

THE
FRONTIERS SAGA

EPISODE 12

RISE OF THE ALLIANCE



Ryk Brown

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Second Kindle Edition

Cover and Formatting by [Streetlight Graphics](#)

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CHAPTER ONE

Despite all that had happened, Maxwell Dumar had never put much faith in the idea that Nathaniel Scott was the *Na-Tan* described in the Legend of Origins. It was, after all, only a legend. For all that he knew it was a bedtime story that had somehow morphed into a pseudo-religion, made stronger still by the maniacal reign of Caius Ta'Akar.

Commander Dumar chuckled to himself as he made his way down the corridors of the Karuzan asteroid's command center. *Na-Tan*. The idea made him smile. Still, Jalea had played the Followers of Origin masterfully, and had gotten the young captain to play the role out of expediency, if not out of utter desperation. That woman had been trouble. He knew it the moment he had met her, and he was glad that Lieutenant Commander Nash had known it as well... and had dealt with her once her usefulness had ended.

Still, one could not help but wonder how it was that so many things seemed to have fallen in place for Captain Scott, and usually at just the right moment. Today was a perfect example. The precise moment in time was rapidly approaching, and this particular advantageous alignment would not come again for another eighty-seven years—if Casimir's calculations were correct. Without that particular stroke of luck, the prince's plan would not have been possible. One had to wonder.

Commander Dumar passed the guards at the door to the control room, feigning a return salute. The room was the largest single room in the entire command section, having been expanded to accommodate the many technicians by the removal of several walls. Rows of workstations, each with multiple view screens for each technician to monitor, filled the room. Behind the technicians walked section supervisors and technical experts. In the back of the room were the physicists and engineers.

"Commander," the senior controller greeted as Dumar approached. He glanced up at the digital time display on the wall. "It's getting close."

Dumar also noted the time. "Five minutes until the window opens." He looked about the room once more, scanning for signs of concern from any of the technicians. "Are we going to make it?"

"If you mean, are we going to be ready, then the answer is yes," the senior controller answered. "If you're asking if it will work, I'd have to answer, 'we're about to find out.'"

Dumar smiled wryly.

"How can you speak of this so casually?" one of the physicists in the back of the room asked. "Do you realize what this will mean? Do you realize how much things will change?" the man continued.

"Yes, I do," Dumar answered, "assuming it works." He turned back to the senior controller. "Of course, if it doesn't, none of us will be the wiser."

The senior controller raised an eyebrow and nodded.

"Did you get to see your family, Mister Bryant?" Dumar asked, suddenly remembering how much his senior controller had been looking forward to the upcoming visit.

"Yes, sir, I did."

"They are well, I trust?"

"Quite well."

"How did your wife react when you told her what you were about to do?"

“She was fine.”

Dumar looked at Mister Bryant. “You didn’t tell her, did you?”

“Of course not,” he answered, smiling. “You married a Corinairan woman, did you not?”

“I did at that.”

“Then you know as well as I that had I told her the truth, she would have knocked me out, bound me tight, and dragged me back to Corinair... by what little hair I have left on my head.”

Dumar had to fight back a laugh. “You are correct, Mister Bryant. I suspect she would have done just that.” Dumar looked at the time display as the last minute disappeared, leaving only seconds left to tick away. “Final check,” he ordered.

Throughout the control room, section supervisors tallied their technicians one by one, then called in their results to the primary controllers lined up at their consoles directly in front of Mister Bryant.

“Navigation is good,” the first primary controller reported.

“Power generation is good,” the next controller added.

“Power distribution is good.”

“Life support is good.”

Mister Bryant listened patiently, marking off each section on his data pad as the twelve primary controllers reported their readiness. He looked at the time display. Thirty seconds and counting. “All systems are online and ready. All outer doors are secure, and all sections are on alert.” Another look at the time. “Fifteen seconds and counting.”

Dumar looked at the physicists to his right. They looked nervous. The engineers to his left, not so much. “Remove the safeties, Mister Bryant.”

Mister Bryant stepped up to the small podium located directly in the middle of the twelve primary controllers. He placed his hand on a scanner plate. A moment later, the clear panel over the arming switch slid open. He rotated the knob to the ‘armed’ position. “The system is armed. The array is live.” He glanced at the time again. “Five seconds to the window.”

Dumar watched the last few seconds change, waiting until the display showed nothing but a row of zeros. “Jump.”

The Karuzara asteroid was dark, lit only by the distant light from the Darvano star. All of its usual external lighting, its approach and departure trenches, its comm arrays, and its various entrances and exits for personnel working on the surface of the massive asteroid had all been shut down. At that moment, it looked much like it had decades ago... before the Corinairan miners, before the Karuzara, and before the Alliance. It was just another dark, dead rock making its way leisurely around its parent star, just as it had for billions of years.

Pale blue dots all over the asteroid began to glow, becoming white as they quickly rose in the intensity. The hundreds of intense white dots suddenly flashed, sending a wave of blue-white light across the surface of the asteroid like a wave of shimmering water. A second later, the entire asteroid was engulfed in a brilliant blue-white flash of light that rivaled the Darvano star itself. The flash faded even more quickly than it had manifested, leaving only the blackness of space where the Karuzara asteroid had been only a moment earlier.

“Jump complete,” Mister Bryant announced. He looked around out of the corners of his eyes as he were afraid to move his head. Finally, he turned to Commander Dumar, who was smiling more broadly than ever before. “We’re still alive.”

“Indeed we are,” Dumar agreed, “and where are we?”

Both of Mister Bryant’s eyebrows raised as he remembered his next task. “Position!” he called out.

“Raising the arrays!” the navigation controller answered.

“Emitters show zero energy,” the array controller reported.

“Energy banks at zero charge,” the next controller announced.

“Reactors are normal.”

“All stations are reporting no damage.”

“All systems appear to be nominal.”

