what, and without hope, because no one would even notice. Because some imposters would've taken over their lives."

"Who would have been replaced?"

"Important people."

"Give me names, Raidan."

"I don't know their names," he said. "I just know what was on those ships, and where it was headed. Class One Cargo headed for Capital World. That is what The Organization told me. And that is why I acted. Someone had to. And I was the only one who could."

"And you gave up everything to make that one move?"

"If that's what it took," said Raidan. "I was ready to die for it. But as it turned out, I'm still valuable. Maybe more than ever."

"Indeed," said Calvin, still wondering how Raidan acquired such a powerful ship. "So what is this *Organization* you're working for?"

"All you had to do was ask," Raidan gave a wan smile. "The Organization is a network of patriots."

"What kind of network? And how many patriots?"

Raidan smiled as if to say, *Wouldn't you like to know?* Then he spoke. "We're connected well enough. We have people in every Imperial system and people on *a few* others. A little bit of money. A few ships. Enough to know there's a problem, but maybe not enough to stop it."

"How did your order get founded?"

Raidan shrugged. "There's an answer of course. But I don't have it."

"How old is this Organization?"

"It's hard to say."

Calvin knew that Raidan wouldn't go into specific details if he didn't want to. And, when dealing with his kind, pressuring him for more answers would only result in fewer. Calvin remained patient.

"I was recruited into The Organization awhile back. Years ago. But I wasn't an easy convert. I didn't believe them, you see, that there was a

danger. That the Empire was no longer as perfect as I'd always assumed. I didn't want to listen, but they were very... persuasive."

"They bought you?"

Raidan frowned. "No, of course not. Not persuasive then. *Convincing*. They showed me proof. Just like I showed you proof a few minutes ago. It's hard to keep thinking your world makes sense when you see your face on somebody else's body."

"So it's like I guessed, The Organization showed you the fake Raidan, and that is why you joined them?"

"The fake Raidan was the moment when I knew I had to open my eyes. And, once I did, the signs were everywhere. Little things. But all of them wrong."

"Like what?"

"Changes in behavior. Orders that didn't quite make sense. Captains I've known for years developing small... eccentricities."

"You think they were replaced by replicants?" Calvin sat forward. "And you found out about the fake you before it was too late, making the threat personal."

"Not so much personal," Raidan clarified. "Yes, I'm going to protect myself. And that means siding with The Organization. But, much more importantly, I'm going to protect the Empire. If someone is powerful enough to find or... construct these *things*, and use them to take over our Navy ships, invisibly, then what does that say about our future?"

"So if they showed you the replicant-you years ago, why is he on this ship now?"

"As a chilling reminder of why I do what I do."

Calvin didn't bother to ask how he got aboard the Harbinger specifically. Raidan could have easily picked him up at any point since he seized the ship. Instead he asked a different question.

"How did you know the fake you wasn't the only replicant?"

"I've seen others since."

"And how do you know, now, that The Organization isn't the one who produced the fake you, in order to win you over?"

"I didn't know that then, but I do now. The Organization exists to protect the Empire, trust me."

"From replicants? How long has this been going on?"

"No not just from replicants. That's a recent move. They started replacing people about five years ago, the captains and officers in the Fifth Fleet were the easiest targets, close to the DMZ. Far away from most major ports. Mostly they, *we*, were just tests. They had to be slow, careful, and see if the transition between real persons and fake persons would go unnoticed. It's

only recently that they've been targeting more important people. Like those ships headed for Capital World."

Calvin instantly thought of his strange visit with Kalila. Had she been replaced? Was this the threat she was hiding from? "More important people meaning nobility?"

"Perhaps some of the nobility. If not yet then eventually, yes, they will be targeted."

"What about the royal family?" Calvin pressed him.

Raidan scratched his chin. "I doubt it. The Akiras keep themselves well-protected. Perhaps eventually, but for now I'm sure they are safe."

"So you've noticed no strange activity from them whatsoever?"

Raidan hesitated. "No. Why are you that interested in this?"

Calvin shrugged, not wanting to give himself away. "No reason. I just want to be sure the monarchy is still intact."

