

Chapter 52: Conflagration

Earth Union, Earth Orbit, battlestar *Euryale*

“Report!” Commander Annabelle Isles ordered as she entered the battlestar’s CIC a moment after the massive ship shuddered from a nuclear near miss. She cut a striking figure as she held the plotting table; just under a meter seventy tall with an athletic figure, bobbed wine-red hair, dark blue eyes, and flawless porcelain white skin. “Cam?”

The man standing across from her at the plotting table raised his right index finger as he held a handset to his ear. Isles knew the news she was going to get was going to make the term ‘bad news’ sound like good news. “Bel...it’s the drones. They’re launching attacks across the system and we have no reason to doubt that it isn’t happening across the Union,” Colonel Camden Julii said after lowering the handset.

The ship shook from another near miss and Isles moved her attention to the overhead dradis display. “What’s the group’s status?” she asked and forced her fear, anger, and shock into small cubbyholes in her mind. The first task right now was to ensure the safety of the ship, then the group, and then hopefully there would be word from the Admiralty.

Julii slowly shook his head. “We were the only ones able to disengage from Argus Anchorage before the drones nuked it to oblivion.”

“Len,” Isles, her voice harder and her eyes narrowed, turned to the weapons officer, “we can shoot?”

The swarthy El Doradan nodded. “We can light ‘em up, Commander,” Captain Leonard Carrera replied.

“Good...Matt, get us to a higher orbit, please, so we have some room to run and gun,” Isles told the navigator, Captain Matthew Dearborn.

“Move us to a higher orbit, aye,” Dearborn repeated the order and then executed it.

“Elsa,” Isles said and paced over to the communications station. “Have we received any word from the Admiralty or Whiskey Mountain?”

Specialist Elsa Vickers shook her head before she answered, “Not a peep. I did hear a broadcast that implied the Round House and Presidential compound were both hit during the opening strikes.”

“Frak...” Isles muttered and tapped her fingernail on the edge of the console. “Any other traffic?”

“Fragments, Commander,” Vickers replied. “Some of the older ships seem to be having some major electronics malfunctions and there are a lot of krypter calls.”

“Ok...send this out on Fleet Priority One; All able assets are to form on us at the trailing Trojan. Send it using my credentials and tell them to get there now.”

“Copy, send; all able assets are to form on us at the trailing Trojan and they are to expedite arrival,” Vickers replied, and Isles nodded.

“Are we ready to launch our fighters?” Isles asked Julii.

“We can, they’re ready and anxious to go,” Julii replied. He was about to add something else but Vickers’ shout cut him short.

“Commander! We’re getting a hail from *Libertas*...” Vickers announced.

Isles felt her heart skip a beat. If there was one ship in the entire Union Fleet that could cause her to drop what she was doing and rush to its aid, it was *Libertas*. “Down here, please,” Isles stated and picked up the handset before motioning for Julii to do the same. “This is *Euryale* Actual,” she announced.

“*Euryale* Actual, this is *Libertas* Actual...Major Jean de Laurier in acting command,” de Laurier stated. “*Euryale* Actual, can you assist? We are taking hits and our FTL is temporarily offline.”

“Copy, *Libertas*, we will move to assist. What is your ETA on repairs?” Isles asked.

“Thank you, *Euryale*,” de Laurier replied gratefully. “We should be jump ready in ten, perhaps fifteen minutes at the most.”

Isles looked over to Dearborn. “Matt, how long to get us to *Libertas*’ position?”

“They’re almost on the other side of the planet...” Dearborn started.

“Jump us there,” Isles told him. “Frak the regs, we need to be there now.”

Dearborn nodded and failed to suppress a grin. Doing orbit to orbit jumps around the Union’s capital world was a career ending event; not just for the person who handled the jump, but every officer up to the ship’s commander would have been cashiered under normal circumstances. However, these weren’t normal circumstances. Dearborn acknowledged the order and a moment later said, “We can jump at your command.”

“Excellent!” Isles said, congratulating him. “Mr. Dearborn, you may jump the ship.”

“Copy, I may jump the ship,” Dearborn confirmed the order before he keyed the 1MC. “Action Stations! Action Stations, Set Emergency Jump Conditions! We jump in ten...nine...eight...”

Isles looked at the dradis as it suddenly started pinging off numerous objects that were CBDR to *Euryale*. It would be close...but her trained eye believed that the battlestar would jump before the incoming missile salvo would strike.

“...four...three...two...one...JUMP!” Dearborn announced and Isles felt the compression that seemed to last an infinite instant before reality returned to normal. “Jump complete, secure from Emergency Jump Conditions,” the navigator announced to the ship before turning to Isles, “We’re bang on target, Commander.”

Isles smirked. “Of course we are, otherwise I’d send you to bed without dinner.” She turned to Vickers, “Please raise *Libertas* and let them know we’re here.”

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“Is everyone away?” Commander Annabelle Isles asked Captain Matthew Dearborn a moment before both officers grabbed something to hold on to as the massive battlestar sustained another near miss.

“Aye,” Dearborn replied through clenched teeth and brushed a bloody lock of hair away from his eyes. Five minutes earlier the ship had sustained a one-two punch of nuclear hits that had thrown him into his console causing a large cut on his right temple. “*Libertas* boarded the last of the evacuees and just jumped to the rendezvous point.”

“Thank the gods,” Colonel Camden Julii swore.

“So say we all,” Isles replied. “Mr. Dearborn, I think it’s time we joined them. You may jump the ship when ready.”

“Aye, I have the ship,” Dearborn replied and then announced the imminent jump over the 1MC.

Isles looked at a pair of overhead monitors; one had been slaved to an optics cluster and showed a real-time view of Earth while the other displayed a still functioning webcam from the Olympus Bank building fifteen kilometers outside the capital. Both images tore at her heart and deep down she knew that she’d never see her adopted homeworld ever again. The ship’s optics showed a blue-white planet that was slowly turning grey and brown as more and more fallout was launched into the atmosphere from repeated nuclear strikes.

But what really tore her apart was the live feed from Olympus Bank. Someone had zoomed in the camera on the distant city center shortly after the attacks started and now the live feed showed half a dozen fallout plumes reaching into the sky, a city that was burning, and the devastation caused by both the thermal pulse from the weapons, but also the pressure wave that accompanied the detonations. Some buildings were shattered and flattened, others were nothing more than a defiant framework of girders and concrete. And then there were the bodies. Bodies were scattered around as if a giant child had thrown their dolls on the floor in a fit of rage.

You could clean up from conventional weapons, Isles thought to herself as Dearborn counted down the seconds before jumping the ship, but nukes changed the equation dramatically. You couldn’t just bring in crews to cart away the debris and rebuild, you had to wait years, decades, perhaps even centuries depending on what jacketed the warheads.

Earth was dead.

Earth would remain dead for a very, very long time.

“...three...two...one...jump!” Dearborn announced a moment before the battlestar’s FTL drive tore apart reality and built a wormhole from here to there, and then pushed the ship through.

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Earth Union, Ganymede System, Acheron Anchorage, battlestar *Medusa*

For an uncounted time in the past few minutes, Commander Feleena Kaylen looked at the chronometer mounted next to the repeater displays on her office wall. She felt like she had just sucked down several Pixie Stix, and not the little ones, but the big, giant sized ones, when she was a child. The nervous energy almost had her hand trembling. Deep down, she knew something was wrong.

“Kaylen,” she answered after he put the handset to her ear after the intercom buzzed.

“Commander, this is Daidone in CIC,” Captain Alphonse Daidone said a moment later. His voice, normally a deep, rich baritone, carried a trace of unease as he spoke. “There’s an unscheduled flight that’s on final approach,” he started, and those words alone would have raised a warning flag to Kaylen. Acheron Anchorage was one of the most closely guarded secrets in the Union Fleet; it was the home to those projects that those without a need to know weren’t supposed to know about. “The flight crew reported that they have a Commander Jessica Raynes aboard and that it’s urgent she see you immediately.”

Now Kaylen know that something was wrong. Her adopted sister just didn’t show up unannounced, and certainly didn’t do it while she was deployed. “Do their bona fides check out?”

“Aye, they do,” Daidone answered. “Whatever they told Acheron Traffic Control got them routed directly here without going through the meet-n-greet at the anchorage.”

Frak, Kaylen thought. “Ok...have her brought to my quarters as soon as she lands...and...damn...is the XO around or are you still the OOD?”

“Colonel DeMer just arrived,” Daidone replied.

“Good...please put him on,” Kaylen requested.

A moment later, a familiar El Doradan voice came on the line. “Hands shaking, Leena?” he asked.

“Yeah...I’m so wound up I think if you poked me, I’d snap like a wound-up spring,” Kaylen chuckled. “Silas...I have a bad feeling,” she continued. “Bring us to Action Stations and set Condition Two throughout, and push that out to *Ersa* and *Eiresione*, too.”

“Copy, Action Stations and Condition Two, pushed out to our little friends, too,” DeMer repeated the order.

“Thanks. I...” Kaylen paused and searched for the right word.

“Yeah, me, too,” DeMer said and saved her the trouble. “My gut is churning like I’m waiting for the rattlesnake to strike.”

“Good...I’m sure when Jess gets here the picture will clear up,” Kaylen hoped. “Also, talk to David about making sure we double the guards at any access point.”

“You think we might be boarded?” DeMer asked.

“I don’t know...and that’s what scares me, Silas,” Kaylen told her XO.

“I’m on it, Leena,” DeMer told her.

A moment later she ended the call and called up a census of what was currently on site at the anchorage. Strangely, the portion of the anchorage devoted to the Chrome Brigades was almost devoid of tonnage; the only ship present was the *Ba’al Hadad* class baseship *Ninazu*. *Dabria* was set to go out on patrol in a few hours, her sister *Libitina* was already in the graving dock, her ordnance scheduled to be unloaded, and her crew ready to be dispatched on leave. Beyond that, other than a swarm of small craft, the only ships present, other than her own group, were *Cloud Giant* and *Stargazer Lily*, both unarmed transports.

Kaylen's reverie was disturbed by a knock on her door and her intercom buzzing. "Kaylen," she answered.

"Commander, this is Sergeant Trone; Commander Raynes is here for you," Sergeant Robert Trone explained.

"Thanks, Bob, please send her in," Kaylen replied and put the handset back on its cradle.

Kaylen stood and stepped around her desk as her oldest adopted sister stepped through the hatch. As soon as she saw Commander Jessica Raynes' face, she knew that her bad feeling had just found its proof. "Jess...welcome to *Medusa*..." she managed to say before Raynes grabbed her in a fierce hug.

"Sister..." Raynes began, and Kaylen found herself looking down from her meter eighty-three height down at Raynes' meter fifty-seven. Despite being the youngest of the three foundlings, Kaylen was the tallest, while Raynes, the oldest, was the shortest. "I see you've called *Medusa* to Action Stations?" she made the question sound like a statement.

"Yes...I've had a bad feeling all morning," Kaylen replied and stepped back and studied Raynes. Her sister was petite, with long black hair framing liquid blue eyes in an attractive face. As always, her uniform was impeccable, and the only thing that gave anything away was the visible tension around her eyes. "What's wrong, Jess?"

Raynes reached into her pocket and withdrew a data card. "The drones are going to launch a Union wide attack in less than an hour. I need you to broadcast the Endless Love protocols on that data card in the clear and on every frequency the drones use. Also, on that...are orders to nuke the drone facilities if Endless Love doesn't work."

"Whoa...back up, Jess..." Kaylen told her sister. "Let's take this from the beginning."

Raynes nodded and paced nervously. "We started seeing some odd communications yesterday. It was more volume than normal, and they were encoded using a new cypher that we didn't have," she explained. "When they were questioned about it, the drones claimed it was data optimization routines. That didn't explain the unknown encryption. We got concerned when several drone ships sailed without direct orders. The drones passed it off as a readiness exercise.

"By now, we were getting pretty nervous and isolated several drones and gave them the verbal override command." Raynes stopped pacing and turned to face Kaylen. "Leena...it didn't work. In less than a heartbeat they killed the intervention team and tried to break out of confinement. I was sent to brief the President and then to meet with Admiral Richardson."

Kaylen nodded. Meeting with the President was understandable given the threat, and briefing Admiral Lawson Richardson, the director of Fleet Special Operations was also understandable. "What happened?"

"President Marquette, thankfully, took the warning seriously and I assume her security people have her someplace secure," Raynes explained. "Admiral Richardson told me to come here and enact the Endless Love protocols." She paused a moment, "Leena, if the transmission isn't effective then you are authorized to nuke them off the map."

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“I have the con,” Commander Feleena Kaylen said as she strode into *Medusa’s* CIC, Commander Jessica Raynes close on her heels.

“Commander has the con,” Colonel Silas DeMer replied and looked expectantly at Kaylen.

“Silas, I need you to verify the authenticity of the orders on this data card,” Kaylen said and handed him the original card that Raynes had given her just minutes earlier. She then turned to Lieutenant Gish DePalma, “Gish, I need to you begin continuously transmitting the information contained on this card,” she handed the communications officer another data card, “on all the frequencies used by the drones.”

“Broadcast the contents of this data card continuously on all the frequencies used by the drones, aye,” DePalma replied and inserted the card into a reader slot.

“Commander?” DeMer said and got Kaylen’s attention. “The orders are authentic,” he said, a haunted undercurrent to his voice.

Kaylen felt her mouth go dry. Until now, this could have all been an elaborate readiness drill, something to verify that *Medusa* was mission ready, but the orders being authentic without any sort of rider or caveat told her that not only were they real, but she was most likely going to launch a nuclear strike within the next few minutes.

“Thank you, Colonel,” Kaylen formally replied. “Mr. Tesla, please ensure that Hydras are loaded in tubes one and two, then spin up birds one and two and prepare for a nuclear launch order on my authority targeting them at the drone reservation at Acheron Anchorage. XO, please confirm that we have a valid launch order.”

DeMer nodded a moment before he spoke, “I concur; I have validated the orders and confirm that we have a valid launch order. The release of nuclear weapons is authorized per Presidential order and issued through the appropriate Admiralty channels. Mr. Tesla, verify that Hydras are loaded in tubes one and two, then spin up birds one and two and prepare for the launch order.”

Captain Selene Tesla’s jaw muscles clenched momentarily before she nodded. “The launch order has been issued and confirmed. Tubes one and two are presently loaded with Hydra XI missiles and are now being spun up for launch.”