“Sir!” one of the section supervisors called out. “We’ve changed shape and mass!”

“What?”

An image appeared on one of the big view screens on the forward wall of the control room. It was a computer-generated graphic of the Karuzara asteroid based on readings from her many sensors.

“We wondered if that might happen,” one of the physicists said.

“We *told* you that would happen,” an engineer insisted.

“That what would happen?” Commander Dumar answered.

“The jump fields sort of nipped off the tops of some of the surface peaks, instead of forming over their complete surface,” the physicist explained.

“That’s why we made all our comm and sensor arrays retractable, isn’t it.” Mister Bryant said.

“We expected this,” Dumar added.

“We just didn’t know how much mass we would lose,” the engineer admitted. “If we’d had more time, we could have calibrated each emitter to prevent this from happening...”

“It was my call,” Dumar interrupted. “Do not worry. All we did was smooth a few rough edges, correct?” He looked at Mister Bryant. “That *is* all we lost, correct?”

“Uh, yes, sir. That’s all.”

“Position is verified,” the primary navigation controller announced. “We are exactly ten light years from our previous position, thirty-seven light years from Palamor.”

“Our trajectory?” Dumar asked.

“Perfect,” the controller added, beaming from ear to ear.

The control room erupted in cheers.

Mister Bryant reached out to Commander Dumar. “Congratulations, sir. You’ve just jumped an asteroid.”

Dumar smiled as he shook Mister Bryant’s hand. *Fate continues to smile on Captain Scott,* he thought as he shook his head in disbelief.

* * *

Josh and Loki ran down the central corridor, dodging the constant stream of damage control team and medical rescue technicians flowing in all directions.

Loki slowed a moment as he stepped aside to make room for a stretcher as another of the Celestia's injured crewmen was wheeled from the main hangar deck forward toward medical. The man had severe burns on one whole side of his body, and looked to be in great pain.

"Come on, Loki!" Josh yelled back from the hatch to the main hangar bay.

Loki continued forward at a quicker pace once again. "Did you see that guy?"

"Yeah, yeah, I know. He's hurt bad. They all are. They'll pump them full of nanites and they'll be back on their feet in a few months," Josh said as he stepped through the hatch. "Hell, most of them are Corinairan. The nanites won't hurt them at all."

Loki shook his head as he followed Josh into the hangar bay. He had known Josh for years now and still his friend's general lack of compassion for other human beings never ceased to amaze him. He followed Josh as they weaved through the usual well-orchestrated chaos that was the main hangar bay only minutes after a battle.

Josh broke through the chaos, stopping in his tracks, his mouth agape as the eighth four zero two rolled forward and turned to line up next to the previous seven. "Holy crap!" he exclaimed, turning back toward Loki, whose expression was similar. "I didn't believe him when he told me..."

"Neither did I," Loki admitted with nearly equal excitement.

"How many are there?"

"I heard at least a dozen," Loki answered.

"Twenty jumped in," Marcus announced as he approached. "Four of them got smoked attacking that damned battle platform."

"Where's the rest of them?" Josh asked eagerly.

"Helping the Celestia finish off them bombers," Marcus answered.

"Look at them," Loki exclaimed. "They're beautiful."

"Ours was better," Josh boasted.

"Ours was only one," Loki explained, gesturing toward the entire group of eight.

"Maybe, but we did a lot of damage with that one ship," Josh reminded his friend.

"That's my point, Josh. Imagine what the captain can do with sixteen of them."

"You're right," Josh admitted with a chuckle. "I hadn't even thought of that." Josh turned back toward Loki. "Let's go check them out." Josh took off on a brisk stride toward the line of black interceptors, slowing to appear more nonchalant as he neared the first one. Its cockpit was open and empty. Its crew, being the first to board, had already disembarked. The same was true with the next two ships in line. Each of them had obvious scarring from their recent encounter with the Jung battle platform. They also had some rather odd-looking configurations on some of their weapons ports and control surfaces.

"What the hell is this?" Marcus wondered, having followed them over. "This ain't the right gauge for a hinge. It'll never hold up down in the atmosphere."

"We weren't planning on taking them down to the surface," one of the pilots explained, "at least not if we could avoid it."

"That ain't no excuse for sloppy..."

“We had to get the first twenty up rather quickly, I’m afraid,” the pilot defended. “I suspect more than a few shortcuts were taken to get them out the door.”

“The *first* twenty?” Loki wondered. “There are more coming?”

“I believe so,” the pilot answered. “I’m not quite sure when, or how many. At least another twenty I’d guess.” The pilot stepped closer, extending his hand. “Thain, Busby Thain. Friends call me ‘Busy’.”

“Josh Hayes,” Josh said, shaking the pilot’s hand as he continued staring at the row of interceptors.

“Loki Sheehan,” Loki answered. “This is Marcus Taggart.”

“Nice to meet you, Senior Chief,” the pilot answered.

“Likewise, Lieutenant,” Marcus answered as he also shook the lieutenant’s hand. “You from Corinair?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Corinari?”

“Six years now,” the lieutenant answered. “Least ways, I was. Not sure what we are now, to be honest.”

“I’m just glad you all showed up.”

“Sorry to come so late,” the lieutenant said. “We were under the impression that trouble wasn’t expected for at least another month.”

“Yeah, things changed,” Marcus said. “Happens a lot around here.”

Busy turned toward Josh, who was crawling up the boarding ladder to the nearest ship. “You like spacecraft?”

“We used to fly a Falcon just like these,” Loki told him.

“Still say ours was better,” Josh insisted as he came back down the ladder.

“Falcon?” The lieutenant suddenly realized who he was speaking with. “Josh and Loki. You’re the guys they told us about.”

“What?” Josh said, his interest suddenly peaked.

“You heard of them?” Marcus asked, more surprised than anyone. “Oh, crap.”