Raidan raised a curious eyebrow.

Calvin changed the subject. "So how did your Organization discover the threat?"

"I don't have the answer to that. It's an invisible war that's been going on for a long time. Decades. Their side slowly building up, readying their plans, and us trying to keep an eye on them and unravel their plans before it's too late. This fight has taken many forms.

"So who is the enemy?"

"They call themselves The Phoenix Ring. No, not a reference to my old ship. They mean the creature of legend. The firebird that dies and resurrects periodically. We think it's a metaphor for the Empire. They want to destroy it and re-create it. And since our Human Empire is the premiere powerhouse of the galaxy, they depend on deception to conquer us."

"Who are they?"

"We don't know the ring-leaders yet. They're called The Council. They act through seconds and thirds, like many of our political noblemen on Capital World, except in this case anonymously. The entire Council may meet at times for dire emergencies, but we've never gotten close enough to confirm that."

"So what *do* you know?" asked Calvin. "Are they Rotham? human? Polarian?"

Raidan looked surprised. "Why would you guess Polarians?"

"Well... we saw a Polarian ship at Abia."

Raidan's eyes narrowed. "Are you sure?"

"Yes."

"Very interesting..." he paused. "To answer your question, we know that humans and Rotham are both involved. As for who is giving orders to whom, no one can be sure." He leaned back and rested his head against the

back of his chair, tapping his fingers thoughtfully upon the armrest. Obviously unhappy.

"It's because we're going to Gemini, isn't it?" asked Calvin.

"What?"

"Why this upsets you. It's because we're going into Polarian space. And now you don't know if you can trust them."

"Yes that is troubling me. But don't read too much into it. Gemini is a safe place."

"Why *are* we going there?"

"It's a safe spot for my group. A kind of a haven for The Organization. It's handy to have a few outside the jurisdiction of the Empire."

"But now it might not be such a safe spot."

"No, it's safe," said Raidan.

"So tell me more about Gemini. What can I expect to find when we get there?" asked Calvin.

Raidan said nothing.

"Let me guess. This trip, and all your hints and clues you left me, it's all an effort to recruit me into The Organization, isn't it? But it wants me to commit to it before I get to know anything really about it. Isn't that how all these secret combinations work?"

Raidan leaned forward once more, looking a little less tense. "No. Recruiting you was my idea. There have been... mixed feelings over the matter. There is no formal invitation being extended to you. I'm just hoping we can... make some kind of arrangement."

"What kind?"

"That depends on what happens when we get there," he smiled. "Don't worry. I won't compel you to do anything. You're not my prisoner. Make your own choice. Just remember that nowhere is safe for you. They're going to come after you. They'll hunt you from Tarsonis to Polaris, Capital World to The Corridor. Cooperating with me is your best chance of survival."

Calvin thought that was probably true. He didn't want to die and needed a safe port for the Nighthawk to take supplies. His best path, he guessed, was to infiltrate The Organization and from that vantage point decide whether they were right and worth joining, or if he should betray them to the Empire, perhaps regaining favor.

"Who's in charge of The Organization?"

"It's split into groups with group leaders who all report to one person. That person and the group leaders share power and cooperate."

"Who is that person?"

"She's called White Rook."

"So this person is a she, then?"

"Yes," said Raidan. "But that's hardly a helpful clue."

"Any clue that can rule out half the population of the galaxy is a helpful clue."

"Good luck guessing her identity among the other half."

"So you won't identify her for me."

"I will not."

"But you know who she is."

"Yes."

"Have you ever spoken with her face-to-face?"

"Yes."

Calvin sat forward. "You're a group leader aren't you?"

"Yes. After the last group leader and his ship, the Arcane Storm, disappeared. I took his place."

"How large is a group?"

"Some financial contacts, a few ships, some intelligence agents and analysts, a couple of safe havens. That's about it."

Calvin got the feeling Raidan wasn't telling him everything.

"Some, as defined as how many?"

"A number between one and infinitely many," Raidan shrugged.