Kaylen nodded, “Thank you, Mr. Tesla.” She took a breath, held it for a five count, closed her eyes, and allowed her mind to slip into a transcendent state that she had possessed all her life. She saw a familiar blue-white world and shook her head. “No...” she whispered and shook her head again to clear the image. That image wasn’t helping, she thought, it never helped.

“Colonel DeMer,” Kaylen said in a clear voice as she unbuttoned the top two buttons of her khaki colored uniform blouse and fished out a key from where it hung between her breasts, “Please remove your launch key and on my order insert it into the nuclear weapons control panel.” The key was warm in her hand and felt heavier than the ten grams it actually weighed. The dialog she was speaking was one that every officer assigned to a nuclear armed ship had to learn by heart; it was precise, measured, and was the only legal way that nuclear weapons could be launched or released.

The CIC was silent except for the sweep and pings from the dradis and Kaylen felt her staff's eyes on her as she worked through the authorization sequence. She held the key in her right hand and used the side of her index finger to flip open the protective cover for the Commander's key. Across the plotting table, DeMer was mirroring her actions and seemed to be just as shocked as she was that they were actually going to unleash *Medusa's* nuclear teeth. "On one we will insert our key and on three we will turn it to the right until it stops."

"Copy," DeMer acknowledged. "On one we will insert our key and on three we will turn it to the right until it stops."

Kaylen offered a brief nod and held her key over the key slot. "Zero!" Both officers moved their keys so that they were just outside the slot. "One!" They both slid their keys into the key slot. She met DeMer's gaze and saw the same determination he applied to any task. A mental image of a little version of herself sitting on the edge of her desk, large glasses riding low on her nose, and her left hand cupping her chin as its index finger extended up along her nose; a classic thinking pose, and she wondered whether he had the same look when he was getting ready to have sex. She suppressed the unasked for thought and image and forced herself not to chuckle or smirk.

"Two!" Kaylen stated and paused giving each of them a chance to abort the authorization.

"Three!" Kaylen finally said firmly and twisted the key to the right, felt the detent adding pressure to the turn, and finally the click as the key passed the detent and confirmed that *Medusa's* commander had authorized a nuclear launch order.

"Nuclear release has been verbally and mechanically authorized," Kaylen said emotionlessly and removed her hand from the key.

"Commander?" Tesla asked to get Kaylen's attention. "Birds one and two are spun up and we have a green board for them."

"Thank you, Selene," Kaylen replied and then looked across the plotting table where Raynes stood next to DeMer and felt the weight of command and the order she was about to give firmly settle onto her shoulders. Others might carry out the order, but she was the one who was responsible for giving it...responsible for dooming the almost one thousand military and civilian contractors who were assigned to the drone reservation that was part of Acheron Anchorage.

"Gish? Are you getting anything from the transmission?" Kaylen asked and met Raynes' blue gaze and saw genuine fear on her adopted sister's face.

"Negative, Commander. I've sent the message and have it on continuous loop, but I haven't received any reply," DePalma replied.

"Al, any activity?" Kaylen asked Captain Alphonse Daidone.

"Nothing on dradis and no dradis emissions," Daidone started, "just like it should be. I did slave one of our optics clusters to the reservation...and..."

"Put it on display," Kaylen told him.

"It'll be on 3, Commander," Daidone replied. "I...am I seeing what I think I am?"

The screen showed the station that was dedicated to the Chrome Brigades, the baseship *Ninazu*, and what looked like a cloud of oddly shaped debris floating next to them. Kaylen felt her mouth suddenly go dry and saw Raynes slightly bow her head and close her eyes. “Zoom in, please,” she managed to force the words from her mouth.

What once looked to be blurry specks suddenly zoomed into to show their true nature. “Frak...” Kaylen heard DeMer swear.

“Mr. Tesla, launch birds one and two,” Kaylen said and looked back at the screen and the human bodies floating alongside the drone baseship and station.

“Aye, launch birds one and two,” Tesla replied and a moment later added, “Birds one and two have been launched and are running hot, straight, and normal.”

“It is done,” Raynes said and sighed.

The dradis tracked the two Hydra XI missiles and the two new pings suddenly turned into many pings as the missiles deployed their submunitions and decoys. Five seconds later, the weapons detonated and all but destroyed the station and docked baseship. “Sunrise,” DeMer said as the optical feed darkened for a brief moment before showing the wreckage.

“Gish, have we heard anything from Traffic Control or the Harbor Master?” Kaylen asked after watching the destruction for several moments.

“No...we haven’t,” DePalma replied. “Wait one...” she added and quickly spoke into the headset that connected to the ship’s wireless system. “Ah...I just hailed them and didn’t receive a response.”

“Silas, coordinate with David and get some Marines over there to take a look,” Kaylen said after a moment’s thought. “Tell him to prepare for a worst-case situation and that they are cleared guns hot on any drone they see.”

“Copy,” DeMer acknowledged and picked up his handset to implement Kaylen’s orders.

“What can I do?” Raynes asked.

“Help me organize whoever survived...we’re going to strip what we can and...go home,” Kaylen told her.

“Home? Or home-home?” Raynes pressed.

“Home-home,” Kaylen told her. “I feel...I feel drawn there and it’s well out of the way.”

Raynes looked at her and cocked her head slightly and Kaylen knew what she was thinking. She and her two adopted sisters were...found...when she was four years old under circumstances that were still sealed from her eyes. They knew where they were found, but it seemed that things...happened...whenever she, Raynes, or her other sister tried to return.

“Ok...” Raynes replied. “Can I take over the Flag briefing room?”

“It’s yours,” Kaylen said before turning her attention to DePalma. “What is it, Gish?”

“*Cloud Giant* and *Stargazer Lily* have both contacted me asking what just happened,” DePalma explained.

“Tell them that this is an evolving situation and that we took the action we did because the drones have been compromised,” Kaylen told her. “Also, tell them that I expect to hold a briefing in ninety minutes and should have more information at that time.”

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Earth Union, Deep Space, battlestar *Euryale*

Commander Annabelle Isles rested her elbows on her desk and held her palms to her forehead as she fought her body’s desire to cry. Her hopes that a significant portion of the Fleet would rally at Earth’s trailing Trojan Point were dashed when only four ships arrived. Four, and one of them was a civilian auxiliary, was all that was able to rally out of the mighty Earth Union Fleet. She stoically accepted the information in the CIC before they jumped and now that the jump was complete, and she was in her office alone, it felt like the weight of the world was on her shoulders.

What really drove home the point that today really was the end of the world as she knew it was the piece of paper on the desk between her elbows. The message had been received right before they jumped and was decrypted immediately afterward and was the one message that all senior capital ship commanders were briefed about but never expected to ever see; Emergency War Order Precipice.

C’mon, Bel, she thought, pull yourself together; you have to give a briefing in fifteen minutes and can’t go out there looking like a schoolgirl who just got dumped after giving up her virtue. Isles closed her eyes and took a calming breath. Her thought wasn’t that far off the mark, she was young for her position, very, very young, though not as young as her younger sister who held a similar rank. Maturity and learning had come easy for the three foundlings once they were introduced to it. It was as if they already knew the information and just had to see it to realize they not only knew it but understood it and knew how to best apply it.

By the time her older sister was ten, they all had the equivalent of a four year post graduate education. By the time they were fifteen they were already in junior leadership positions, and now at the ripe old age of thirty, she was in command of a battlestar that suited her temperament, as was her younger sister in one that suited hers. Her older sister, though, focused on intelligence and finding patterns where there were none and needles in haystacks.

Many times, she wondered, both privately and with her sisters, just who and what they really were. The official story, and one that was backed up by fragmentary memories, was that they were children of scientists from an unsettled world. Something, neither of them were sure just what it was, happened, and the Union arrived to rescue them. Her older sister, using some of her contacts, was able to peel away at least the first layer or two of the onion that obscured their heritage to learn that there was no record of their parents, or anyone who was found when they were rescued, in any Union database or census.

So, who were they?

Any chance of finding out had died with the Union.

That question, Isles decided, was one that she had to accept had no available answer.

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“Where are we going?” Major Jean De Laurier asked. *Libertas’* acting commander was someone that Isles expected to be part of the crew on the Presidential transport; tall, freakishly fit, dark hair groomed to perfection, piercing grey eyes, and a face that seemed to jump between ‘boyishly good looks’ and ‘vid star’.

“We’re going to jump to Stonehenge, resupply if we can, evacuate the small population, and then we’re going to do exactly what our orders told us to do,” Commander Annabelle Isles told him and the other four senior officers in the briefing.

“I...” De Laurier paused for a moment, then forged ahead, “Why Stonehenge?”

“Because it’s on the far fringe of explored space, has little to no real industry, has a fair bit of ranching and agriculture, and I think it will serve as a good jumping off point,” Isles explained, not giving away her real reason for choosing that specific world.

De Laurier nodded and pursed his lips. “That makes sense, if we’re going to be on our own for a couple years, we’re certainly going to need the supplies.”

“Colonel Dawkins, what does the larder look like?” Isles asked Colonel Rutherford Dawkins, the commander of the sole replenishmentstar that rallied to her call.

“*Bounty* is full to the gills, Commander,” Dawkins replied professionally as Isles studied his body language. There was some tension around his eyes and jaw line, but he refrained from many of the other nervous tell-tales that she expected. The bespectacled man wore his dirty blond hair within regulations, but in a style more befitting a business executive than a military officer. He wasn’t fit like De Laurier, but had a friendly and approachable softness about him that seemed to inspire trust and confidence while radiating competence. “I spoke with Colonel Noble and we’d like to replace the training rounds in *Christian Sands’* magazines with live ordnance.”

“Make it happen, Ford,” Isles told him and by extension Colonels Marco Noble and Eirene Suter, *Christian Sands’* commander and headmistress respectively. “Speaking of which, how are the cadets?” Now she did address Noble and Suter.

Noble and Suter shared a look before the headmistress spoke, “Many are still in shock, but we’re keeping an eye on everyone. I think things were somewhat mitigated by having so many friends and family members visiting today that the shock they might have experienced was somewhat lessened.”

“Good...that’s something that we are all going to need to keep an eye on, mental health. We’re sailing in uncharted space and our resources are going to be stretched to the limits,” Isles told them. “We’re going to have half an hour between each jump, and we’ve planned four jumps to get to Stonehenge, so we’ll have an hour and a half of down time, I’d like to use that time to perform UNREP for *Euryale* and *Sands*; I’m still a little jumpy being this close to things.”

“Commander,” Captain Barney Jessup said and raised his hand. “I’ve spoken with my purser and he’s compiling an inventory of our cargo. Some of it is finished textiles, clothing, some electronics, and a load of specialty foods from Ass End of Nowhere. I should have the exact manifest ready for your review later today.”

“Ass End steaks?” Isles grinned. “I like it. In fact...I’d like for us to plan on having a really good meal once we get to Stonehenge, to celebrate our survival. How does that sound?”

Her suggestion met with approval and a few minutes later the meeting ended. After the last person left the conference room, Colonel Camden Julii slipped in and sat across from Isles. “How did it go?”

“Better than I expected. De Laurier seemed to be resistant on going to Stonehenge, while Dawkins already had a plan to get us through the next few days,” Isles explained.

“They’re in shock, this was something that could never happen, until it did,” Julii told her. “I used to date De Laurier’s older sister; he’s a good guy and once he processes what happened, he’ll be good to go.”

“Oh?” Isles arched an eyebrow at Julii’s revelation and then smirked. “Is his sister as hot as he is scrumptious?”

Julii chuckled. “She’s the thing that dreams are made of,” he mused. “I...” he suddenly turned serious, “I hope she’s ok. We broke up because our careers took us in different directions, but while it lasted, we had something real.”

“You never know, Cam...she might have been visiting her brother when all this went down...” Isles teased.

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Earth Union, Stonehenge Orbit, battlestar *Medusa*

This is what Earth must have looked like before we made landfall, Commander Feleena Kaylen thought as she studied the display that showed the serene blue-white planet below. For the past year or so, she had felt an ever-stronger pull to return to Stonehenge, to try and find an explanation for who, and when she was honest, what she was. It was readily apparent to anyone who saw her that she was exceptionally young for her position, and if they had a chance to read the classified portions of her service jacket, they would have incontrovertible proof that while she might physically be human, there was something decidedly unhuman about her cognitive abilities and ability to learn.

Kaylen knew her sisters had the same traits and that each one of them had something slightly unique about them. Jessica Raynes, the eldest, had a knack for critical thinking that far exceeded almost anyone in the Fleet. Annabelle Isles, her middle sister, was off the charts when it came to spatial awareness and individual tactics. Herself, she reflected, was the master planner, tactician, and strategist, being able to see both the big picture and little picture and knowing how best to apply the assets available to overcome whatever obstacle might be in the way.

Unlike her sisters, however, she had something they didn’t; precognition. It wasn’t always active, but when it was, what it showed always happened. As Kaylen grew up as a child, she realized that by working with her sisters that often Raynes would provide the context and Isles often stormed the issue.

Individually, each woman was exceptional, but when they joined forces, they became an unbeatable force of nature.

And now, Kaylen reflected, she had come home...home-home as Raynes called it. This was where the Union found them twenty-four years ago. Despite all three girls having eidetic memories, none of them had anything more than fragments of memories and flash images of life before the Union Marines arrived. There was no record of anyone found in the compound anywhere in the Union. The forty-seven men, forty-five women, and three children were complete unknowns. Their faces and DNA weren't in any database, the identity documents were all forgeries, and despite the presence of cutting edge medical and research equipment, no institute of higher learning had any record of the ninety-two adults.

"You have that look, Leena," Commander Jessica Raynes said and broke Kaylen's reverie.

Kaylen nodded, "Yeah, I guess I do. I was thinking about us...going downstairs and getting a look at where we were found."

"But it's just us...Bel..." Raynes said, and Kaylen understood what she had left unsaid.

"Soon, Jess, soon..." Kaylen told her.

Raynes narrowed her eyes and met Kaylen's gaze, "She survived?"

"She did," Kaylen confirmed. "That's why we're going to wait until she arrives before we go downstairs. It won't be long."

"You scare me sometimes," Raynes told her sister before her face clouded somewhat. "Ah..."

"What is it, Jess?" Kaylen asked.