“No, you guys are famous back home. At least to other flight crews. Hell, they even had us studying some of your maneuvers. The waterfall? That was amazing! Did you really do that?”

“We really did that,” Loki answered, wishing the memory of the event could stay buried deep within his subconscious.

“Unbelievable. Most pilots would have ejected.”

“Can’t eject when you’re carrying a jump drive in Jung territory,” Josh said with obvious swagger.

“I guess not,” the lieutenant admitted. “Still, it would be a hard instinct for a Corinari pilot to overcome, especially after they drilled it into your head during training.”

“Yeah, well, ain’t nothing ever been drilled into that boy’s head,” Marcus told the lieutenant.

“*Senior Chief!*” a deckhand called out from the distance.

“Chaos calls,” Marcus said as he turned to leave.

“So, we’re famous back in the PC?” Josh asked, feeling more cocky and arrogant than usual.

“I don’t know about the entire Pentaurus cluster, but everyone on Corinair who flies has heard

about you two. I've got to say, it's an honor to meet you both. I'd love to hear about some of your flights some time."

Loki closed his eyes and shook his head. "No, you wouldn't."

"Sure!" Josh said. "What would you like to hear about?"

"Oh, man," Loki mumbled, shaking his head.

* * *

"Congratulations, Captain," Lieutenant Telles said from the entrance to the captain's ready room. "Your victory, although surprising, was well earned through the use of sound tactics."

"We were victorious because twenty Falcons arrived just in time to save our butts," Nathan said.

The lieutenant moved deeper into the ready room as he spoke. "Only because of your actions on the Darvano system, and your subsequent defeat of the Ta'Akar Empire. Without those victories, the one most certainly would not have been possible."

"Perhaps," Nathan admitted, not completely believing the lieutenant.

"A great leader always makes his decisions based on the greater goal, not the individual battle. You were prepared to let your world die in order to continue fighting for people you might never meet, but who need you to stand and protect them nonetheless."

Nathan looked at the lieutenant. "Are you sure I wasn't just afraid that we would lose, that we would all die and the Earth would die with us?"

"There is nothing wrong with fear, Captain," Lieutenant Telles explained as he took a seat across from Nathan. "Fear increases adrenaline levels, sharpens our wit, energizes our muscles, quickens our heart and respiratory rates. Fear prepares us; keeps us alive, *if we control it. That is what you did that day. Not only when you were willing to walk away from the battle, but when you destroyed that battle platform with perhaps thousands of Jung still on board.*"

Nathan stared at Lieutenant Telles in disbelief.

The lieutenant squinted his eyes, unsure of the cause of the captain's confusion. "Is something wrong?"

"This is the first time you sat down in this room," Nathan explained, an eyebrow raised and a grin forming on his face. "I stopped inviting you to sit long ago, and now..."

"I can stand, if you prefer?"

"No, no, no, it's quite all right. I actually prefer that you sit. I'm just a little stunned, that's all."

"Perhaps I am becoming accustomed to the less than formal command style that exists aboard this vessel."

"That's good."

"Still, it is a shame that we were not able to utilize the resources of that platform. They were surely significant."

"The risk was too great," Nathan said. "It is far less complicated this way."

"Then you do not feel any remorse for taking their lives."

"They attacked us, Lieutenant... without provocation and in the end without mercy. They have killed millions of my people, and decimated my world. They got what they deserved."

Lieutenant Telles cocked his head to one side. "Vengeance, Captain?"

“Perhaps.”

“A dangerous emotion, to be sure.”

“Perhaps,” Nathan admitted. “Perhaps it is much like fear,” he added, “a tool... effective when used properly.”

“Perhaps,” the lieutenant agreed.

“Captain?” Major Prechitt called from the entrance.

“Major,” Nathan answered as both he and Lieutenant Telles stood.

“Captain, Lieutenant, I’d like to present Major Galen McCullum of the Corinari, leader of the flight of four zero twos. Major, Captain Nathan Scott of the Earth Defense Force, and Lieutenant Lucius Telles of the Ghatazhak.”

“A pleasure to meet you sir,” Major McCullum said as he shook the captain’s hand. He turned to Lieutenant Telles to greet him as well. “Lieutenant, I must say, I never expected to be shaking the hand of a Ghatazhak. From what I have heard, I am honored to meet you as well.”

“The honor is mine, sir,” Lieutenant Telles answered.

“I cannot tell you how happy we all are to see you, Major,” Nathan exclaimed as he sat down again. “Please, gentlemen, sit.”

“I’m not sure you want us to, Captain,” Major McCullum said. “I’ve been in that cockpit for nearly three days.”

Nathan gestured for him to sit. “Please, get comfortable. I want to hear all about it. What is going on back in the Pentaurus cluster, on Corinair and Takara? What assistance is the Alliance able to send? I assume that the Data Ark cores arrived safely?”

“I’m afraid that I don’t have such answers for you, Captain. My men and I were only recently hired by Commander Dumar to pilot the first batch of four zero twos back to Earth. To be honest, we hadn’t expected to arrive in the middle of a fight, especially against a ship of such enormity.”

“Yes, the Jung seem to like extremely large vessels,” Nathan said.

“We were under the assumption that the Jung reinforcements were still a month or two away,” the major explained.

“Yes,” Nathan said, “that’s what we thought when we sent word back to Takara. A lot has happened since then, and we have realized that much of our intelligence about the Jung was incorrect.”

“Perhaps we can be of help. Our ships are quite well equipped for reconnaissance work.”

“Rest assured, Major, we will utilize them.” Nathan cocked his head in thought. “You said the first group. Are there more Falcons coming?”

“Ah yes, Falcons. I have heard of this Earth creature. An appropriate name for the four zero twos. Indeed, Captain. Commander Dumar has acquired nearly one hundred of them, in various stages of disrepair. He believes he can get at least another twenty of them working in short order. The rest will require more extensive repairs that require the fabrication of, in some cases, entire sections of the fuselage. Rest assured, however, that he and his crews are working on them with all due haste.”