Calvin changed the subject back, thinking this could help him estimate The Organization's reach. "How did you find out replicants were on those Rotham ships? The first ones you attacked, the Beotan convoy?"

"Insider information," said Raidan. "Though now that particular contact has vanished, presumed dead. But I did the best I could with what she gave me."

"But you didn't succeed in taking out the whole convoy."

"Yes," he sighed. "One ship got away. Maybe I took out all the replicants by destroying the other ships. Or maybe they all escaped on the one ship that evaded me, I don't know. But at least it never made it to Capital World."

"So then you were arrested and taken to Praxis where The Organization arranged for your escape. How'd you pull it off?"

Raidan smiled. "I know what you're doing. You're trying to figure out how powerful The Organization is, and how it works. I won't play along. But I'll tell you this much. Not everything in the Harbinger's cargobays was cargo, if you get my meaning."

"So what did you do with the Harbinger's original crew?"

"Handed them off somewhere—those who weren't on our side. Can't remember where," he shrugged innocently. Calvin frowned, understanding that Raidan wasn't going to share more.

"Then you went to Aleator," said Calvin. "But you got there late. Probably because you were 'handing off' the original Harbinger crew, and since there were no bases or planets nearby, you transferred them to another ship," he thought back to Sarah's findings. "The Liberty Sun."

Raidan clapped quietly. "You don't disappoint."

"But the Liberty Sun was visually accounted for at its target destination... it couldn't have had time to meet with you."

"Or so a paid witness claimed..."

"I see." Calvin nodded, thinking that would have been simple enough to arrange. "And then," he continued, "you went and received a huge sum of money from one Yanal Kemmer on Aleator. That's why you went there."

Raidan smirked. Calvin knew if there had been another reason, Raidan wouldn't share it.

"Then you went to Brimm and invaded the station and raided its harddrives. Obviously searching for Intel. We got that same data, analyzed it, and found that several Rotham ships—many of which you destroyed—were scheduled to arrive at or bypass Abia System. But you already knew that, didn't you?" Calvin looked into his eyes. "So why *did* you go to Brimm?"

"Brimm. Brimm. Brimm... We did go to Brimm to collect information. It is, or was, a hub for a swathe of Phoenix Ring operatives. A staging point for maneuvering cargo, personnel, weapons, you name it, in that sector. From there we identified many of the ships involved in the conspiracy. Distinguishing the bad Rotham ships from the innocent commercial ones is not easy. Luckily, the Phoenix Ring didn't know we were onto their operation at Brimm and the station wasn't properly defended against a dreadnought."

"What about the Rotham ships that were there? You destroyed one and left the other intact."

"The T'orma and the Vim?"

"Yeah," said Calvin. "One was wiped out but the other you just left there. Though, officially, you boarded it and captured its crew."

"I did. A key Phoenix agent was on board. He was responsible for coordinating a lot of the activity and stood out like a sore thumb—a human on a Rotham ship, *please*. We took him and the crew alive. They're currently in our detention block on this ship."

"Are they an information source or bargaining chips?" asked Calvin.

"Information. The Phoenix Ring doesn't value their compromised agents. And, unfortunately, their compromised agent didn't know as much as we'd hoped."

"Why did you leave that ship intact instead of destroying it and depriving them of that resource?"

"I wanted you to see it," said Raidan. "Simple as that."

"Okay..." said Calvin, piecing it together. "Then you went to Iota. Probably because of information you got from Brimm. But what did you find there?"

"Phoenix ships. They had to be destroyed."

"Class One Cargo?"

"No. Class One Cargo is very rare, so far. These were carrying weapons."

"Small arms?"

"No, the big kind. Planetary bombardment rounds."

"Do you know what they were planning with them?"

Raidan didn't answer.

Calvin sighed and asked another question. "You left one ship there intact too. Disabled. But intact. And you told me to board it."

"Didn't you?"

"No," said Calvin.

"That's too bad," said Raidan. "I was hoping you could have exposed its cargo to Intel Wing, and also hoping that Phoenix agents inside the government wouldn't have been able to censor your discovery completely."

"What would I have found?" asked Calvin. "More planetary bombardment rounds?"