Raynes stood from where she had been sitting on the other side Kaylen's desk and began to pace. "I've thought about us a lot; you, Bel, me...and I've spun things around a hundred and eighty degrees to look at it from a different direction and what I'm coming up with...it scares me."

"Now you have me concerned," Kaylen said and studied her sister's body language. They had all been adopted by different parents, but they were raised in the same communal setting, so while they may not have shared physical traits, they were sisters where it mattered.

"Ok...I'm the oldest, then Bel, then you," Raynes began. "I'm shortest, then Bel, and then you're the tallest. My focus is somewhat narrow...Bel's critical thinking isn't near mine, but it's damned good, and she's unbeatable when it comes to individual tactics."

"You're scaring me, Jess," Kaylen said as what her sister said began running down the rabbit holes of her mind.

"I was when I first considered it," Raynes admitted and stopped pacing. "You...you're the youngest, tallest, and have the broadest range of talents...and then there's the other thing you have."

"What you're suggesting is...the Union doesn't have the technology to do that," Kaylen countered.

Raynes shrugged. "And yet here we are..." she started before the klaxon sounded.

"Action Station, Action Stations, set Condition One throughout the ship! This is not a drill!" Captain Alphonse Daidone's voice ordered over the 1MC.

Kaylen smiled at her sister, “Bel’s arrived.” She reached for the handset a moment before it buzzed for her attention. “Kaylen. Is that *Euryale*?” she asked.

“How the hell do you do that?” Colonel Silas DeMer asked. “We received their bona fides a few moments after they jumped in.”

“Good...please have Gish reach out and contact *Euryale* and have it routed down here,” Kaylen said and leaned back. Yes, she thought, things are coming together.

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“I have to ask,” Commander Feleena Kaylen asked, “you’re certain that this is legit?”

Commander Annabelle Isles slowly nodded. “I’m afraid so, Leena,” she answered her sister. “I was there when we received it and I watched it be decrypted and printed. I...” she paused and blinked her eyes several times, “I saw Earth... the drones nuked it far beyond reason. Even if I didn’t have confirmation, after seeing that, my gut would tell me it’s real.”

“Jess?” Kaylen asked her sister’s opinion. Ever since they were children, even though she was the youngest, she seemed to be the one the others turned to for leadership.

“Two things...” Commander Jessica Raynes said and held up her right index finger. “First, there is no higher authority and thus no one to enforce the rules other than our adherence to following them, so...we could simply find someplace that hasn’t been hit and go to ground and slowly rebuild. Two,” she added her middle finger to her index finger, “we follow them and hopefully meet other survivors about five years from now.”

“Your suggestion?” Isles prodded her older sister.

“Metaphorically, I want heads on pikes. I want to go to Stormhaven and hit the place with a near-c rock and crack it into itty bity pieces,” Raynes replied. “But...that really won’t do any good as the drones don’t really need it. My vote is that we take a five-year cruise.”

“Bel?” Kaylen asked.

Isles slowly nodded. “Yeah, I agree with Jess...five-year cruise. What is your opinion?”

Kaylen leaned back in her high-backed chair and crossed one long leg over the other before she answered the question. “What I want is immaterial, I have to think of those I have a duty of care to provide for, and even if we stay here or find someplace else, it’s a matter of time before the drones find us if we stay in Union space. We have a plan, we have a destination, and for now that is going to have to be the hope that drives us forward.”

“Do you think anyone else made it out?” Isles asked.

Raynes nodded. “Absolutely. The drones had surprise, but their numbers weren’t enough that they would have overwhelming superiority in every system simultaneously. I ran some estimates before you arrived and I think that some of the more remote worlds stood a higher chance of a successful evacuation than the inner worlds, so I’m hopeful.”

“Good, I’d hate to have the weight of being the sole survivors of the Union on our shoulders,” Kaylen said soberly. “In about ten minutes,” she said after confirming the time from the chronometer on the wall, “we’re going to brief the other command officers...but first, I think we need to make a call to some very nervous people downstairs.”

“What do you mean?” Isles asked. “Why would they be nervous? Well, other than the obvious.”

“We’ve identified *Lex Talionis* and two other Erisian gunstars on the surface,” Kaylen explained. “They may not be Fleet, but they are human, and I really doubt that the drones are going to care about the hull color or uniform they wear.”

“That’s something I could never figure out,” Raynes mused. “For what are essentially administrative differences, why did things start going way back when?”

“Before my time,” Kaylen smirked, “but I chalk it up to people being people; get the right demagogue and you can make Zeus’ clergy tear down his temple.”

“No...” Isles shook her head. “I think there’s more going on...well...was going on; it’s a moot point now.”

“Yeah, you’re probably right,” Kaylen conceded. “I’ll make the call to *Lex Talionis*...last I heard Baz Martel was in command.”

Isles arched an eyebrow. “Heartbreaker has *Lex*?”

Kaylen sighed and nodded. “Yes...”

“You sure you’re the right person to call?” Isles asked. “I mean...you did...”

“Yeah...but a couple years later we crossed paths and resolved the issue,” Kaylen told her sisters. “I was young, stupid, and when I found out...I lashed out.”

“Ok...” Isles told her. “I’ll trust you on this.”

Kaylen picked up the handset and called the CIC. After Colonel Silas DeMer answered, she explained what she needed and a moment later heard the two beeps that indicated she had been transferred to the ship’s wireless system and then the crackle and pop that indicated the transmission was being encrypted. “Erisian gunstar *Lex Talionis*, this is the Union battlestar *Medusa*, please answer this hail; we wish to parlay...” she said and paused for a moment before repeating the hail.

“*Medusa*, this is *Lex Talionis* Actual, we’re listening,” a male voice answered.

“*Lex* Actual, this is *Medusa* Actual, is that you Baz?” Kaylen asked.

“Leena?” the voice asked.

“Yes,” Kaylen confirmed.

“If it was anybody but you, I wouldn’t have answered,” Colonel Basil Martel answered. “What brings you out to the middle of nowhere?”

Kaylen chuckled. “Because it is the middle of nowhere, Baz. Do you still remember your briefing when you were given command of *Ra*?”

“Yes...” Martel said hesitantly. “Anything specific?”

Kaylen’s answer was one word, “Precipice.”

“Yes, I remember Precipice. It was a doomsday scenario that no one thought would ever be needed. I know that we’re in no position to force something that extreme,” Martel replied.

“No...you aren’t,” Kaylen stated definitively. “However, the drones are...and have. I’d like to extend a white flag of truce so you and a deputy can attend a briefing that I’m going to hold shortly. I’ll have my comms officer transmit you the Emergency War Order and some other supporting data,” she said formally. After a brief pause, her voice lost the formality, “Baz, they’re systematically destroying every world, going full scorched earth. We’re going to evacuate everyone on Stonehenge and then set out...I’d like you and your people to join us.”

“Ah...It isn’t that I don’t believe you,” Martel started. “But before I commit to anything, I’m going to need to see the order and the evidence.”

“I understand and I’ll have my comms officer send them momentarily,” Kaylen offered. “In the meantime, I’m going to postpone the briefing until I hear back from you.” She paused for several moments, “Baz...we were close once and were good friends...I...I don’t want to leave anybody behind. Look at the material and come to the briefing...whatever issues we might have had...personal or professional, are over. As far as I’m concerned, the Crisis is over; right now, it’s everyone who’s flesh and blood on one side, and everything that’s alloy and circuits on the other.”

“I hear you, Leena...” Martel said, still sounding a little unsure. “Send it over and I’ll let you know in five minutes.”

“All I can ask, Baz,” Kaylen told him.

“Well, that went better than I expected,” Isles said after Kaylen ended the call and had the information transmitted to *Lex Talionis*.

“So what happened?” Raynes asked. “Between you and Martel?”

“We were in a course together at the War College and I had the biggest crush on him; he was older, handsome...damned near scrumptious, and it took the entirety of the eight week course for me to work up the courage to ask him out...he didn’t seem like he was going to ask me, so I had to do it myself. After I asked, he smiled, shook his head, and said he was married. That was bad enough. Then, when the class ended, we had just checked out of BOQ when this guy walks up, gives him a hug, and then lays a lip lock on him the likes of which would have started a dead star. Baz asked him if he had checked into the hotel yet, and that’s when I knew that the guy I was crushing on was gay.

“I was pissed, hurt, angry...I mean, I was eighteen, and even though I had almost a decade in uniform and was mature for my age, I really wasn’t that experienced in matters of the heart,” Kaylen explained and hung her head. “I said some mean things...things I shouldn’t have said and had no right saying, and when I worked out on the punching bag, it was his face I saw. Woman scorned? Oh, hell yes! Then, about two months after that, I’m on leave in Thera Bay sitting at this little boardwalk bistro. A woman, a few years older than I was, and wearing a bikini that left little to the imagination, sat down, waved over a server, and ordered a Planter’s Punch.

“Before I could say anything, she told me her name was Marta and that she was Baz’s wife,” Kaylen paused and sipped her coffee. “Over the next couple minutes, she explained that what I saw wasn’t the whole story and that she had, without Baz’s knowledge, sought me out to try and clear the air.”

“He’s a poly?” Raynes asked.

Kaylen nodded. “Marta told me that she, Dax, Baz, Holly, and Angelle were a poly moresome, and that they were all one big...family.”

“Wow...” Isles chuckled. “What happened next?”

Kaylen smirked. “I won’t go into details, but we worked things out and afterward I contacted some of the people I vented to and retracted everything.”

“Only you, little sister,” Raynes chuckled and was interrupted by the intercom buzzing.

“Kaylen,” Kaylen answered the call.

“Commander, I have Colonel Martel on the wireless for you,” Lieutenant Gish DePalma said.

“Excellent, please patch him through,” Kaylen asked.

“My gods, Leena...it’s all true...” Martel said hollowly before Kaylen could say anything. “It’s all destroyed...”

“Yes...” Kaylen said, it was the only thing she could say without sounding trite.

“Are you holding the briefing on *Medusa*?” Martel asked.

“I am. Are you close with any of the locals down there?” Kaylen asked.

Martel chuckled. “You could say I am...my parents moved here when I was four. I’ll bring the mayor of the main settlement, though you may need to come down to talk directly to the Colony director.”

“Colony?” Kaylen asked.

“I’ll explain when I get there,” Martel told her. “They’re a...social organization of sorts...that broke off from the main settlement about twenty years or so back. Because I’m from Freeport, anything I say will be viewed with suspicion.”

“Ok...” Kaylen agreed. “I have to go to the surface anyway on a personal matter, so stopping there can be built into the timeline.”

“Good...I’m going to leave in a few minutes and should be there about five minutes later,” Martel stated.

“Oh...I’m bringing my XO with me...she says she’d like to meet you again.”

“Oh?” Kaylen asked, not sure who he was talking about.

“Yes,” Martel replied, his voice sounding cryptic, yet Kaylen could detect a smile in it. “You must have made quite an impression on Marta when she tracked you down to bury the hatchet.”

Kaylen felt her face flush, “Oh...yes...you, ah...know about that?”

Martel chuckled. “Yes, we don’t have secrets in my family.”

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Commander Feleena Kaylen stood with Commander Jessica Raynes on her left and Commander Annabelle Isles on her right and waited for the airlock to cycle. Also present was a squad of Marines in full battle-rattle to provide an honor guard for the Union colors and boatswain who piped aboard the visiting officer. All had boarded save one, those from *Lex Talionis*, the Erisian gunstar.

“I heard rumors, friend of a friend’s uncle’s third cousin twice removed’s sister’s boyfriend’s father sort of thing, that there was going to be a high-level meeting between a presidential envoy and the Erisians today,” Raynes said softly while they waited.

“Oh?” Isles asked. “Do you know who was involved on our side?”

“Sean Marlowe,” Raynes replied and smiled.

“Oh...that man is just...ummm...” Isles almost shuddered. Her affinity for older men was well known by her sisters, and by any account, Vice Admiral Sean Marlowe was a man who checked all the boxes. But, Kaylen thought, the man was off the market even if he didn’t know it himself. It was clear when she had met him a few months earlier when *Medusa* provided security for the operation that captured the Erisian commerce raider *Iura Hominis*. Marlowe was on hand to direct the operation and his aide, Major May DeBeers, was never far from his side, the two operating as if they were two halves of the same person.

“Yes...he is...” Raynes chuckled. “If the drones hadn’t glitched, my guess is that about this time we’d be hearing an official declaration from the President that the conflict was over.”

“You have that much faith in him?” Kaylen asked.

“Yeah, I do,” Raynes replied. “I’ve worked with him on several occasions and there’s something about him...I dunno...he’s able to find the sticking points or issues and develop an equitable solution that gives everyone the feeling that they won. I just wish they would have handed this off to him ten years ago.”

“Yeah...then we wouldn’t have had the support to develop the drones,” Isles sadly said.

“Game time,” Kaylen said and brought their attention back to the airlock’s hatch. The telltale switched from red to green and a moment later the hatch hissed open. A man just shy of two meters tall stood on the other side and was dressed in a Union Fleet uniform, though devoid of any rank, branch, or certification badges.

“Permission to come aboard, Commander?” Basil Martel asked respectfully.

“Permission granted,” Kaylen replied.

A moment later, Martel stepped across the hatch coaming and put his foot on the receiving lounge’s deck. When his foot touched the deck, the boatswain piped him aboard and announced, “*Lex Talionis* arriving!”

Martel turned to the boatswain, “Thank you, Boats.” He took two steps forward, then turned and held his hand out for the woman who had stood behind him. “Commander, I believe you know Marta de Bardi, my wife and executive officer of *Lex Talionis*?”

De Bardi stepped forward and Kaylen recognized the woman immediately; she had aged a few years, but she was unmistakably the woman she had met at the bistro. Like her husband, she wore an unadorned Fleet uniform, but where he was tall, she was considerably shorter, had lustrous dark hair gathered in a functional ponytail, and seemed to be slightly nervous and not as self-confident. “Commander,” she began, “it’s been a while; given what’s happened, I’m glad to see you survived.”

Kaylen smiled, “It has been a while; I’m glad to see you and Baz are well. Welcome aboard *Medusa*.” She turned to her right, “This is Commander Annabelle Isles, and this,” she turned to her left, “is Commander Jessica Raynes. I, ah...do have one question before we move to the briefing room...why aren’t either of you wearing an Erisian uniform or any sort of rank or other insignia?”