“What else might we expect in the way of assistance?” Nathan asked.

“I’m afraid I do not know all the details to *that*, either,” the major confessed. “However, I was instructed to give you this,” he added as he pulled a small, metallic case out of his flight suit pocket. “Each of us was given one of them and instructed to turn it over to you upon our arrival. I am told

instruct you to view the file in private so that you can decide for yourself what information should be shared with your subordinates.”

“Have any of you seen what is on the file?” Nathan wondered.

“No, sir,” the major assured him. “For security reasons, Prince Casimir had the containers keyed to your bio-signature. If anyone else tries to open any of the containers, the contents will disintegrate in seconds.”

“I can’t wait,” Nathan said as he took the container from the major.

“Captain,” Major Prechitt began, “might I suggest that we create a second air wing, one for the Falcons, and put Major McCullum in charge of that wing.”

“Are you comfortable with that?” Nathan asked Major Prechitt.

“I’ve known the major for many years, Captain. We have served together on several occasions and I have the utmost confidence in his abilities.”

“And you, Major?” Nathan asked, this time looking at Major McCullum.

“That would be fine, sir. However, there is the matter of what entity myself and my men are to be attached to. We all gave up our commissions in the Corinari in order to join Commander Dumar on this expedition. Technically, I have no rank over the other pilots in my flight.”

“Yet they still followed your command in battle,” Nathan commented.

“Which is why I chose him to lead the new air wing, assuming you approve of its formation,” Major Prechitt added.

“Of course, of course,” Nathan agreed. “I’d be happy to have you command the Falcon air wing,” Major McCullum.

“Thank you, Captain.”

“As to your rank, for now, you and your men will be attached to the Aurora, as members of my crew. We’re still working on what military entity we are going to be from this point forward. A few technicalities in Earth law to straighten out yet. However, for expediency’s sake, I suggest that you and your men retain whatever ranks you had as members of the Corinari, at least until we decide what to do.”

“That would suit us fine, sir,” Major McCullum agreed. “We can start the reconnaissance flights as soon as you like.”

“It might be best if you and your men took a day off, Major,” Nathan suggested. “You did just finish a three-day flight. Better you get some rest, get acclimated to your new surroundings and get settled into your new quarters. Besides, I’d like to start with a thorough sweep of our own system before I send your ships out on interstellar recon.”

“As you wish, sir.”

“Come,” Major Prechitt said to Major McCullum. “I’ll show you around.”

“It was a pleasure meeting you both,” Major McCullum said as they turned to exit.

“The pleasure was mine,” Nathan answered.

“Hey, what was it that your flight instructor used to call you?” Major Prechitt asked Major McCullum as they headed for the exit.

“Why?”

“You need a call sign.”

“What’s a call sign?” Major McCullum wondered.

“Old Earth pilot tradition,” Major Prechitt explained as they disappeared through the hatch.

“I expect you will want to view that file without delay,” Lieutenant Telles said as he turned to exit as well. “I’ll let the good sergeant know that you do not wish to be disturbed.”

“Thank you, Lieutenant.” Nathan sat down as the lieutenant pulled the hatch closed behind him. He looked at the container in his hand. It was slightly scuffed, and had body oils and fingerprints on the shiny silver case. The case was rectangular, a little less in length than his palm and fingers. He pressed the release, and the case opened. Inside was another device about the size and shape of his thumb. At one end it had what looked like a holo-emitter similar to the ones in the conference table in the Aurora’s command briefing room. He looked inside the case again. There was a small note that read, ‘place on floor and activate.’ Nathan followed the instructions, coming out from behind his desk and placing the device on the floor in the middle of his ready room. He pressed the one and only button on the device and stepped back. Seconds later, the image of Prince Casimir of Takara appeared before him, full size and looking every bit as real as the men who had just stood in that same spot moments ago. However, he was not moving.

Nathan examined the image for several seconds, fighting the urge to pass his hand through it. He waited for several seconds, looking right and left, wondering when the image was going to speak. “Are you going to say something?”

“Ah, Nathan, it is good to see you, so to speak,” Prince Casimir began.

Nathan’s head jerked back in surprise, not expecting the image to react to his voice. “Tug?”

“I wish I could be there in person,” the image of Prince Casimir continued, paying no attention to Nathan, “to fight side by side once again. I still believe that my people, the people of the Pentaur sector, and I, all owe you and your crew more than we can ever repay. Unfortunately, times are difficult in the cluster. We are under great pressure to protect the worlds that the empire had stripped of their own defenses against raiders and pirates from outside the region. With only a few warships left, and even fewer of them equipped with jump drives, the task is difficult. The Avendahl is forced to jump regularly from system to system in order to maintain enough of a presence to discourage such attacks. Furthermore, the nobles that make up the new Takaran Parliament are less than pleased with the challenging new economic environment in which their own profits are no longer guaranteed. They are uncomfortable with the idea of funneling precious resources away from Takara toward Earth, for fear of being left with too little to fill their own coffers.” Prince Casimir looked down at the floor and sighed, then looked up again. “It is of my own doing, I suppose. Had I not moved so hastily and broken up the empire, the nobles might have been more cooperative. I am quite sure that their reluctance is driven more by their desire to punish me than to protect themselves. If they truly wished to protect themselves, they would pick up a weapon and join the fight. I truly regret that in my haste, to prove to the families of all the fallen Karuzari that their sacrifices were not in vain, that I have now put the welfare of those that gave us our freedom at risk. Unfortunately, freedom for all worlds was the only end game that made sense, and to accomplish that goal, I had to step down as the sole leader of the Takaran system. For the difficulties that this decision has caused you, I offer my sincerest apologies. Furthermore, I swear to you that I will do everything within my power to support you and your efforts to not only free your world, but also to rid the galaxy of the Jung threat.”