"No. Criminals. Easily identifiable human fugitives living comfortably under the watch and guard of the Rotham crew. I didn't kill them because they weren't a threat. Their freedom and safe escape into the Rotham Republic is the Phoenix Ring's way of repaying someone for some kind of favor. My killing them wouldn't have been much of a prize, but your finding them, criminals on a ship that's supposed to be there for peaceful reasons, well ... that *would* have meant something."

"I see," said Calvin. "And then you lured us to Abia to see the Rotham squadron. Why didn't you just go straight there? We would have followed you."

"We didn't want to alert them. If they figured out we were jumping to Abia, the squadron might have run away. Instead we pretended to go to Zendricun until we were too far out to be seen. Then we turned around, met up with our other ships, and went to Abia."

"And we took the bait," said Calvin. "And because of that we lost many great people." He kept his voice cool, despite the unsettled feelings inside him; above all he tried not to think of the gruesome deaths he'd witnessed. Losing officers was part of the job, but that knowledge had never really prepared him for losing friends.

Raidan's smile faded and his eyes became sober. "I never guessed they could have seen past your stealth system."

Calvin didn't reply.

After an appropriate pause, Raidan added, "We've all lost much. And we're going to lose a lot more. That's just the way of it. Eventually we all die and lose everything."

"Indeed." It made him think of his brush with death on Aleator One, when first Jacobi and then Tristan had saved his life. "Tell me..." said Calvin.

Raidan looked up.

"What do you know about CERKO?"

"Why?"

"On Aleator One, I was ID'd and attacked by CERKO agents. Tristan came to my rescue, even though I'd handed him off to the port authority. Now that I know you're working together, maybe you can explain what happened to me there. And how Tristan got aboard my ship, and free, in the first place."

"We bribed a few choice Aleator officials when we heard, from some of our feelers, that CERKO was hired to kill you there. And, by the looks of it, somebody paid a lot. Outfitting that many rebels, sending them halfway across the Empire, giving them automatic weapons, and knowing just when you'd be there. Couldn't have been cheap."

"Why me?"

Raidan shrugged. "You tell me. Who wants you dead?"

"I really don't know..." Calvin was completely at a loss. Somehow he'd expected Raidan to know the answer. Maybe he didn't want to tell him. Or maybe he was as baffled as Calvin.

"So you made sure Tristan was there, to protect me from the CERKO agents, is that it?"

Raidan smiled. "We recruited someone on your ship to make sure Tristan could get free and collect your, what-would-you-call-it?... *scout*, I guess. So he could find you on Aleator."

Calvin thought about it for a minute. "Mister Pellew. You recruited him somehow, and he made sure Tristan got free and switched out the surveillance footage," Calvin was rambling more to himself than to Raidan, but this also helped explain why Pellew had been willing to take Calvin's side against Summers and the Major. He was working for Raidan, or The Organization, or both...

"Yes," Raidan admitted. "Pellew is working with us. He's a recent recruit, nabbed him on Praxis, but we had considerable leverage."

"You coerced him?"

"No. His sister is influential in The Organization. Blood is thicker than water, as they say, and money is thicker than blood. Interpret that however you like."

"What about Jacobi?" asked Calvin. "Or should I say Titus Antony."

"Who?"

"A man in a tattered military uniform. He was working with the CERKO agents up until the moment they were going to execute me. He killed them."



And then, shortly after, more CERKO agents killed him. He didn't tell me much. But I'm sure he's connected to you."

Raidan's face changed from smug to intrigued. "I know of no such person."

Calvin searched Raidan's eyes. "Are you sure?"

"Cross my heart and hope to die."

"I see..." he wasn't sure if Raidan was lying or not. If Jacobi hadn't been working for Raidan, why would he have acted how he had?

"Then tell me about Tristan," said Calvin.

"He's been my contact with and information source for a few of the Remorii settlements."

Of course Calvin knew most Remorii lived in clans, or groups, or herds—whatever they were called, but he never thought they'd be useful to talk to—if dialogue were even possible. Too hard to find and too little power to be much of an asset, or so he'd believed. "Tristan's a Remorii— creatures the Empire would eradicate if it could—so why would he care about protecting us humans?"