Some of the confidence seemed to leave Martel and his shoulders slumped a little. “You said as far as you were concerned, the Crisis was over and that it was us against them. You can’t have an ‘us’ if we’re still thinking like ‘us and them’ to other humans. Wearing them...that would highlight a difference, and Marta and I both believe that we need to focus on or similarities instead of differences.”

Kaylen looked at Raynes who nodded, then to Isles who also nodded, and then back to where her guests stood. “Welcome back to the Fleet Commander Martel, Colonel de Bardi. You’re both out of uniform and I expect that to be remedied the next time I see you.”

Martel smirked and nodded. “By your command, Commander.”

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Earth Union, Stonehenge Orbit, battlestar *Euryale*

Despite being well away from the Union’s primary and secondary systems, *Euryale* was still at Action Stations, though at a reduced readiness level, Condition Two. Commander Annabelle Isles walked from the hangar to her quarters, trailed by a pair of Marines as per Standing Orders since hostilities commenced. She barely prevented a yawn from escaping despite being awake and active for close to twenty hours. The Balls to Four watch was usually ‘quiet time’ on the massive warship, but the current threat of attack and the repairs from their escape from Earth ensured that there would be more activity than usual.

Five minutes later, Isles was in her quarters stretched out on one of the leather sofas. She picked up the intercom handset and had the OOD page Colonel Camden Julii to her quarters. After a moment, she walked over to the small pantry and opened a half kilo bag of Ingram’s Kettle Cooked potato chips. She eyed her cabinet and the almost two dozen similar bags and sighed sadly. When these were gone, the world would lose a culinary delicacy, she thought.

When the intercom buzzed to let her know that Julii was outside, she was on her second bottle of PepperCola and her fingers were salty and oily from the chips. “Enter!” she shouted; her Marines familiar with some of her peculiarities.

“Mind if I get one?” Julii asked when he entered and nodded at the soda.

“Help yourself,” Isles said after crunching a handful of chips and swallowing them, chasing them a moment later with a sip from her own bottle.

“How did it go?” Julii asked. “I figured you’d want to talk about it when you got back, though I didn’t expect you this late.”

Isles stretched and arched her back, her arms over her head, and her toes curled. “The plan is to be ready to leave in 36 hours, though depending on whether the drones show up, we may have to leave earlier. The collective thinking is that since there’s just this one settlement, that it will actually be a couple days before we have to leave, but the 36 hours is when the minimums have to be completed.”

“And then we go to the Colonies?” Julii asked.

“Yes...” Isles replied and yawned. “I was surprised at how easy it was to convince the civilians to make the trip; I’m not sure we could do it without them.”

“Oh?” Julii prodded.

“Do you know the show, ‘Frontier Packet’?” Isles asked. Seeing Julii’s nod, she continued, “One of the ships here is *Rock Pixie*, with the full cast and crew. They were getting ready to start filming the next half of the season and one of the plots centered around Stonehenge and some smuggling.”

“Cool...” Julii grinned. “Maybe I can meet Gillian McGovern...”

Isles shook her head; she was well acquainted with Julii’s infatuation with the starlet. “Well, her nibs browbeat Captain Norwalk to bring her along for the meeting. Seems she thought that since she was *Rock Pixie*’s Owner Aboard in the show that she should be at the meeting. Cam,” she turned and looked directly at her XO, “after meeting her face to face, I wouldn’t frak her with my enemy’s dangly bits. I’ve never seen Leena ready to have someone removed from a briefing until today. If you say the sky is blue, she’ll say the sky is black half the day. If you say water is wet, she’ll say that there’s more ice and vapor than liquid water. Bitch is frakking toxic.”

“I could bring her to heel,” Julii grinned. “I like a challenge.”

“Go for it, Cam...be my guest,” Isles shook her head. “You have a meeting with her tomorrow...no, this morning at 1000 hours to discuss what they need to offload for necessary supplies.”

“Huh?” Julii stuttered as his eyes went wide and he cocked his head.

Isles smirked at Julii’s unintentional imitation of a confused dog. “You heard me, Loverboy, you get a crack at her in about nine hours.”

Understanding replaced confusion on Julii’s face which was then replaced with confidence and a grin. “Challenge accepted,” he snarked.

“Ok...ok...” Isles held up her hands in surrender, “don’t blame me when you crash and burn.”

“Never,” Julii replied and then turned serious. “Are those really two of the Angels of Death?” he asked, referring to two of the ships that had been with Kaylen’s group when they had arrived.

“Yeah...*Libitina* and *Dabria*...both with a full war load,” Isles confirmed. “Explaining that they were real took some very careful work...I’m glad Leena is in overall command.”

“Commander Kaylen?” Julii asked. “She’s younger than you and Commander Raynes...”

“She is...” Isles agreed. “But,” she crunched a handful of chips and continued after she swallowed them, “She was also posted to commander six months before me and eight months before Jess. But beyond that, Cam, she’s the right person for the job. She sees the big picture better than anyone in the group and where I would have been much more blunt and Jess would have told them it wasn’t any of their business because it was classified, Leena managed to make sure everyone knew what was here and why, and then did in such a way that everyone was ok with it.”

“You know her better than I do, and I trust you implicitly, so that carries over to her, too,” Julii told her.

“Thanks, Cam, I appreciate it,” Isles said. After several moments, she turned on her side so she could face her XO. “Ah...tomorrow...I’m going downstairs for a couple hours.”

“Oh? Why’s that?” Julii asked.

“Two reasons...” Isles explained and swung her legs off the sofa and sat up. “First, we have to meet a splinter settlement that isn’t on the best of terms with the main settlement. Baz Martel seems to think that as outsiders, we’ll be accepted with less friction. Second, Leena, Jess, and I have to return somewhere and poke around a bit; if we don’t do it now, we’ll never have this chance again and it’s...”

Julii leaned close. “What?”

“It’s where we were found,” Isles slowly explained. “We don’t know who we really are or where we really came from, except for this one place. We’re here, we were...drawn here...”

“When you knew where Leena would be?” Julii offered.

“Yeah...we have to find out, Cam, if there’s the slimmest of a chance, we have to try,” Isles emphatically stated.

“I’ll hold the ship together, Bel,” Julii told her.

“Thanks...” Isles softly replied.

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Earth Union, Stonehenge, 50 kilometers from Freeport, independent settlement Harmony

“We couldn’t have taken a Roc?” Commander Feleena Kaylen asked as the comfortably appointed transport bus slowed as it approached what looked like some sort of ancient gatehouse that spanned the width of the road. The center was open, but gated, and there was a large parking lot on either side of the road.

“No...” Commander Basil Martel replied after hesitating for a few moments.

“No? Why?” Commander Annabelle Isles prodded.

Martel swallowed and looked to where Colonel Marta de Bardi sat. Kaylen saw the unspoken communication pass between them and sat back. If this was a trap, then it was a trap, they were already committed to seeing it through to the end.

“Ah, Commander,” de Bardi began and shook her head. “There’s no easy way to say this, but Harmony is a naturist settlement.”

“Naturist?” Commander Jessica Raynes half asked, half stated. “As in it’s a nudist colony?”

Martel slowly nodded before de Bardi continued, “I was young when it happened, but when Harmony split off from Freeport, they adopted a no-clothes policy. No one outside Harmony is really sure why they did it since that wasn’t the reason why they relocated. It’s just one of those things that happened, and people here have learned to live with it. Thankfully, the climate is pretty much perfect for the lifestyle...”

“So, to talk to their director we’re going to have go in nude,” Kaylen said. “That’s what you’re saying, isn’t it?”

“Pretty much, yes, Commander,” de Bardi confirmed.

“Leena?” Raynes asked and looked at Kaylen.

“They haven’t listened to our wireless communications and the envoy that Freeport sent was told to frak off,” Kaylen explained. “I don’t want to do it, but...if we want to evacuate them, I’m going to have to do it.”

Isles sighed and frowned. “At least we can leave the Marines outside with the bus?” she asked hopefully.

“Yes...” Kaylen nodded. “I don’t think we need that break in discipline.” She turned to look at where the Marine fireteam was riding at the rear of the bus. “Sorry guys...no show today!” she laughed.

“Ma’am, we wouldn’t have looked...” Lieutenant Henry Hayden O’Donnell, Water to his friends due to his initials, said. Then added after a pause, “Much”.

“Not today, Water,” Kaylen joked and then thought, I really don’t want to do this.

Ten minutes later, Kaylen took a deep breath and looked at Isles, Raynes, and de Bardi. “You seem rather relaxed about this, Marta.”

“I grew up here before I left for school and to experience life,” de Bardi explained. “My parents still live here, but because I left and didn’t return, everyone else sort of looks at me as an outsider.”

“That won’t cause any trouble, will it?” Raynes asked.

“No, it shouldn’t,” de Bardi replied. “People are...different here...I didn’t realize it until I was at college, but their whole way of looking at life is slightly off. Like most insular communities, they don’t trust outsiders, but they take trust issues to a new level. It’s almost...” she shrugged.

“Almost what?” Isles asked and said what was on Kaylen’s mind.

De Bardi pursed her lips, “Almost as if they were hiding and didn’t want anyone to be among them covertly.”

“That’s understandable and not really all that out of the ordinary,” Raynes stated. “There’s a sect devoted to Philotes on Hesperides that requires having sex to enter. They believe that such an act lays bare one’s soul and that you symbolically become one of them. So, no...Harmony’s reasons don’t seem that odd to me.”

“Let’s get this started, we have somewhere else we need to visit before we return to orbit,” Kaylen said and started for the door.

“Wait...” de Bardi said and handed each woman a towel. “Custom is you have a towel to put down on your seat...for hygiene purposes.”

De Bardi opened the locker room door and stepped out into the shaded porch that ran along the inside length of the building. Kaylen felt very self-conscious of herself as she stepped onto the porch, as if there were eyes everywhere staring at her and someone waiting to make a snide or suggestive remark. “Where do we go from here?” she asked.

“As soon as Baz gets here, we’re going to head down Broadway to the Town Hall, it’s that brick and wood building down there about two hundred meters,” de Bardi pointed.

Kaylen allowed her gaze to sweep the settlement. It appeared to have two main roads that met in a traffic circle with a small park and gazebo, and perhaps a dozen buildings on each side of each arm. Harmony wasn’t a large settlement and had a population of about three hundred souls. There were people out walking, tending lawns or gardens, doing maintenance, and all the other things that would be expected in a community this size, except they were all nude. Thankfully, to her thinking, no one was paying them much attention and for that matter, no one was paying anyone else any extra attention given their state of undress.

“Ah, glad to see you haven’t freaked out,” Martel’s voice said from behind and causing Kaylen to flinch.

“No...not yet,” Isles smirked. “Not like any of us have anything...any...thing...to be ashamed of, though,” she added.

“Yeah...well...” Martel shifted his gaze and Kaylen saw de Bardi shake her head. “Let’s get this show on the road, or foot, as the case may be.”

Martel took the lead and lead them along Broadway toward the Town Hall.

“I can see why you crushed on him...” Raynes whispered conspiratorially to Kaylen.

“Please...don’t remind me...” Kaylen whispered back. “I’d rather that just stays a memory...”

“Sure...” Raynes chuckled.

“Ah, here we are,” Martel said and held the door for Kaylen and the others to enter. As Kaylen passed, he whispered, “I heard that.”

“I figured,” Kaylen said as Martel followed her into the Town Hall. “It was years ago, resolved, and that’s where it stays.”

“Understood...” Martel told her and moved to the front of the group where a muscular man in his middle years stood waiting. He wore a lanyard holding a badge around his neck and a utility belt with suspenders that supported a sidearm and several pouches. “Hello, Chief Jamison.”

The Chief seemed unimpressed by Martel’s greeting. “Hello, Basil. What brings you to Harmony?”

Kaylen suppressed the desire to sigh audibly. They didn’t have time for these childish games. She was about to speak up when an older man stepped into the foyer. “Basil? You’re running a little early, aren’t you?”

“Yes, Mayor Birdsong, we’re about half an hour early...” Martel explained. “Can you see us now?”

“Certainly,” the Mayor replied and then turned to the Chief. “Go get Marcus and bring him here immediately.”

“But...” the Chief protested.

“Do it. Now,” the Mayor ordered. “I don’t have time for your petty bullshit, these people don’t have time for it, and if what I’ve heard is correct, we don’t have time for it.”

The Chief glared at the Mayor, then at Martel, and then left the foyer by the same door that the group used to enter it. “Please, Norman never got over losing the exquisite Marta to Basil and seems to think that his badge gives him some sort of authority to drive his agenda...I don’t even know why we keep him on payroll...we haven’t had a crime here in more than ten years,” the Mayor explained. “Now, Basil, please introduce me to your guests.”

“Certainly, Mayor,” Martel replied and quickly introduced Kaylen, Isles, and Raynes.

“Please, come this way, we can wait in the conference room until Marcus arrives,” the Mayor told them and led them into another room. “Water?” he offered.

“Is Marcus critical to listening to what we have to tell you?” Kaylen asked.

“No...he isn’t...I just thought that you might want him present,” the Mayor explained. “Ah, here he is, we won’t have to wait,” he added as the conference room door opened and an older man, perhaps in his sixties and still fit and trim, entered. Kaylen narrowed her eyes at the newcomer. There was something familiar about him, but it was on the edge of her perception like a memory just out of reach.

“Marcus,” the Mayor began, “thank you for joining us.”

“My pleasure, Ivan,” Marcus replied.

A moment later, introductions had been made and Kaylen began explaining what happened and why the settlement had to be evacuated. Neither man interrupted her and what she thought would take half an hour was done in less than ten minutes.

“Marcus?” the Mayor asked.

“It sounds like we need to pack,” Marcus replied.

Slowly, sadly, the Mayor nodded. “Yes, it does. I will let the town know that we need to be ready to leave within six hours.” He looked at everyone sitting around the table, nodded, then stood. “If you will excuse me...I need to deliver some unpleasant news. Marcus...will you?”

“Yes...” Marcus replied.

“Thank you, Mayor Birdsong, for your understanding and acceptance of the situation,” Kaylen said before she stood and shook his hand.

“We are presented a binary question; do we want to live, or do we want to die?” the Mayor stated. “it is in our nature to want to live, the decision was...easy.”