Casimir's image appeared to turn and walk several steps to the left, although his image remained in the same position within the captain's ready room. He stopped beside a large view screen that came to life as he came beside it. *"Despite the restrictions placed upon me by the Takaran Parliament, I have devised a way to provide support for you and your cause. My old friend, Maxwell Dumar, has resigned his commission in the Takaran military. As per Takaran custom, he has been given a substantial retirement in the form of a lump sum payment. In addition, I have liquidated the majority of my family's holdings in order to provide him with additional funding. I have also convinced the Corinairan government to return the Karuzara asteroid base to the Karuzari Nation, which, according to the Alliance treaty, still existed. Maxwell Dumar is now the president of the Karuzari Nation, and is the commander of the Karuzara asteroid base. He has purchased many four zero two deep space interceptors from the Palee spacecraft scrap yards, as well as a few dozen of the old interplanetary utility freighters commonly known as 'boxcars'. If you are watching this recording, then you already know of the first group of twenty four zero twos. I promise, many more are soon to follow. The plan is this..."* Prince Casimir pointed to the image on the view screen next to him. *"This is the Darvano system. I have determined that in just over two months, a window of opportunity will appear that will not come about again for quite some time."* The image of the Darvano system began to shrink. Casimir continued to speak. *"At that point in time, the Karuzara asteroid's orbit around the Darvano star will put it on the perfect trajectory for the Palamor system, just over forty-seven light years away. The plan is to install a massive emitter array around the Karuzara asteroid and jump her, in ten light year increments, to the Palamor system. There, she will intercept the orbit of one of Palamor's super massive gas giants and use it to alter the Karuzara asteroid's trajectory onto a course for its next gravity assist maneuver in the Jenalaya system, one hundred and twenty-six light years away."* Casimir turned to face the camera again. *"You see, Captain, I intend, through a series of carefully plotted jumps and gravity assist maneuvers, to bring the asteroid base, with all of its considerable resources, directly to you. It should provide you with a substantial base of operations. Furthermore, Commander Dumar has acquired additional resources in the form of consumables, medical supplies, and personnel of all disciplines—the majority of which are from Corinair, I might add—to both staff the asteroid base and supplement your own crews as well. Assuming that our rather ambitious plan to jump the Karuzara asteroid base all the way to Sol succeeds, it should provide all the resources needed to survive until such time as I can send more substantial aid, hopefully in the form of jump equipped warships."*

The view screen went dark and Prince Casimir moved back to his right, as if returning to the position in the room at which he had started his message. *"Stored on the data bank of this device are detailed reports, personnel rosters, resource inventories, fabrication capabilities, and time frames. This should help you to understand exactly what the Karuzara facility is capable of so that you can plan how best to utilize it. I urge you to include Commander Dumar in your planning, as he is most skilled in matters of combat strategy and intelligence. More importantly, besides yourself, he is the one person in the universe that I trust completely. He is, for all intents and purposes, an extension of myself, speaking and acting on my behalf, with full authority."*

Casimir took in a deep breath and let it out in a long sigh. *"I do so wish I was there with you now, Nathan. Soon, the same technology used in the enhanced jump shuttle that brought the data cores to*

Takara, we shall be able to create a network of jump-equipped comm drones that will give us near real-time communications capabilities. Until then, I wish you the best of luck. Just hold on a little longer, Captain. Help is on the way.”

The hologram faded away, and the device shut off. Nathan, who had been leaning against the front of his desk during Casimir’s speech, stepped forward and picked up the device and looked at it. He smiled, then moved back behind his desk and activated the intercom. “Comms, get me President Scott at NAU Command.”

* * *

“Jump complete,” Mister Bryant reported.

Commander Dumar looked up at the massive view screen that covered the front bulkhead of the Karuzara’s main control room. The screen had gone black as it waited for new sensor input from which to redraw its map representing the asteroid’s current position.

“Position report!” Mister Bryant ordered.

“Arrays are coming up now!” the navigation controller answered.

“Emitters at zero energy,” the array controller reported.

“Energy banks also show zero,” the next controller added.

“Reactors are normal,” the power systems controller followed.

“All stations appear normal, sir,” Mister Bryant reported. “Sensors are coming online now.”

Dumar watched as the main view screen began to display computer-generated images of nearby objects detected by the asteroid’s many sensor arrays. The objects appeared, one by one, as data from the sensors poured into the navigational computers. First, an icon representing the star Palamor, then the super massive gas giant they were rapidly approaching. One by one, symbols for the rest of the planets in the system began to appear.

“Position verified,” the navigation controller announced. “On course for counter orbit around Palomar Three. Expect gravity assist maneuver to begin in three hours and forty-seven minutes.”

“We’re right on course,” Mister Bryant said with obvious satisfaction.

“That was only our fifth jump, Mister Bryant,” Commander Dumar said. “We still have one hundred and eight jumps to go.”

“Yes, sir.”

“How long until the scout ship is ready to launch?”

“Two more days, I believe.”

“We’ll be well beyond Takaran charted space by then,” Dumar said. “I’d feel a lot more comfortable if we had someone clearing our arrival points before we jump into them. I don’t want to discover another budding singularity like the Aurora did.”

“No sir,” Mister Bryant agreed. “That would definitely ruin our day. Still, you have to admit, it’s starting to look like this crazy plan might actually work.”

“Perhaps,” Dumar said, “but I’ll be more confident after we get the maneuvering systems installed and working.”

“Mister Delaney assures me that his crews will complete the task on schedule,” Mister Bryant told the commander, “and his opinion is certainly a well-qualified one.”

“His experience is in fitting asteroids with single-use deceleration thrusters for the purpose of transferring them to orbits around Corinair. This is quite a different task altogether.”

“I have faith in the old man,” Mister Bryant stated with confidence.