"That's an interesting question," Raidan pressed his fingers together. "Why don't you ask him yourself?"

"When?"

"Whenever you like. He's going with you," Raidan sat back.

"On the Nighthawk?"

Raidan nodded. "You'll find him to be a very useful asset, I think. Consider it a fool's apology for dragging you into all of this."

"No, I don't think so," said Calvin. "I *don't* want a Remorii on my ship."

Raidan shrugged. "Suit yourself. I guess that means you don't want to keep in contact with me and The Organization."

"What do you mean?"

"Tristan is my liaison. He knows how to contact The Organization. You don't."

"You could tell me."

Raidan chuckled quietly. "It doesn't work like that. Trust me, you need Tristan. But understand he's not like Remorii you've met in the past—that's right, I know what *really* happened on the Trinity," his eyes met Calvin's. "Tristan is not the same. He's a friend. Take him with you. He'll prove his worth to you, I promise."

Calvin hesitated. He was very tired, and felt disadvantaged. His fatigue dulled his edge. It was hard to put the pieces together, and sort out what was rational and what wasn't. In the end, he nodded. Thinking Tristan might be a source of information at the very least. "All right. He can come aboard."

"That's wise," said Raidan.

"For now."

"It will be a sign to my other people on your ship that you are an ally. And should be followed."

"Other people?"

"I understand you lost a great many people at Abia. Many of them critical personnel. Medics, crewmen, analysts... soldiers. They will need to be replaced for your ship to function, will they not?"

Calvin thought of Monte, Rose, the Major, and all of the others in their final moments, and lowered his head. Feeling the grief overcome him at last. "Yes. I even lost my chief physician." It hurt to say that, but he did it as emotionlessly as he could. "I will need more people."

"It's hard. I understand. But it comes with the job. You just have to pick yourself up and keep fighting."

Calvin nodded. He knew he couldn't blame Raidan for what'd happened. At least not more than he could blame himself.

"There is one other thing," said Calvin.

Raidan looked curious.

Calvin wasn't sure why he was bringing this up, except that the thought of returning to the Nighthawk, as a divided ship, was miserable. He needed cohesion. And that meant he needed to understand, in order to make peace. "Summers Presley," he said. "Tell me... why is she so impassioned when your name comes up?"

Raidan seemed surprised by the question. "Is she now?"

Calvin frowned. "Yes. Something happened, or didn't happen, between you two and she's been obsessed with hunting you down. She wants you to kiss Lady Justice."

A tiny, intrigued smile appeared on Raidan's lips. "I'm sure she does."

"Well?"

"If you must know, she and I were close before all of this happened. How could we not be? She was the most reliable officer I've ever had. And she looked at me with a kind of respect that, well, very few can show. And, as I'm sure you've found, her advice is always extremely insightful."

Calvin said nothing.

"So I came to depend on her more as an equal than as a subordinate. A partnership was born. But I kept one thing from her."

"The Organization."

"Exactly. And as we both know, in this game, the more knowledge you have, the less safe you are—I couldn't tell her because I wanted to protect her."

"Meanwhile," said Calvin, "she realizes you've been keeping secrets from her and misinterprets it—she thinks you don't trust her. And now she wants to prove something to you."

“No. She had no idea I was keeping secrets up until the very, very end. It wasn’t until Harkov’s marines boarded my ship that she realized I’d been lying to her, and the whole crew, about everything. If she’s still *impassioned* when my name comes up, it’s because she feels betrayed that I deceived her, no other reason.”

Calvin didn’t push the matter but believed there was more to the story. “Thanks for your information,” he said. “I should return to my ship now. My crew and I need to mourn our dead.”

“Yes, indeed,” said Raidan. “But don’t forget to have your defense officer contact me with details about the engagement in Abia, as agreed.”

“I won’t forget,” said Calvin, unsure what Raidan would find useful about it—he already knew the Fifth Fleet destroyed itself. “Miles will contact you as soon as he’s able.”