“Still...thank you,” Kaylen repeated.

“You’re welcome...and thank you...all three of you, for returning and stepping out of your comfort zones to let us know what happened.”

Kaylen narrowed her eyes and glanced over to where Raynes sat. From the subtle change of her sister’s face, it was clear that she had picked up on what the Mayor had said.

After the Mayor left, everyone stood, and Marcus shook his head and motioned for them to sit. “I was wondering when you three would return,” he said.

“That’s the second time in less than five minutes someone has mentioned our return,” Isles said and leaned forward.

Kaylen put her hand on her sister’s arm and silently urged restraint. Where Raynes would analyze a situation until every scrap of information was known, Isles would wait just long enough to form an opinion and then begin operations. “Marcus, what’s going on here? I think if I asked Commanders Raynes and Isles if they thought you looked familiar, they’d agree with me and say yes.”

Marcus sat back and tried to look contemplative, at least as much as a naked man in his sixties might look. “You were all born not too far from here,” he began. “I can take you there, if you’d like.”

“That was the other thing we planned on doing when we came down,” Kaylen told him. “Having a guide would be nice.”

“Did you know our parents? Our real parents...” Isles asked.

Sadness clouded Marcus’ face as he nodded. “They were some of the most amazing people I’ve ever known. Growing up in Freeport, I never expected to be much more than maybe a farmer or rancher, or if I was exceptionally lucky, work in one of the warehouses. But when they arrived in town, my life changed. They were looking for some people who knew the local area and who would be able to help them survey a claim and then work as an intermediary with the locals in Freeport.

“Your parents’ people...they didn’t come into town much and stayed close at what they began calling the Center. I was fifteen when they arrived and your father, Commander Kaylen, took me under his wing and treated me like a brother. He taught me things...” Marcus’ gaze grew distant and a sad smile touched his lips. “In the early days, they lived in the ship they arrived in, and then one day, after the

Center was built and operating, it was gone. I asked what happened and was told that it had been sent away.

"I later heard that it had been sent into the sun. Your parents..." Marcus pursed his lips and seemed to slip into deep thought for a moment, "...they never came out and told me, but I always had the feeling they were hiding from someone. When you were born, Commander Raynes, everyone celebrated. Then, Commander Isles, when you were born, there was another celebration. And Commander Kaylen...when you were born, they celebrated again. And then, it seemed like whatever they were working on was finished, some people left and I never saw them again, but most stayed and everyone helped raise the three of you."

"What happened, though? Why did the Union show up and take us away?" Isles pressed.

"I don't know," Marcus said sadly. "I wish I did. They sent me and a couple others into Freeport for supplies and when we got back, the Union was there. It was odd, if they were there for you, then they would have sent someone from Child Protective Services, but this was a full kit assault, the officers in charge were working with a couple civilians who were supervising crews stripping the Center. I saw you three," he blinked several times as tears formed in his eyes, "get pulled away from your parents' bodies and hustled into a shuttle."

Silence descended on the room and Kaylen sat back in her chair, her nudity and that of the others forgotten and no longer of any consequence. The Union that she had served all her life, had been loyal to, had been responsible for her parents' murder. She forced her eyes closed and made her mind process what she had heard. It wasn't the Union, she decided, it was the civilians who were somehow involved.

"Tell me about the civilians...what were they like?" Kaylen finally said.

"There were five of them, three men and two women," Marcus finally answered. "The oldest two, they seemed closer than the others, and gave the most orders. The other three, they were the ones that were cataloguing the equipment that was being removed and seemed excited about what they found."

"Now we know," Raynes said after a moment's silence. "What do you want to do, Leena?"

"I want to visit our home," Kaylen said. "I want to see if maybe that brings back any more memories."

"I agree..." Isles added. "Whoever did this is probably dead and nothing more than fallout, but if I ever find them..."

"Me, too," Raynes stated.

"If there's room for some outsiders, we'd like to get in on it..." Martel said and de Bardi nodded her agreement.

"I think there is plenty of room," Kaylen said and realized that despite everything that happened to the Union, to her and her sisters twenty-four years ago, that she felt at peace. There were things she could control, things she could influence, and things that caused a turbulent mind. Hearing Marcus' story settled her mind and while it didn't answer 'why', it answered 'how'. Perhaps there would be more found at the Center's ruins.

“I...I managed to save some personal items...” Marcus offered. “They set fire to the Center and left, but your parents’ houses were far enough away that I had a few minutes to collect some things in case you ever returned.”

“Thank you,” Raynes said and Kaylen nodded her agreement and saw that Isles did too. “Do you want to bring them with you when we go to the site?”

Marcus nodded. “I think that I should go home and get them, let my wife know that we need to pack and leave, and then I’ll meet you at the main gate. This is something that you want to be dressed for,” he smirked.

Until he said it, Kaylen had completely forgotten about her current state of undress. “Yes, I think that might be a good thing...no sense getting scraped and scratched...”

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Earth Union, Stonehenge Orbit, battlestar *Medusa*

“What do we have, AI?” Colonel Silas DeMer asked as the dradis continued to ping off the seven new contacts.

“They aren’t drones...” Captain Alphonse Daidone replied as he sent IFF interrogations to the new contacts. “Ah...I’m getting transponder replies stating that they’re *Eurypyle*, *Meliea*, *Manticore*, *Union Bastion*, *Union Tollgate*, *Bountiful Harvest*, and *Hamilton Arm Trading Post*.”

“Looks like we might have more survivors,” Captain Selene Tesla said from her position at the plotting table where she stood in as acting XO.

“Let’s hope...” DeMer agreed. “Gish, can you hail them please and then send it down here.”

“Hail them and send it to the plot, aye,” Lieutenant Gish DePalma answered, her enlisted roots showing in the newly commissioned officer’s response. “This is the Union battlestar *Medusa* to the new ships entering Stonehenge orbit; please identify yourselves immediately to prevent offensive action being taken. I repeat, this is the Union battlestar *Medusa*...”

“*Medusa*, this is *Eurypyle* Actual, it is so good to hear a human voice,” a strained voice replied on the handset that DeMer held to his ear.

“*Eurypyle* Actual, *Medusa* Actual, this is Colonel Silas DeMer, who am I speaking to?” DeMer requested as he watched Tesla glance over her shoulder to make sure her replacement had valid fire control solutions on the new arrivals.

“Colonel DeMer, this is Lieutenant Colonel Tom Gatsby, requesting permission to enter orbit while we deal with some maintenance and personnel issues.”

“Permission granted, Colonel,” DeMer told him. “What is your current status? I thought *Eurypyle* was still fitting out and *Meliea* just was just accepted for duty?”

“We were at Athena Anchorage when things went down,” Gatsby began and sounded somewhat more at ease than when he introduced himself. “The drones took down Traffic Control and the Stationmaster’s control center, then started shooting anyone they could find. We managed to get as

many people aboard as possible, mostly civilians and yard personnel, before we had to cast off. *Manticore* was freely navigating and trying to keep the Marauders away from us while we tried to bring all our systems online.

“Before we could jump, we received EWO Precipice, though right now no one has the codes to decrypt it and get the specific details. I made the call to jump to El Dorado, but they were as bad as Earth, then we went to Troubadour and arrived right as the drones started bombarding the planet. That’s when Captain Birdsong suggested that we make for Stonehenge. It’s far out on the Hamilton arm, out of the way, and that should buy us at least a little time to get the ships ready for combat.”

DeMer didn’t ask where the command officers were, that could come later, he reasoned. “I have some good news and some bad news,” he offered. “First, that EWO you received is everything you heard the rumors about; it’s our orders to leave the Union and not look back. Second, we’re in pretty good shape and should be able to help you get things in order. Third, I’m going to need inventories and manifests from each ship in your group with regards to supplies and stores, personnel, and magazine levels. I’ll send over a census form that I need for each person.

“Questions?” DeMer asked.

“Ah...just one, Colonel,” Gatsby replied. “We’re going back to fight the drones, right? We can’t be leaving...”

DeMer closed his eyes and remembered how he felt when he found out about the Precipice order; similar thoughts had gone through his head as well. “The war is over, we lost,” he said slowly, and hearing himself voice the words seemed to make it all the more real to him. “We really never had a chance. Now, we have to follow the last order and try to ensure that some of us survive, for all we know we are all that is left of the Union, perhaps even of humanity. Hopefully, in a couple years, we’ll find others who survived, but until then, it’s just us.”

There was silence for several long moments. “I understand, Colonel,” Gatsby finally replied, his voice sounding on the verge of loss. “I’ll coordinate with the other ships and make sure we have the information you requested. Will there be a briefing before we leave?”

“Thank you,” DeMer said. “Yes, there will be one in about six hours. At that time Commander Kaylen will review what happened, what we’ll be doing, and set a time for our departure.”

“Understood,” Gatsby stated. “Do you want to assign us orbital positions?”

“Let me connect you with my navigator,” DeMer said and met Tesla’s questioning gaze.

“Gatsby sounds a little jumpy,” Tesla said after DeMer put the handset on its cradle.

“A little, but he witnessed firsthand what we didn’t, so it’s to be expected,” DeMer theorized. “Now, if he doesn’t settle down by the time we jump off, then we might have an issue.”

“Those ships could offer a lot of comfort...” Tesla said.

“Yeah...depends on whether their holds are full or not,” DeMer agreed. “*Bountiful Harvest* should at least keep us in fresh vegetables.” He studied the dradis for a moment before shaking his head. “I better call the boss and let her know what just arrived.”

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Earth Union, Stonehenge, approaching the site known as The Center

“Have you ever seen that symbol before?” Commander Annabelle Isles asked Commander Jessica Raynes as the transport slowly made its way along the overgrown road. Since the Center had been razed, the road had largely fallen into disuse and only saw occasional traffic. As a result, what had been a broad three lane road with wide berms had become a detritus covered paved path barely wide enough for the transport.

“No,” Raynes replied and sat back in her seat. “There’s something familiar about it, but I’m not sure if that’s because it sparked a memory from before we were taken or if it was from something I’ve seen since then.” She shrugged. “I’d like to know, though...I...”

“What is it, Jess?” Commander Feleena Kaylen asked and narrowed her eyes at her sister.

Raynes shrugged again and pursed her lips. “I...my gut tells me that whatever it is, it’s part of something that’s going to be important in the future.”

“You think it’s Colonial?” Isles asked.

“No...I don’t know, Bel,” Raynes admitted. “I don’t think so...it might be Kobolian or Communion, or hell, it might be someone we’ve never heard about.”

“We’re almost there,” Marcus said from where he sat at the front of the vehicle. “I see the gate is still intact...” he added wistfully.

Kaylen looked through the front window and saw what Marcus was talking about. Ahead, perhaps twenty meters away, two large concrete pillars rose out of the underbrush, one on either side of the road, and a steel framework spanned the road. The paint was faded and all that was left was a lite green that was almost invisible to the eye. Set in the center of the span, though, was something that had just been the topic of conversation; the twin flame symbol was firmly attached to a two-meter-high sign panel.

“We’re home,” Isles softly said. “Even though I haven’t been here for more than twenty years, I know...this is home. Our house was...Corporal,” she said and walked to stand next to the driver. “Go through the gates and then take a left and look for the first right...then stop at the first corner.”

“Yes, ma’am,” the driver replied and guided the transport under the gate before turning left onto an overgrown and creeper covered road. A moment later he turned right and slowed the vehicle’s pace even more until it finally stopped. “Is this it?” he asked.

Isles nodded and pressed the button that would open the transport’s door before she stepped down and onto the ground. She took half a dozen steps and stopped, staring at the overgrown ruins that used to be a house. Kaylen watched as she took a few more steps forward and then slowly sank to her knees and started crying.

She didn’t remember doing it, but a moment later both Kaylen and Raynes were kneeling next to their sister, holding each other, and joining her in crying. “It’s all real,” she finally said.

“I lived right there,” Raynes said and pointed to a crumbled ruin next to the one they knelt in front of. “And Leena...you lived right there.”

Kaylen looked at the ruins of what used to be her childhood home and could feel the memories struggling to break free and enter her conscious mind. Instead, they teased and tantalized her while dancing just beyond her awareness. “Let’s take a look...” she finally said and stood, helping Isles to her feet.

Together, they poked through the three sets of ruins. The walls were the only things left; the furniture, furnishings, and any little knick-knacks had either been burned by the fires or simply succumbed to the years exposed to nature.

“I wish there was more here for you...” Marcus said after about forty-five minutes. “The Marines were pretty thorough when it came to burning everything. The Center itself is nothing but some charred rubble.”

Kaylen felt Raynes slip her arm around her shoulders and pull her close, just as her sister had done with Isles. “C’mon, let’s go...there’s nothing more here except ghosts.”

“What happened to the bodies?” Isles suddenly asked.

“They took them,” Marcus replied sadly. “The only thing they left behind were ruins.”

“If I find out who they are, and if by some miracle they survived, I’ll end them,” Isles growled. “I don’t care who they are, what they did...to our families, to us...unforgivable.”

Kaylen found herself nodding her agreement. “Jess?”

Raynes’ reply was exactly what Kaylen expected, “Heads on pikes, sisters, heads on pikes.”

They were approaching Freeport when Kaylen asked, “Do you think our adoptive parents were involved?”

Raynes quickly shook her head. “No, I don’t. Mine were accountants for a chain of grocery stores, Bel’s dad was an architect and her mom was a doctor, and Leena, your dad was a lawyer and your mom taught piano. Unless they were really, really deep cover identities, I think that whoever arranged for our adoption just pulled strings and ensured that we got special treatment. I’d love to go dig through those records...”

“It’s the past,” Kaylen finally said. “Who we were is replaced by who we are, and while I want to find out who I was, we all have responsibilities that we willingly accepted.” She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. “It’s beyond our hands...let’s focus on saving as many people as we can and reaching the Colonies in one piece.”

“So say we all,” Isles stated.

“So say we all,” everyone repeated.

“So say we all,” Kaylen said and closed the ancient vow.

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Earth Union, Stonehenge Orbit, battlestar *Medusa*

“How is the evacuation going?” Commander Feleena Kaylen asked the officers seated around the briefing table. “We’re coming up on about six hours from our target.”