“Let’s hope your faith is not misplaced,” Commander Dumar said as he turned to exit the control center.

* * *

Loki peered in through the doorway to the starboard pilot’s briefing room prior to entering. The room was like a small auditorium, with progressively elevated rows of comfortable high-backed seats that formed an arc around the room, so that all the seats pointed directly at the podium. Behind the primary seating there was another level known as the gallery. It had four rows with ten seats in each row. Normally, it was covered by a retractable wall. Today, the wall was gone and half the gallery was filled with the additional flight crews from the sixteen four zero twos that had arrived the day before.

“What the hell are you waiting for?” Josh called from behind.

“We don’t usually attend these briefings,” Loki said under his breath.

“What are you talking about? We’ve been to several of them.”

“Not with this many people,” Loki said.

Josh peered into the room from behind Loki. “Damn, there are a lot of people in here, aren’t there.” Josh pushed Loki forward. “Come on, let’s find a seat.”

Josh stepped around Loki and started heading for a pair of seats in the back row of the main section of the briefing room.

“Where are you going?” Loki asked, seeming slightly panicked.

“There’s two seats over there, Loki.”

“In the middle of everyone? Maybe we should sit in the back?”

“Why?”

“Humor me.”

“Okay.” Josh turned and followed his friend up the steps along the side of the room and up to the second to the last row in the gallery, taking two of the empty seats near a cluster of Corinari pilots who had been on board the Aurora since they had first left the Pentaurus cluster. “Kind of far back, isn’t it?” he asked as they sat.

Loki looked across the rows of seats below. “Most of the four zero two crews are down front.”

“You know, it is better back here,” Josh realized. “We can make smart comments and the CAPT can’t hear us.”

“Just be quiet, Josh,” Loki warned. “There’s got to be a reason that Major Prechitt asked us to come to this briefing.”

“Yeah, it did seem kind of strange,” Josh agreed, “seeing as how we don’t have a ship, and all.”

Loki continued to scan the room. His brow furrowed slightly. He leaned toward Josh. “Why is everyone looking at us?”

“Because we’re famous, remember?” Josh waved at the some of the four zero two crews that were looking back toward them. “How’s it going, guys?”

“Oh, jeez, Josh,” Loki exclaimed. “You don’t even know them.”

“Hey, they’re looking at us, remember.”

“Remain seated!” Major Prechitt ordered as he entered the room with Major McCullum following close behind. Major Prechitt stepped up to the podium and immediately began to speak. “To those of you who have recently joined us, first I’d like to welcome you aboard. Second, I’d like to warn you that you might as well forget most of the combat tactics you learned in the Corinari, as ninety percent of it won’t work in the Sol sector. The Jung are a completely different type of pilot. They fight to the death, they don’t believe in surrender, and they don’t believe in mercy. Luckily, the Jung seem to believe in quantity over quality, as most of the pilots we’ve faced thus far were not that skilled. In addition, their ships, while fairly effective in space, are poorly designed for atmospheric flight. If you do run into a good pilot, get him to chase you down into the atmosphere and you’ll be able to fly in circles around him. Of course, none of that really matters to those of you flying the four zero twos, you’re better off using the jump and shoot approach rather than straightforward dogfighting. Do not let your instincts to engage the enemy, in the traditional sense, take over. You’ve been blessed with jump drives. In combat, I strongly suggest you use them. I urge you four zero two crews to review the flight data from all of the Falcon’s engagements. You’ll learn quite a bit.”

“Oh, don’t let your head start swelling up,” Loki said under his breath. He looked at Josh next to him, noticing the change in his posture and expression. “Too late.”

“Incidentally,” Major Prechitt continued, “the four zero twos will now be referred to as ‘J-F-Four Zero-Two Falcon’, or ‘Falcon’ for short. We will be forming a second air wing specifically for the Falcons. This wing will be under the command of Major McCullum.”

“That sucks,” Josh mumbled as the major continued his briefing. “There can only be one ‘Falcon’.”

“I don’t know,” Loki disagreed, “I think it’s pretty cool. Sort of an homage.”

Josh looked at him. “A what?”

“A sign of respect.”

“Yeah, right. None of those four zero twos will ever be *the* Falcon.”

“I know, but I still think it’s cool.”

“What do you know? You think *math* is cool.”

“That concludes my portion of this briefing,” Major Prechitt said. “The Falcon crews will remain for their flight assignments from Major McCullum. The rest of you are dismissed.”

“Well, that was certainly a waste of our time,” Josh said as he rose from his seat.

“Yeah, it kind of was,” Loki agreed, seeming surprised.

“Mister Hayes, Mister Sheehan,” Major Prechitt called out, “you two should remain as well.”

“Uh, oh,” Loki said. “What did you do?”

“I didn’t do anything,” Josh objected as he took his seat again.

“Then why is the CAG coming over here?” Loki wondered. “Did you make a face at him or something?”

“I swear, I didn’t do anything.”

Major Prechitt came up and took a seat in the row directly in front of them, pulling the release lever at the base of the seat and rotating it around so he could face them as Major McCullum continued to brief the four zero two crews below.

“Major, why are we here?” Josh asked with some skepticism.

“You’re here for two reasons. First, I want to give you a ship.”

“What, like a shuttle or something?” Josh asked with disdain.

“We’ll take it.” Loki interrupted without hesitation. “Hey, at least we’d be flying.”

“Actually, I was going to give you Major McCullum’s ship.”

“You’re giving us another Falcon?” Josh asked in disbelief.

“I thought you said there was only one Falcon?” Loki mumbled.

“Shut up.”

“Are you two finished?” the major asked.

“Sorry, sir,” Loki said.

“What’s the major going to fly?” Josh wondered.

“He’s going to be too busy setting up a new air wing for now. He can fly one of the ships from the next batch. So, do you want it?”