“Good,” Raidan scribbled a series of numbers onto his paper, then tore it off and handed it to Calvin. “Have him use this frequency.”

## Chapter 32

Its blackness was appropriate. The vast, deep, ever stretching ocean of space.

Calvin had stood there, gazing out the window, long before anyone arrived. The tranquil quiet offered a kind of solace he needed.

Silence. Like death. And, not for the first time, Calvin wondered about his own mortality, and of those who'd passed away. Realizing he too would follow that path. Maybe sooner rather than later. Would he ever see them again? Or were they, and all mankind, doomed to be lost forever?

He thought of Monte the most. His old friend. Yesterday a person but today only a memory. What would he do without him? And as the scene of Monte's death replayed in Calvin's mind, over and over, he felt his eyes grow warm. But no tears flowed. He didn't let them.

He watched the open-nothingness for some time before the others came. Shuffling quietly onto the observation deck—all but a skeleton crew required to operate the ship. He put on an emotional mask and addressed them, the mask of the charismatic captain who could inspire his crew to soldier on. Even though, deep inside, he felt empty.

He went through the motions of a funeral in space, one of the worst duties a captain must fulfill. He'd already done *the* worst duty, contacting next of kin. He'd spoken to no one, left only messages, but it was still hard telling someone their loved one had died, and knowing it had been, at least partially, a result of decisions he himself had made.

Now here he was.

Speaking words he'd prepared mixed with words that came to him in the moment. "...we remember our dead. Our friends. Our colleagues. Our family. They died bravely. They died nobly. And they died with dignity. Fulfilling their duties to the final degree. Every one of us here owes them something, for it was us they died defending. Let us remember them not just for who they were, but what they were. Heroes..."

He led them in a moment of silence and many bowed their heads. Calvin closed his own eyes. But instead of darkness he saw visions of the exploding ship. And thought of his friends' souls forever wandering the infinite wilderness of space. Perhaps freer in death than ever in life.

He again addressed his officers and their eyes fell on him. They were in pain, but resilient. And seeing their strength gave him a little more. He found eloquence he never knew he had, and he spoke about each of their dead in turn, as individuals, recalling from his own memory what an honor it had

been to serve with them. After each, a shot from the main gun lit up the windows and darkened again, like the sun of that person's life setting for the final time.

Monte was the most difficult to speak about, because Calvin had been very close to him. And trusted him more than any other person since Christine had died. But he didn't linger there. He gave the doctor his proper honors, and continued down the list. According to order and rank.

The final honor went to the Major, who'd sacrificed himself to save Calvin. And when Calvin spoke, he made an extra effort to find the right words. The faces of Special Forces looked up at him, strong but crestfallen. They had admired their CO. And now he was gone. But seeing them, desegregated from the crew, camouflage peppered through a room of black-and-silver, was heartwarming. Showing a kind of unity Calvin never would've thought possible so soon after they'd fought against each other. It helped that, even more recently, they'd fought side by side. And died side by side.

Once he finished honoring the Major, another shot fired from the main gun, followed by four volleys of six from the smaller guns. And Calvin gave them a final thought to ponder.

"I lied to you all earlier."

His words rippled like a shockwave through the crowd; he continued. "Intel Wing did not give me back my command. I seized it, so we could go to Abia. And I dragged you all with me. Which is why I will not compel any of you to stand, or hang, beside me... But, I am going to keep moving forward on this road. And I am going to uncover the truth. All of it. And I invite you all to come with me. But you deserve to know the cost of doing so. No one you love will be safe. And the government will hunt us. They will call us criminals. They may even kill us. But, I believe, history will remember us differently. As those who took a stand when no one else could. Warriors in an invisible war."

He told them how he and Raidan had spoken and how he believed that, together, they could rid the Empire of the threat so deeply inside it. The same one that had stolen away twenty-four of their own.

"But to anyone who chooses not to follow me down that dark road, you can book passage back to your families once we reach Gemini. I promise you. And you can go, shamelessly, with your heads held high. And no one will begrudge you for it."

Then he paused and looked them over one final time. "It'll be another twelve hours before we arrive. You have until then to decide. Dismissed."