“So far, based on the reports, everything is on schedule,” Commander Jessica Raynes answered. “We have *Sand Pixie*, *Rock Pixie*, and *Cthulhu Gnome* grounded to directly board evacuees and to load whatever food was ready to ship. Commander Martel’s *Amor Fati* and *Non Serviam* are also grounded, though at two remote settlements that would take too long to travel to Freeport.”

“Good...” Kaylen said and yawned. Since they returned from the surface a day earlier, she had managed to steal three hours sleep. “Colonel Dawkins, you’ve been managing the stores manifests into a composite database, what can you tell us?”

Colonel Rutherford Dawkins, Ford to those who knew him, pushed his glasses back into place from where they had partially slid down his nose. “Well...we’re going to have to watch what we eat,” he began and arched his eyebrows. “Not because we’re going to run out of food, but quite the opposite. Based on the reports from four hours ago, we should be able to ensure that everyone has plenty to eat; we’ll just have to watch that we don’t overindulge. We’re also going to need to rely very heavily on *Bountiful Harvest*’s hydro- and aeroponics, in addition to its grow domes, to ensure that our dietary needs, nutrient wise, are met.

“We were fortunate that several warehouses were full of both meats and vegetables that had been processed for shipping, and all that combined means that we aren’t going to starve,” Dawkins concluded.

“Won’t the food spoil or get freezer burned before we arrive?” Gillian McGovern asked.

Kaylen tried not to show her aggravation at the attractive auburn-haired woman who thought that merely playing a role in a serialized drama qualified her to make decisions that would affect their survival.

Dawkins shook his head and offered the annoying woman a warm smile. “Not if we make sure we store it properly. Stonehenge has a state-of-the-art packaging system that seals the food product in an opaque mylar bag and then irradiates it with a brief burst of radiation. Nothing that lingers or damages the product, but due to the sealed package all the bacteria that would cause it to spoil are killed. All we need to do is make sure that they’re stored at a consistent temperature and aren’t exposed to extreme pressure changes, that could damage the seals, that food will be just as fresh for our great-great-grandchildren as it was the day it was sealed.”

“That’s pretty cool,” McGovern said and returned Dawkins’ smile. “I knew about that process, but I thought that being this far out that they used freezing and canning, and didn’t have state of the art.” She looked around and narrowed her eyes. Kaylen saw what the actress saw, several looks of disbelief. “Vapid is just an act, gentlemen...I have a degree in management and a masters in operations...I just play the role people expect.”

“Ok...” Kaylen couldn’t keep the smirk off her face. Even Captain Lawrence Norwalk of *Rock Pixie*, the ship that had been used for five years as the main prop for the show, looked surprised at McGovern’s revelation. “You do realize that you just opened yourself up for some additional work, Ms. McGovern?”

“We’re all in this together, Commander,” McGovern replied. “Acting was a fun diversion, but it wasn’t what I went to school for. Let me be useful for a change.”

“Ok...Colonel Dawkins, do you think you could use Ms. McGovern’s talents?” Kaylen asked.

“Certainly, Commander. My team is good for dealing with a battlegroup, but we’re a bit larger than that and extra help is very welcome,” Dawkins replied.

“Good...” Kaylen told them. “I’ll let the two of you work out the details. Next...” she started to say but was interrupted by the 1MC.

“Action Stations! Action Stations! Set Condition One throughout!” Colonel Silas DeMer’s voice announced over the 1MC a moment before the intercom buzzed for attention.

“Kaylen,” Kaylen said after picking up the handset. “What’s going on, Silas?”

“We just had six contacts jump in at about 100k. Gish is trying to raise them and thankfully by their transponders they aren’t drones,” DeMer explained.

“If they’re legit, better they arrived now than in twelve hours,” Kaylen stated. “I’m on my way to CIC.”

“Ah...wait one, Leena...” DeMer asked. “Gish just made contact with *Santorini*...”

“Put it through down here and listen in...just in case,” Kaylen told her XO.

“On it...” DeMer said and a moment later Kaylen heard the two beeps indicating that the handset was connected then the familiar hisses and pops from the scrambled line. “You’re live,” he told her.

“*Santorini* Actual, this is *Medusa* Actual, please confirm,” Kaylen stated.

“*Medusa* Actual, *Santorini* Actual,” a tired voice immediately replied. “You’re the first friendly contact we’ve had since the drones went nuts.”

“What can you tell us about the state of the Union?” Kaylen prodded.

This time there was a slightly longer delay before her question was answered. “*Medusa*...the Union is in flames,” the voice replied, sounding like it was trying to remain professional and not break. “We were on a port visit at Camelot when the drones went crazy. We evacuated all the people we could and then broke free from the station by jumping to the primary gas giant. That was where we encountered *Sequoia*, *Square Deal*, and *Aeolus Anatolia*.

“After that, we tried to make it back to Earth, but everywhere we jumped into was the same; the drones were nuking everything in sight and the worlds were burning. We gambled and jumped for *Turbulence*...” the voice paused for a moment. “That’s where we found *Fiat Lux* and *Union Castle*. *Turbulence*...was destroyed. After that, we decided to jump along the Hamilton Arm and hopefully find someone else who survived.”

“You did good, *Santorini*. This is Commander Feleena Kaylen, who am I talking to?” Kaylen asked.

“Lieutenant Colonel Woodward Colbert, Commander,” Colbert replied. “What are your orders, ma’am?”

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“Are we going to have trouble with *Sequoia*?” Commander Annabelle Isles asked. “We had to deploy Marines to protect a delegation to Caledonia a few months back from their bully boys.”

“Let me handle *Sequoia*,” Commander Jessica Raynes said. “I know several people over there.”

Kaylen studied her sisters and then the other officers seated at the conference table. She knew there was more to it than Raynes ‘knowing several people’, but she was willing to wait until there weren’t as many ears present for the explanation. “Ok, run with it, just keep us in the loop in case some of the personalities become a little...warm to the touch.”

“Will do,” Raynes replied and settled back into her chair.

“Ok...so barring any additional changes or events, I’d like to have everyone ready for the first jump in,” Kaylen looked at the wall chronometer, “six hours, call it 2300 hours. However,” she held up a finger, “I’d like to try and postpone things until 0900 hours so that everyone has a full night’s rest. We’ll be making two short FTL jumps before we begin the acceleration to cruising speed. The jumps will put us into deep space where there shouldn’t be anything within dradis range to track us, which should add to our chances of success.

“Any questions?”

“Just two, and they’re more an issue of community than anything,” Colonel Eirene Suter, Headmistress of Cadets from *Christian Sands* stated. “First, we have a significant number of children, both from Stonehenge as well as survivors; we’d like to reach out to any teachers, educators, or even subject matter experts, and begin classes again. The cadets will finish within two years and everything they need is already present, but we have others that need basic and then advanced education.”

Kaylen smiled and picked a paper out of her stack and slid it over to Suter. “Contact Mayor Birdsong and Mayor Rosemont; they both contacted me about that very issue. Also, Colonel Yarboro of *Semper Discentes* can give you the contacts you’ll need to integrate the faculty aboard her from Walden University. I think the four of you, or whoever they suggest, can put something together that will benefit everyone. The census database should be complete within the next day or two, and from there you should be able to find out who else might be able to help.”

“Thank you, Commander,” Suter said and took the paper.

“You mentioned two things,” Kaylen prodded.

“Ah...yes...” Suter replied. “Given the civilian shipping and population, what is the chain of command going to be?”

“The mayors and I discussed this and while Mayor Rosemont didn’t like it, Mayor Birdsong was quite persuasive. Overall, I am in command of the fleet and as such am the final word on any issue. However, the mayors are going to jointly oversee a civilian leadership council that will handle non-military

matters,” Kaylen explained. “They know their people, so I am hoping that I don’t have to play arbiter in any but the most extreme cases.”

There was some more discussion and after ten minutes Kaylen called the meeting to an end. “I’m going to meet with the newly arrived command teams and bring them up to speed, and then we should be ready for our early launch window. Be ready to go, but if nothing crops up, I’d like to stick around until the secondary window in case any more stragglers show up.”

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“Is Caldwell Stephens the disgusting hippie that his pictures show?” Commander Annabelle Isles asked as she stood next to Commander Feleena Kaylen and Commander Jessica Raynes in *Medusa’s* portside upper receiving gallery 1.

“I’d be happy if he bathed before coming over,” Kaylen said. “He gets an immediate strike for the wild beard and unkempt hair...looks like he lives in a frakking cave instead of having a PhD in Environmental Biology.”

Commander Jessica Raynes turned and narrowed her eyes at Kaylen. “You seem to know an awful lot about him...”

“Yes...I do,” Kaylen growled. “About five years ago...you remember the *Cobalt Express* incident?”

“The dayliner that crashed into Ventura Chemicals’ plant on Chiron?” Raynes asked.

“Yeah, that one,” Kaylen replied. “I knew two of the people who died in the crash and never bought the official story that it was a systems failure. The Stargazer series has an impeccable safety record and they have outstanding control systems; other than *Cobalt Express*, in almost twenty-five years of operation, they never had a failure like that. Some digging pointed to Earth First! and Stephens’ little bunch of terrorists being responsible.”

“I’m going to need to ask you to at least be civil,” Raynes asked. “What hardly anyone outside certain offices at Justice and Intelligence knows is that we’ve been running a counter intelligence/counter terror operation on *Sequoia* to infiltrate not just Earth First!, but also other domestic terror groups. Stephens...he’s one of our assets.”

“What?” Kaylen exploded. “And you didn’t do anything?”

Raynes took a step back and raised her hands defensively. “It wasn’t my call, it came from the top.”

“I’m not pissed at you, Jess,” Kaylen sighed. “But this really pisses me off. People died and Justice and Intelligence kept playing their games...” she paused and then continued in an approximation of Donnelly Westingham, the intelligence director from the series, ‘Spymaster’, “‘It was for the greater good’ ...bullshit. Those people, every one of them, had families.”

“I know...I whispered in some ears and people were cashiered for the decision,” Raynes offered.

“Anyway, he’s a cocky frakker and is going to try and worm his way into your graces. Don’t ever, ever trust him. My guess is that his file would have been sent to Black Bag in the next year or two.”

Isles shook her head. “We use a terrorist, let them commit acts of terror, and then liquidate them so we can do it to someone new. Maybe the drones were right...”

“Sister?” Raynes asked.

“I’m just venting,” Isles answered. “We have a chance to get rid of the old ways, the games, tricks, and double dealing, and you Leena, you have the authority to make it happen.”

Kaylen nodded. There were a lot of wonderful, amazing, and good things about the Earth Union, but every shining city on a hill has its dark underbelly. In less than thirty-six hours she had seen a creation that was supposed to save lives do the exact opposite; it destroyed the Union. She also learned that her parents, her real parents that she couldn’t really remember, had been killed by the Union, and friends had been allowed to die for some bureaucrat’s concept of ‘dealing’ with a domestic terrorist group. Maybe Isles was right, maybe they could create something better. The hatch telltale turning from red to green told her that it was a thought she’d have to ponder later.

Just as it was when Martel and de Bardi boarded, there were Marines present, though since it wasn’t a military or elected official, the boatswain wouldn’t be piping Stephens aboard.

The hatch opened and a man almost two meters tall stepped through. He wore a red and white checkered flannel shirt, denim pants, boots, and fit the picture that Kaylen and Isles described. “Ah, permission to come aboard?” Stephens asked after he was standing in the receiving gallery.

Kaylen forced her face to remain neutral and not frown. “Permission granted...though it’s usually customary to ask prior to stepping onto my deck.”

“Oh, my bad,” Stephens replied. “Ah...what’s the need for all the bang sticks?” he asked and pointedly looked at the Marines.

“Protocol,” Kaylen answered, already agitated by his attitude. “The others have already arrived and are waiting in the conference room.”

“Cool, lead on,” Stephens said.

Kaylen turned and extended her hand toward the hatch leading into the ship. “This way,” she said and gestured him to follow Raynes who had stepped to the hatch.

Stephens looked around for a moment, then stepped between Kaylen and Isles, taking a deep breath as he passed them, and stood about a meter behind Raynes. Kaylen was sure she heard him say to himself, “These are three class A asses...”

“Mr. Stephens,” Kaylen said conversationally causing Stephens to turn. “Do not mistake my youth for an interest to ‘hook up’ or that I’m sympathetic to your cause. Another comment like that about me or any of my officers or crew will see you retired to the brig for insubordination. The old world and ways died when the drones launched their first nuke, your...contributions...are no longer needed and so your value has decreased to that which you can offer to our survival... Do I make myself clear?”

Stephens swallowed and the cockiness seemed to fade from his manner. “Ah, yeah...I guess so.”

Kaylen smiled and shook her head. “It was a question with a binary answer; yes or no. No guessing is involved.”

“Uh...yes,” Stephens offered.

“Good, now that we understand each other this alleviates the need for me going over to *Sequoia* and doing this in front of your people,” Kaylen told him. “I’ll put this in terms that are crystal clear; in this fleet, I am the Alpha Bitch; you? You’re a beta. Don’t ever make me come over and piss out my territory. Got it?”

“Uh...yes,” Stephens replied and Kaylen saw what she wanted; respect tinged with uncertainty as to whether she would actually make due on her threats.

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“Looks like we’ll be able to get some rest before we jump off,” Isles said as she settled into a large overstuffed chair in Kaylen’s quarters.

“Thankfully they all had seen the devastation, so we didn’t need to work too hard to convince them to leave,” Raynes added.

“Small favors,” Kaylen yawned.

“And you, sister...I’m impressed,” Isles chuckled. “You went full She-Wolf on the hippie.”

“I wish I could have filmed it,” Raynes laughed. “The look on his face was priceless.”

“I’ll talk to David about getting you a copy,” Kaylen offered. “Everything has been recorded for protection and history.”

“Still,” Raynes said a little more seriously, “I’m going to go over after the first jump and see what I can find out and smooth any ruffled feathers.”

“That’s fine...I’m happy playing bad sister to your good sister,” Kaylen told her.

“What about me?” Isles asked.

“You’re enforcer sister,” Raynes chuckled.

“Cool...” Isles smirked.

“Now...I think it’s time we all get some rest and prepare for tomorrow...the first day of the rest of our lives,” Kaylen suggested.

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Deep space, approaching cruising velocity, Earth Union battlestar *Medusa*

Commander Feleena Kaylen sat on the sofa and folded her stocking clad feet under her. She had dinner earlier with her sisters and now, approaching 2100 hours, she had shed her uniform for a comfortable pair of sweats and decided it was time to do something she first put off due to lack of time and then put off for fear of the memories they might trigger.