“Hell, yes,” Josh insisted.

“What about you, Loki?” Major Prechitt asked.

“A shuttle would be safer,” Loki admitted, remembering all the times Josh had put them at extreme risk.

“Shut up!” Josh scolded. “He’s in,” he told the major.

“Yeah, I’m in.”

“Great. There is a catch, however,” the major warned.

“Let me guess, we’re doing nothing but cold-coasts from now on,” Josh surmised.

“Actually, we’re not even going to let you do that. You’ll be running support missions for now until you finish basic flight training.”

“Uh, we already know how to fly, Major,” Josh pointed out.

“Actually, only Loki knows how to fly, Josh,” Major Prechitt explained. “You know how to pilot a ship. If you’re going to fly under Major McCullum’s wing, you’re going to need some additional training.”

Josh looked the major square in the eyes. “No disrespect intended, Major, but we all know that you can pilot just about anything better than anyone in this room, yourself included.”

Major Prechitt laughed. “You’ve never lacked confidence, have you, Josh. Look, I’m not arguing that you’ve got amazing skills, but you need a better knowledge base to go with them. Think about it, Josh. Think about how much more amazing you’d be with the right training. Understanding the how and why of flight makes you a better pilot. It makes you able to think your way out of a dangerous situation instead of just relying on your instincts.”

Josh smirked slightly, then reluctantly nodded his agreement. “I guess I can understand what you’re saying.” Josh sighed. “It’s just that, well, you see, I’ve never really had much education, Major. Hell, I was flying ground hoppers when I was ten. Then shuttles, and then the harvester. To be honest, I don’t understand how half the shit in that cockpit works. I just know how to use it.”

“That’s my point,” Major Prechitt said, “and don’t worry about the holes in your education. Loki has already been through formal flight school, so he already knows everything except for the tactical stuff. He can help you through the science and math.”

“Math,” Josh moaned.

“Don’t worry, Josh,” Loki said, “they let you use calculators.”

“Here’s the thing,” Major Prechitt continued, “Once you pass, we’re prepared to offer you both commissions.”

“In the Corinari?” Josh exclaimed. “Uh, neither of us are from Corinair, remember?”

“The Corinari have disbanded,” Major Prechitt explained. “The nations of Corinair have joined together and formed a unified planetary government. The ways of the Corinari no longer serve the needs of the military that will be replacing them. That’s why so many of them are volunteering to join the Alliance.”

“So you’re offering us commissions in the Alliance?” Loki asked.

“Once you complete your training, yes.”

“So, we’re going to be officers?” Josh wondered, again appearing skeptical.

“Correct.”

“Commander Hayes,” Josh said. “I like the sound of that.”

“How about you start off as ensigns and work your way up like everyone else.”

“Will I outrank Marcus?” Josh wondered.

“Master Chief Taggart? Yes, you would.”

“I’m in,” Josh answered without delay.

“When did Marcus become a master chief?” Loki wondered.

“That’s right,” Josh realized.

“Technically, he hasn’t, yet. The captain is going to promote him and offer him the job as chief of the boat.”

“What about Master Chief Montrose?” Loki asked.

“He’s going to be reassigned to the Celestia.”

“The Celestia barely has a crew,” Loki said.

“She’ll be getting a bigger crew soon enough,” Major Prechitt explained. “She’s going to need a COB she can trust.”

“Yeah, Marcus would drive her nuts,” Josh agreed.

“So you both agree to go through training?” Major Prechitt asked.

“Sounds good to me,” Loki said.

“If it means I can give orders to Marcus, then hell yes,” Josh agreed. “Are we going to fly at all the meantime?”

“That’s why you’re here, to get your next assignment,” the major explained. “You’ll start your training in a week or two, as soon as we get the Falcon wing all settled in.”

“Who’s going to be our instructor?” Loki wondered.

“You’re looking at him.”

“Great,” Josh moaned. “No offense, sir, but you can be kind of a dick sometimes.”

“It might be best if you didn’t start your military career off by insulting your instructor, Cadet Hayes,” Major Prechitt said as he rose to leave. “Gentlemen.”

“Real nice, Josh,” Loki said as the major left the room. “Real nice.”

“Hey, that’s Cadet Hayes to you,” Josh mumbled.

“Captain on deck!” the officer of the watch announced as Nathan entered the Aurora’s flight operations center.

Nathan moved through the center of the space to the plotting table at the center of the room, where Major Prechitt and one of his aides were studying sensor readings displayed on one of the many view screens clustered around the overhead. “Something to show me, Major?”

“Yes, sir,” Major Prechitt responded. “Right here,” he added, pointing at the view screen.

“What is that? A debris field?”

“Mostly, yes,” the major answered. “As you know, my people routinely perform after-action reviews of all combat data, comm traffic, and sensor records after every flight. These were from sensor downloads taken from the new Falcons during their engagement with the battle platform. This is a debris field from one of the plasma torpedo impacts, either ours or the Celestia’s—we haven’t determined which as of yet. This sensor image here is from one of the Falcons, just after it micro-jumped clear of the platform and swung back around to jump in again. It’s this object right here that’s the problem,” he said as he tapped on the screen to zoom in on the object in question.

“That doesn’t look like debris,” Nathan said with concern in his tone. “Its shape is too clean. How big is it?”

“About thirty-two meters, sir. We also see it in these sensor sweeps as well, all of them consecutive, right up to the point where the ship jumps back to reengage the platform.” Major Prechitt showed each frame in rapid succession. “That particular object is not following the same path as the rest of the debris being blown away from the platform. It’s steering a different course. Another Falcon caught glimpses of it as well, right up to the point it disappeared.”

“Disappeared?”

“Or went to FTL,” Major Prechitt said. “It’s about the size and shape you’d expect for a comm drone.”

“So you think the platform got a final message out before it came apart.” Nathan did not look happy. “And you’re telling me this two days later?”