Miles and Sarah lagged behind as the others filed out. They said nothing but their eyes were supportive and he was glad to know that, whatever was coming, he wouldn't have to face it alone. Shen would have stood there too, Calvin knew, had he not already been moved to the Harbinger's burn ward.

The last to leave was Summers Presley. She'd been completely silent the whole time and didn't make eye contact with him or anyone. She just stared out the window for awhile. Calvin wanted to say something to her, but he didn't know what. He decided to just leave her be.

To his surprise, she was the one to break the silence. Barely more than a whisper at first. "I'm sorry," she said, in words so quiet Calvin thought he'd imagined them. He wasn't sure how to reply.

Summers continued, "for what I did to you... here," her eyes searched over the empty observation deck. "I am sorry. And..." she paused, finding a little strength, "you were right. There *is* something wrong with the Fleet. What happened... I don't know... I don't understand it..." she looked past him and out into space. "But something *is* wrong. I can accept that now."

Again Calvin was speechless, barely able to believe what he was hearing. And he could tell this was very difficult for her.

"Thank you," he said quietly, not sure what to add. Thinking that, after all that had happened, Summers was as much a victim of circumstances as he was. "You could walk away from this, you know?" he found himself saying. "You weren't part of this—what I did. The Fleet would take you back. You could walk away from all of this and no one would hold it against you."

"I would hold it against me," her words were quiet but forceful. "After what I saw—what we *all* saw—how could I walk away? How could anyone?" She glanced down at her hands, as if they were stained red. "I'm no one's tool anymore. Not Raidan's. Not the Fleet's. Not yours... no ones."

There was a fire in her. The fire of someone who'd been betrayed too many times. Someone who didn't trust anyone or anything anymore.

"So... are you coming with us, then?" asked Calvin. Not sure what to expect.

She nodded once. "I believe in what you're doing. You are trying to find the answers. Discover what's wrong with the Fleet, so order can be restored. If I can help with that goal, I want to. If nothing else, I have to try..." she spoke slowly, with some difficulty, "Just.. promise me one thing." Her eyes met his, looking deadly.

"What?" he asked, wondering what one thing was so important to her.

"Be careful trusting Raidan." The strength of her gaze and the steel of her words took him off guard.

"I will," Calvin promised.

Her eyes stayed with his for half a second longer, bright and unreadable, then she turned and swept out of the room without another word.

Leaving him alone again.

The first to come and the last to leave. He turned back to the window and pressed his hand against its cold surface, thinking about what'd just happened. But before long his thoughts twisted back to the violence on the

Rotham ship, particularly Monte's death. And in his mind he offered a silent farewell to his dear friend. He leaned his head against the glass and closed his eyes as several choice memories poured through his mind.

Only then did the tears flow. And he let them, without a sound. His eyes burned and cheeks grew damp, but it gave him peace.

## Chapter 33

Raidan sat at his desk, where he'd remained since Calvin had left.

It was peaceful and quiet, aside from the occasional clinking of bottle to glass. He drank another swallow of whiskey and let out a satisfied sigh, letting himself relax even more.

He had a lot to think about now that he'd finally met the young Intelligence captain who'd been pulled into something much larger and deeper than he could hope to realize. In a way it was kind of sad. Regrettable, at least, that one so young and talented would have to be ruined; he was now required to give up everything, despite his complete innocence. But it was for the greater good. There simply was no other way.

*Calvin Cross, I do not envy you. You have the second worst position in the galaxy now.*

In a way, Calvin reminded him of himself. When *he* used to be happy.

*Hopefully you have more wisdom than I did, at your age, Calvin. Otherwise you won't survive long enough to be useful. And far too much depends on you.*

Raidan took another sip and thought about what was stored below and how, in a few more hours, the fate of an entire planet would be decided.

He shook his head and set the bottle and glass aside, then scribbled a note on his stationary for Tristan to pass along via kataspace.

It read: *"We're coming, and the package is coming with us. Fifteen hours. A.R."*



# End of Book One

The story continues in **The Phoenix Rising**.

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