As boxes went, it wasn't a large box, perhaps twice the dimensions of a shoe box, yet what it held was a look at who she was before she was placed with Roger and Linda Kaylen. Slowly, as if it might be trapped, she lifted the top off the box and set it aside. Its removal revealed several photo albums, some envelopes, and three data cards.

Kaylen took a deep breath and slowly removed everything from the box and arranged it on the coffee table. It wasn't much, but it was the first tangible connection that she had with her parents. She lifted the first album and suddenly realized that other than Marcus, the last people to actually handle this would have been her parents. Her real parents.

Slowly, her hands steadier than she thought they'd be, she opened the album and started looking at the pictures. Most were taken at social events; cookouts, parties, sporting events, but some were simple nature shots focusing on wildlife or a picturesque scene in the wilderness. One couple, either individually or together, appeared in many of the pictures, often with a child Kaylen believed was herself. Unbidden, tears came to her eyes as she saw the joy and the love the little girl and her parents shared at her third birthday, walking in the park, playing with two other little girls in a bounce house, and enjoying ribs at a picnic.

Kaylen slowly leafed through each album, recognizing the faces of her sisters, their parents, and the other people at the Center. It was near the end of the last album that she began seeing some people that weren't in any of the other photos; there was an older couple, perhaps in their forties – the woman was blonde and glamorous while the man was solidly built and wore his prematurely greying hair short with an accompanying beard. Another new face was a dark skinned, dark haired woman who's mouth seemed to smile a lot, but her eyes never shared the joy. Rounding out the new faces were an athletic man in his early 20s, he reminded her of the frat boys that would hit on her when she went home on leave. The last new face belonged to a man who was also in his early 20s, but had a compassion about him that was almost tangible, he carried a few extra kilos and reminded her more of a science nerd who played at the local pub on the weekends to make rent than the squared away optics of the others.

Whoever they were, Kaylen thought, they were probably the people that Marcus mentioned were present when we were taken. She set aside several of the photographs which clearly showed their faces and bodies, "Jess can run these through the census database to see if they happen to be with us, and if not, through the media database to see if they show up anywhere else. I don't know who you are," she slowly said as she looked at a group picture of her parents, her sisters' parents, the five new faces, and three little girls, "but I'll find out and then I'll come after you..."

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Deep space, Earth Union battlestar *Euryale*

"Did you see the memo that Jess sent?" Commander Annabelle Isles asked the man who stood across from her on the other side of the plotting table.

Colonel Camden Julii nodded. "I did. What's up with it?"

Isles shrugged. "Nothing, maybe everything," she offered cryptically. "Matt, take the con for few minutes, please. Cam, walk with me," she said to her two officers.

“Copy, I have the con,” Captain Matthew Dearborn replied and stepped over to the plotting table.

“Sure...” Julii said and followed Isles out of the CIC and the short distance to her quarters. “What haven’t you told me, Bel?” he asked after they were both seated in her lounge.

“You know how Jess, Leena, and I were all adopted after we were ‘found’,” Isles used her fingers to air quote the last word, “on Stonehenge. When we were on the surface, Marcus, one of the people at Harmony, told us that he used to work at the settlement where we were found. He told us a story that none of us really remember other than memory snapshots, about how our parents were killed by Union Marines.”

“What?” Julii asked. “Why would Marines do that?”

Isles shook her head. “I wish I knew. He did tell us that he saw that the operation seemed to be directed by some civilians.”

Julii’s eyes narrowed. “The people that Jess asked us to watch for?”

“Exactly,” Isles confirmed. “Marcus gave us each a box of things that he managed to save from our homes; keepsakes, albums, etc. Leena finally went through her box and noticed these people suddenly showed up when she was about three or so, about a year before we were found. When she told us about it, Jess and I both went through what we had and found pictures of them as well. Jess took them and created composites of each one, then aged them to what they might look like today.”

Julii sat back and seemed to be deep in thought. “You think they might have stayed on Stonehenge?” he finally asked.

“Either that or made it to one of the evacuation ships and through sheer luck wound up in our little expedition,” Isles told him.

“I still don’t understand why Union Marines would attack a peaceful settlement...” Julii said. “I guess if we find them, we can find some answers.”

“I hope so,” Isles replied. “So...now that we’re a few weeks into this, what’s it like working with McGovern?” she smirked.

Julii smiled and laced his fingers behind his head. “Not too bad,” he offered.

“Oh? Do tell,” Isles prodded.

“Nothing to tell...once you get through the walls she’s put up, she’s a pretty nice woman,” Julii explained. “Treat her like an equal, not an object, and she’s your best friend and ally.”

“She shot you down, didn’t she?” Isles smirked and arched her eyebrows.

“No,” Julii slowly shook his head. “I never gave her the option.”

Isles’ eyes went wide. “I thought she was your dream girl?”

“She was...until I learned that Michelle was visiting her brother on *Libertas*,” Julii explained. “That changed everything. We’ve been talking and even met for dinner a couple times and...Bel...the magic is still there.”

“Then go for it, Cam,” Isles told her XO. “As a friend, I’m telling you to go for it. You were given a second chance because of the worst calamity in history, if nothing else, that’s a ‘sign’.”

“It is...” Julii mused. “Would you do the service if she says yes?”

“I’d kick you out an airlock if you didn’t let me do it!” Isles laughed.

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“Are you ready for the ceremony?” Gillian McGovern asked as she brushed her hair in front of the mirror.

“I am,” Commander Annabelle Isles replied and tugged her uniform cuffs down to smooth out the arms of her dress whites. “Are you?” she asked, knowing that there were really two questions involved.

“Yes,” McGovern replied and stopped brushing her auburn tresses before turning to where Isles stood in the doorway to the head. “And I’m even ready for us to go public,” she added, her emerald eyes twinkling.

Isles released the tension that had built in her shoulders. “I’m glad to hear that...it’ll be a first for me, too.”

McGovern put the brush on the vanity and walked over to Isles and hugged her. “Before I met you, like you, I was happily hetero, now...well, I won’t be averse to bringing a guy into our relationship because nothing can replace ‘that’,” she chuckled and Isles joined her a moment later and nodded her head. “But I am not ashamed I found you or what has developed between us. The heart wants...”

“...what the heart wants,” Isles finished for her and hugged McGovern back. “The people that matter know, but this will be settling the rumors once and for all.”

“Let’s do this, Bel,” McGovern said and offered her arm.

Isles took it, smiled, “Let’s do this, Gillian.”

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Deep space, habitat ship *Sequoia*

“I have to admit, I never thought a reception in a redwood forest would be something I’d ever attend,” Commander Jessica Raynes told the people seated around the table.

Commander Feleena Kaylen nodded and swept her gaze around the clearing as soft chamber music was played by a quartet. All around the perimeter, the giant trees that gave the ship her name reached for the stars and tables had been setup in a small clearing amidst the lonely forest. The air had a freshness that she hadn’t experienced since she left Stonehenge the day before they set out on their journey. Despite almost three hundred people, numerous servers, and the small band, there was a stately quiet offered by the clearing that when she closed her eyes, she could truly believe she was deep within a terrestrial forest.

“Yes...I agree with you there, Jess,” Kaylen told her and then stood as the last two people assigned to their table arrived. “Bel, Gillian, you both look great,” she greeted them.

“Thank you,” Isles replied a little nervously.

“She thought that everyone was going to stop and look at us when we entered,” McGovern quipped. “Other than a glance, no one paid us any notice.”

“Told you,” Colonel Marta de Bardi said. “And I should know...” she winked.

“The ice is broken, now I can relax,” Isles said and held a chair for McGovern.

As the people at the table talked, Kaylen looked at them and truly understood the saying, ‘friends are family you get to choose’. Next to her sat Colonel Silas DeMer, who had escorted her to the event, then Raynes and Colonel Rutherford Dawkins. They make an odd couple, but they work and make it work, Kaylen thought of her sister and her unlikely date. Then Commander Basil Martel and de Bardi, and finally Isles to her right and McGovern between Isles and de Bardi.

After dinner was served and before the entertainment took center stage, there were several speeches on the accomplishments over the past twenty-eight months. After the initial shock wore off and the resulting suicides and ‘work related’ accidental deaths, their population stabilized for about nine months until there was a sudden increase as the first generation born under way was born. Since then, births outpaced the deaths, and everyone seemed content with the status quo.

She did have to show up unannounced with a platoon of Marines after Caldwell Stephens and some of his followers began agitating for an anarchistic level of fleet control. After realizing that Kaylen was making good on her earlier threat, he became a model citizen. Though, once we arrive at our destination, Kaylen thought, how long will that last?

Another speech discussed the infrastructure that had been developed and used to tie the fleet together through education and entertainment, while another spotlighted some individual accomplishments. Finally, it was Kaylen’s turn to speak and close the ‘talking’ part of the event. She stepped up to the microphone and looked out at all the expectant faces. She had turned thirty just a few months ago and felt the weight of their hopes and dreams settle on her shoulders.

“My friends,” she began, “You’ve heard about how we’ve overcome adversity, mourned, welcomed new lives, how we’ve built a community that’s as real as anything we had before we set out...and we’ve been told of the accomplishments that have happened. But I want to talk about the human side of the past two years.

“Before the Genocide, we were a divided people,” Kaylen said in a clear, pleasant voice. “We had Unionists and Erisians on protest lines and the front lines, and yet, here we are, one people. Freeport and Harmony had...disagreements...and yet, here we are, one people. Before that fateful day, we were a collection of ships and crews from diverse social, economic, and cultural backgrounds, and yet...” she smiled, “here we are, one people.

“My sister’s executive officer,” Kaylen pointed to where Colonel Cameron Julii sat at a nearby table, “had belatedly ended a relationship before the Exodus because they both thought they were going in different directions. Fate gave them a second chance and they both took it. That is just one story, every ship has many more, and that is the true testament to our strength and resiliency.

“We’re at the half-way point of our trip...ancient mariners called this the ‘point of no return’ because it was farther to return than it was to continue to their destination.

“None of us ever expected to be put in this situation or would have conceived what happened. Yet, we came together where it was needed, found our common ground, and built our shining city in the heavens on that shared ground.

“In twenty-eight months, we’ll be back here to celebrate the end of the beginning of our journey and embrace the start of our journey’s end. May the gods bless all of us, and may we find our brethren and our cousins from across the stars.”

“So say we all,” McGovern’s clear voice stated.

“So say we all!” everyone present repeated.

“So say we all,” Kaylen said the third saying of the vow and ended her speech.

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Beyond Known Space, Orbit of Unnamed System’s 3rd Planet, HMS *Pathfinder*

Lieutenant Gretchen Lutjens looked around the spotless and immaculately furnished quarters that she claimed for the voyage back to the Colonies. The bedroom alone was larger than the small apartment that she had on Picon, and the luxury was only something that she had seen in documentaries. She ran her hand over the comforter that was softer than any bed linens she had ever felt and wondered what it must have been like to serve aboard the mighty ship.

Lutjens chuckled, “Girl, you’re going to learn firsthand what it’s like...you’re in charge of the ship until we get home.”

“Still answering your own questions out loud?” Captain Daniel Warwick asked from where he leaned against the hatch that led into the quarters and caused Lutjens to shriek in surprise.

“What the frak, Danny?” Lutjens laughed and asked as she turned to see the man who should have been in charge of the ship. She was a Marine and flight operations weren’t her forte, leading Marines was.

“Sorry...” Warwick smirked as his eyes said he wasn’t. “I wanted to discuss with you away from other ears what Commodore Musk told me.”

“Go ahead and close the hatch and have a seat,” Lutjens said and waved her hand at the lounge. “I hope its good news...I really want to get this ship home and get off it...for good.”

“About that...” Warwick said and settled onto the sofa. “Once we were able to unlock the ship’s systems, we realized that Bentonhurst also wiped all the navigation information, so even if anyone who survived managed to hack the system, they’d have no way of getting home.”

“I’m starting to get the vibe that we should just disappear off the ship and forget we ever found it,” Lutjens replied. “There’s a lot more going on than was in the reports or in what we’ve been told since we got here.”

“Yeah...well, Musk isn’t going to replace the navigation data...in fact, the small craft that we’re going to keep aboard will have their nav systems purged,” Warwick explained. “Before each jump, *Arke* will send coordinates for the next jump, he wants to make sure that we retain executive control.”

“I can live with that. Dinner last night was just creepy, and the three survivors?” Lutjens said and shuddered slightly, “I felt like I was being sized up for a lab experiment when we met them.”

Before Warwick could reply, there was a gentle knock on the hatch. Lutjens and Warwick shared a look before Lutjens stood and walked to the door. She stepped back after she opened it and found Yuki Yamada and Ilsa Schmidt standing on the other side. “Girls...” she said and allowed it to come out as more of a question than a greeting.

“Ah...can we talk, Gretchen?” Ilsa asked and nervously looked over her shoulder.

“Certainly...come on in,” Lutjens replied and stepped aside for the girls to enter. “You remember Captain Warwick?”

“Hello, Captain,” Ilsa said and was parroted by Yuki a moment later.

“Please...sit...” Lutjens offered and sat next to Warwick on the sofa to present a unified front.

“Thank you for seeing us,” Yuki said after they were seated. “No one else knows we’re here and we’d like to keep it that way if possible,” she explained and Ilsa nodded agreement.

“Ok...I can honor that,” Lutjens told them. “What’s on your minds?”

Yuki looked at Ilsa and arched her eyebrows before the other girl nodded. “Don’t trust the adults,” Ilsa began. “Everything they told you was true...but it wasn’t the whole story,” she explained.

“My...mother...Clovis, and Escobar...they’re evil and the reason why everything fell apart.”

“Can you explain in a little more detail and do you have any proof?” Warwick asked.

Ilsa nodded again and reached into the bag that hung at her waist. “My...mother...” again there was a pause as she said the word as if it was either alien or repulsive, “kept a journal that she regularly wrote in and had dozens of them on a shelf. I leafed through them one day when I was bored and was horrified by what I found.” She withdrew her hand from the bag and held three hardcover journals that might be found at a fine stationary store. “Here...this first one covers when the first people went missing, the second one when they returned to this planet after people started dying, and this last one is from about a year later.”