“My apologies, Captain. We’re making things up as we go in regards to the four zero twos. It may take a few more days to get them fully integrated into our operational procedures. That’s why I’ve doubled-up the eyes on these sensor readings.”

Nathan sighed. “I suppose it doesn’t really matter. We couldn’t have done anything about it anyway.”

“We could try and track it, maybe knock it out of FTL and destroy it,” Major Prechitt suggested.

“For all we know, it’s one of many that were sent out,” Nathan told him.

“When they receive that comm-drone, it will undoubtedly include battle data. Assuming that the target was the platform in the Alpha Centauri system—which is the general direction it was headed in when it went into FTL—they’ll be able to analyze how we defeated the first platform and prepare our defense against that tactic.”

“Which means we have two choices,” Nathan said. “Either we come up with another way to take down a Jung battle platform, or go to Alpha Centauri and destroy the other one before that comm drone reaches them.”

“Captain, so far, the Jung FTL technology appears to work in similar fashion to that used by the Takarans. The most prudent assumption would be that the Jung comm-drones are at least as fast as the Takaran comm-drones were before they began using ZPEDs as their power source. If that is the case then...”

“I know,” Nathan interrupted, “that means we’ve got about two weeks.” Nathan sighed again, then looked at the major. “Got any other good news?”

* * *

“Tanna Control, Falcon Three One Eight,” Loki called over the radio.

“It’s a good thing you usually do the talking,” Josh said as he prepared their ship for entry into the upper atmosphere of the planet. “I’d still be referring to us as ‘Falcon’.”

“*This is Tanna Control,*” the voice answered over the comms. “*Who is calling?*”

“Tanna Control, this is Falcon Three One Eight. We are about to enter your atmosphere, en route for the Terran settlement spaceport.”

“*There is only one Falcon,*” the controller argued.

“That’s what I said!” Josh exclaimed.

“Well, now there are more,” Loki replied over the comms, “a lot more.”

“What the hell is with the ‘three one eight’ bit anyway?” Josh wondered. “I mean, I understand ‘one eight’, but what’s with the ‘three’?”

“It was Lieutenant Telles’s idea,” Loki said. “If there are any Jung spies monitoring transmissions, it will appear as if there are hundreds of us.”

“Seriously?”

“Maybe it has something to do with translating from English to Jung or something, I don’t know.”

“*Falcon Three One Eight, state the nature of your visit,*” the Tannan controller demanded.

“Tanna, Falcon Three One Eight is here to speak with members of the Terran settlement leadership, and to deliver a request from Captain Scott to the leaders of Tanna.”

“Like they could do anything to stop us if we decided to buzz downtown or something,” Josh mumbled from the front of the cockpit.

“Don’t even think about it, Josh.”

“I was just making an observation, Loki.”

“*Falcon Three One Eight. You are authorized to land at Terran settlement spaceport. Do not attempt flight to any other location until Tannan security forces have verified your identity. Do you understand?*”

“Tanna Control, Falcon Three One Eight, understood. Proceeding directly to Terran settlement spaceport to await Tannan security forces.”

Josh smiled. “New SOPs dictate that we jump from orbit to the surface to save fuel and wear on the airframe.”

“I don’t know, Josh,” Loki disagreed. “We might spook them.”

“They’ve had shuttles jumping down for weeks now,” Josh insisted.

“You’ve got a point.”

“Besides, what are they going to do, shoot at us with guns?” Josh waited for several seconds for

response, then turned his head slightly as if to look back at his friend sitting behind him. "It's protocol, remember?"

Loki sighed. "Plotting the jump," he finally said. "Nose down three and reduce speed to land. Come right twenty."

"Down three, right twenty, and decelerating hard," Josh answered.

"This isn't a combat jump, remember," Loki warned. "We'll jump in at five hundred meters on the twenty-kilometer final to the primary pad and sweep the area before we land."

"No problem," Josh agreed. "On course and speed."

"Jumping in three.....two.....one.....jump."

* * *

Abby sat behind her makeshift desk inside one of the few solid structures in the Terran settlement on Tanna. She had been reviewing the proposed fabrication schedule for going on three Tanna hours. It was boring, mind-numbing work, but she had volunteered to work on the planning committee in the hope of not only helping the fledgling settlement, but also to be in a position to hear news of Earth as soon as it arrived. The settlement's 'town hall' as it were, was located next to the spaceport that the Tannans had constructed before the first Terran refugees had even set foot on their world.

The Tannans had done a lot to help them. They were a technologically advanced society, but lacked the population necessary to support a large industrial base. Because of this, the Terrans were forced to fend for themselves with the resources eagerly provided by their hosts. It was a hard life, but it was safe.

"How does it look," the young woman asked from the doorway to Abby's office.

"Honestly, I don't think we can do much better than what has already been proposed," Abby said, offering the data pad to the woman. "Making more fabricators is not going to help unless the amount of processed material needed to keep them running is there, which it is not. I'm afraid we will have to make do with this schedule for now."

"Then I should tell the director that the schedule is approved?"

"Might as well," Abby answered.

A thunderous clap was heard in the distance. The young woman's eyes grew wide with fear, remembering the sounds of Jung bombs falling on the Earth in previous attacks. "What was that?" she exclaimed.

"It was a jump flash!" Abby said as she jumped to her feet.

"Are you sure?" the young woman asked.

"Trust me!" Abby exclaimed as she ran out of the room.

Abby dashed through the outer office and into the corridor, dodging other workers as she headed for the main entrance. Bursting through the doors, she ran several meters before stopping to turn around and look skyward. In the distance, she could see a familiar black object heading rapidly toward the spaceport on the other side of the building.

A Terran patrol cart pulled up behind Abby. "Everything all right, ma'am?" the security officer inquired.

Abby spun around. "Can you take me to the pad? I need to speak to that flight crew."

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