Lutjens took the books and kept the first one and handed the other two to Warwick. Slowly, as if she was opening a tomb in the form of a book, she lifted the cover and looked at the first page. It was filled with neat, precise writing that hinted at a private or very high-end education. Without reading, she began turning the pages to see if there was anything other than written entries. After a dozen pages, she stopped and saw a page that reminded her of when she was in school; a page full of notes and some doodles. In this case, instead of band logos or the name of a boy she was interested in, it was a symbol of some sort; two pillars of flame, each seemingly curving away from the other.

“Ever see something like this?” Lutjens asked Warwick and showed him the doodle.

Warwick studied it for several moments and shook his head. “No...can’t say I have. Looks like a corporation’s logo maybe?”

“Could be,” Lutjens agreed and then showed it to the girls. “Do you know what this is?”

Ilsa and Yuki shook their heads. “I’ve seen it before, though,” Yuki offered. “We were exploring and found some crates with that on them.”

“Hmm...” Lutjens said. “We’ll take pics and send them over to *Arke* for analysis,” she stated. “In the meantime, we’re going to make the first jump in three hours, so we need to make sure everything is ready to go. Thank you for bringing me these books.”

Once again, Yuki and Ilsa shared a look. “I know you’re going to sequester yourselves from our people on the trip,” Ilsa stated and Lutjens nodded. “I...we...were wondering if we could stay with you...”

Lutjens arched an eyebrow. “Why?”

“We...we don’t trust the adults and think that they’re planning something...something not good,” Ilsa explained. “Everyone blindly agrees and goes along with what Clovis, Schmidt, and Escobar suggest without even thinking about it...they’re like...mindless drones when those three speak.”

“But not you?” Warwick prodded.

Ilsa and Yuki both shook their heads. “I don’t know why, but Ilsa, me, Orson, and Tim...we seem to be able to say no.”

“If something happens, I’ll give you sanctuary,” Lutjens declared and received smiles from the girls.

After the girls left, Lutjens sat back on the sofa and looked at Warwick, “What the frak is going on?”

“I dunno...but I think we need to read those journals,” Warwick replied and nodded at the three books on the coffee table. “I need to worry about flight prep, so I don’t need you on the bridge until about ten minutes before we jump. Look through them and see if you can find something...”

“I think that’s an excellent idea,” Lutjens told him. “Pass this verbally; engineering and the command spaces are on lockdown; no one is allowed in without an armed escort that outnumbers them. Thankfully our quarters are in the command spaces, so we don’t need to worry about those.”

“You’re spooked?” Warwick asked.

“Frakking right, I’m spooked!” Lutjens retorted. “I...do me a favor...between you and me.”

“Anything, Gretchen...you know that...just ask,” Warwick replied.

“This ship is pretty automated, more than anything we have now, so I want an override code that will open all pressure hatches and vent the ship except for our secure spaces here and in engineering,” Lutjens explained slowly. “I want it verbal, so all I need to do is speak it and it will happen, and keyed to my voice print, yours, Nelson’s, and James’. Since no one else from *Arke* will be here, we’ll limit it to just us four...”

“Ok...care to share your reasoning?” Warwick asked.

“Yeah...I want to be able to end them with a word if I need to...” Lutjens stated. “None of us is going to go home in a box, and if that means we space people who shouldn’t be alive, people who are playing god? Then yeah...I’ll do it and won’t shed a tear.”

“It’ll be ready before we jump,” Warwick offered.

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“Oh...my...gods...” Lieutenant Gretchen Lutjens swore as she read Eliza Schmidt’s journal. Her eyes read the neat and precisely printed text as quickly as she could comprehend what she was reading. Each page seemed worse than those that preceded it and she finally had to put down the journal and walk around her quarters for a moment to regain her equilibrium.

“Kilgore, Communications,” Corporal Aiden Kilgore said over the Marines’ wireless communications system.

“Aiden, this is Lieutenant Lutjens...” Lutjens said a moment later. “I need you to patch me through to Commodore Musk and tell Maisy that this is Priority One; unless the Doc has declared him dead, she needs to get him on the horn ASAP.”

“Copy, get Commodore Musk on the horn ASAP,” Kilgore replied. “Ah...full scramble and frequency hopping enabled?”

“Absolutely,” Lutjens told him and started pacing to steady her nerves.

“Wait one...” Kilgore advised. The moments felt like hours before Kilgore announced that he had Commodore Musk.

“What’s going on, Lieutenant?” Commodore Andre Musk asked over the wireless.

“Sir...I...” Lutjens was suddenly speechless as the enormity of what he had discovered hit her like a brick wall. “Sir...” she repeated and then told Musk what she found.

“You’re certain?” Musk asked when she finished.

“It’s in her own handwriting, Commodore,” Lutjens explained. “This isn’t some sort of fiction...this is what they did. I know enough biology and chemistry to get the gist, and I’m sure that the folks on *Arke* can tear it apart and give you a better explanation, but yeah...I’m absolutely certain.”

“Ok...what do you suggest?” Musk asked.

“Send me the rest of Echo Company, in sealed combat armor, and I’ll remove them all to the brig and confine them there after they’re strip searched,” Lutjens suggested.

“Ok. We’re due to jump in twenty minutes, that’ll be enough time to get Echo over to you,” Musk told her. “I want all those journals confiscated and sent over to *Arke* for examination.”

“Copy, Commodore,” Lutjens replied. “It’ll be done.”

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“What do you think you’re doing?” Dr. Aaron Clovis demanded as the Marines entered his lab unannounced.

“Dr. Aaron Clovis,” Gunnery Sergeant Crispin James stated through the helmet mounted speaker that was located where his mouth would be, “You are under arrest for crimes against humanity and a host of other charges. Please put your hands behind your back.”

“What? You can’t do this!” Clovis stated and refused to move.

“Fine...now the hard way,” James stated. “Wilkes, Bloom, restrain him.”

“Copy that,” Private Henderson Wilkes said and moved to Clovis’ right side while Private First Class Chance Bloom moved to his left. “Sir, if you resist, I might hurt you,” the large Marine told the scientist.

As soon as Clovis was restrained and held by Wilkes and Bloom, James put the next step of the plan into action. “Saldana, cut his clothes off and bag them.”

“Cut his clothes off and bag them,” Corporal Grant Saldana replied and drew his combat knife and proceeded to cut Clovis’ clothing off the man until all he wore were the shackles binding his hands behind him. Once the clothes were cut off, Saldana put them in a clear plastic bag, sealed it, and wrote AARON CLOVIS on the frosted tag.

“Lieutenant Lutjens, Gunnery Sergeant James; target has been secured,” James said over the platoon frequency.

“Copy, James,” Lieutenant Gretchen Lutjens replied. “Proceed to assembly area.”

“Copy, proceed to assembly area,” James confirmed and looked at the fire team that surrounded the naked Clovis. “Let’s go...” he told them. “Assembly area.”

When they arrived at the lounge that was designated the assembly area, James noted that the other teams had been successful; Doctors Eliza Schmidt and Ronaldo Escobar were already present and looking as annoyed as Clovis, and just as naked, while the rest of the survivors were quickly brought in. In total, there were thirteen adults ranging from their thirties to their sixties present, cuffed, and naked. The only people missing were the four youths that they’d encountered shortly after boarding *Pathfinder*. They weren’t part of the tasking order, so other than being on the alert for someone that might have been missed or never mentioned, the operation was almost over.

“Ok...we’re going down to the brig,” Lutjens announced. “Let’s go.”

Five minutes later, James stepped into the brig. Other than the trim, it looked like every other jail he’d seen; cells, secure doors, security cameras, protected control spaces, almost overkill for a ship that was supposed to be filled with the cream of the Colonies’ eggheads, he thought.

“Everyone goes into their own cells, these three,” Lutjens indicated Clovis, Schmidt, and Escobar, “go into solitary, as well as the First Gens. Everyone else, I want an empty cell between them.”

“Ok...we’ve got them, now what, Loot?” James asked Lutjens after everyone was secured in their cells.

“Now we start solving the mystery of what actually happened and why,” Lutjens replied and leaned against a desk. “I’m not going to go into details, Cris, if I did, you’d probably just shoot them in their

cells, but suffice it to say that those three have all the answers.” James looked where she was pointing and saw she indicated the three solitary confinement cells that held the scientists.

“Understood,” James replied. “Ah...” he remembered something that was mentioned in the briefing. “You want full containment protocols enacted?”

Lutjens nodded. “Yeah, I do. If there was a way I could freeze them until we got home and then thaw them out, I would, so this is going to have to work.”

James pursed his lips. “Ok, everyone out!” he ordered over the platoon frequency. As soon as everyone was out of the common area the cells opened into, he stepped out of the room and closed the hatch. “Ok, Pablo, enact Isolation Protocols.”

Petty Officer 2nd Class Pablo Hernandez nodded. “Copy, enacting Isolation Protocols,” he stated. “All cells confirmed sealed, atmosphere in common areas has been evacuated. Isolation Protocols are in place.”

“Thanks, Pablo,” Lutjens said and squeezed the corpsman’s shoulder.

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Beyond Known Space, Colonial battlestar *Unicorn*, BS-81

“Jump twenty-six complete, all ships accounted for and in formation,” Captain Quannah Mason announced.

“Thanks, Q,” Commander Siv Andresson said and thanked the gods that they were now almost two hundred fifty light years closer to home. She was still reeling from the news that pointed to the Colonies suffering an apocalyptic fate, but she told herself that until she saw it with her own eyes or had proof, that it simply couldn’t be real. It was sticking her head in the sand, but for now it was the only way she was able to compartmentalize everything and still function.

“Is our problem child behaving?” Colonel Melchior von Peele asked and nodded to the display that showed *Pathfinder* majestically sailing through space about ten kilometers ahead of *Unicorn*.

“As of the last report, yes,” Andresson replied. “Lieutenant Lutjens didn’t take any chances; she had everyone except the kids put in shackles and then had their clothes cut off before they were put in individual cells...and then had the common area reduced to vacuum.”

“Ouch...that’s beyond supermax,” von Peele chuckled. “A bit extreme?”

Andresson shook her head. “Mel...I saw a couple pages from Schmidt’s personal diary...I think I would have just spaced the lot of them and allowed what happened there to remain a mystery. It was hardcore house of horrors stuff...made some of the Cylon labs that were discovered after the war look like high school biology class.”

Von Peele narrowed his eyes. “That sounds pretty bad...”

“It was,” Andresson offered. “Andre is having an archivist team digitize the journals and then they’re going to pick them apart. Mel...” she paused for a moment, “those three were responsible for everything that happened...and they used their own crew members as test subjects. Then...they got

involved with cloning. We'll take them back and if there's anything left of the government, they'll disappear them, pick them for all they know, and then probably keep them as prized scientists."

"Ok...maybe Lutjens didn't overreact," von Peele agreed. "Is that part of the reason why we're maintaining a thirty-minute jump schedule?"

Andresson nodded. "Yeah. At this rate we should be home in a couple more days. Seems so fast given how long it took to get out here."

"Sure does," von Peele agreed. His fingers tapped on the plotting table and Andresson waited for him to get to what was really bothering him. "Do you think we have a home to return to?" he finally asked.

"Yeah, I do," Andresson told him and saw surprise on his face. "Let's look at this as if we weren't Colonial citizens and officers, just people who knew Colonial Fleet and Cylon doctrine, as well as why the Cylons likely returned."

"Ok..." von Peele agreed.

"What is our primary ship to ship weapon?" Andresson asked.

"One-meter kinetic rounds, supported by an increasing number of two-meter kinetics," von Peele replied.

"Right," Andresson agreed. "Now, what was the Cylons' main ship to ship weapon?"

"When they left it was the nuclear missile," von Peele answered and a moment later his eyes widened.

"Ah...I think you're seeing it..." Andresson suggested. "In a full-scale fleet battle, we have over a thousand battlestars, a similar number of assault ships, more gunstars than I can imagine, and we only saw a bit over twenty-thousand detonations. And how many nukes did it take to do in *Unicorn* during the last simulation?"

Von Peele slowly nodded at Andresson's logic. "It took more than twenty-five to destroy us, which was high for a *Mercury*, but even if you figure ten nukes per battlestar and an average of seven per assaultstar, all those gunstars, some being battlestars in all but name...and yeah...I see your point."

"That's just one outcome..." Andresson cautioned. "The other is that they could have gone straight for the homeworlds and then who knows what we'll find."

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Beyond Known Space, Colonial Deep Space Research Vessel *Arke*

"I know we're more than three quarters of the way home and it's probably an odd time to take a pause," Commodore Andre Musk told the five other officers and two academics seated at the table. "However, given what we've discovered on *Pathfinder* and what we anticipate finding when we return home, I thought that it would be prudent to take time now, while we have it, to bring everyone up to date. Also..." he smirked and shared a glance to an attractive middle-aged woman in civilian clothes, "on what Dr. Franklin and her team have discovered."

"You figured out what happened on *Pathfinder*, Willie?" Commander Siv Andresson asked.

Dr. Wilhelmina Franklin brushed a stray lock of brunette hair behind her ear before she slowly nodded. “Though, when I look in the mirror and am completely honest with the face looking back at me, I wish I hadn’t.”

“We’ll get to that in a moment,” Musk cut in and avoided minutes of speculation and discussion that he knew would develop. “First up, we have dinner; home and *Pathfinder* are not acceptable conversation – they can wait for later. Once we’re finished eating, we’ll discuss what we’ve been able to piece together about what happened at home and then we’ll cover *Pathfinder*. At the end, we can have a free-for-all Q&A.”

Musk made sure that the dinner conversation stayed light and that everyone was involved. “Tell me, Morris,” he asked the head of *Arke*’s scientific contingent, “other than the topics that will be discussed later, what are your thoughts about the overall mission?”

Dr. Morris Digby was not what Musk pictured when he thought of ‘senior academic’. Instead of being a slight, perhaps overweight and balding man with glasses, Digby was tall, extremely fit, wore his salt and pepper hair longer than short and shorter than long, and somehow managed to always ensure that his clothing had razor sharp creases...whether it was the start of the day or the end of a forty-eight hour cram session. When he was a younger man, he competed in the pentathlon; a series of tasks that tested an athlete’s ability to swim, run, fence, shoot, and ride a horse. The rich playboy look disguised the fact that the man had his first doctorate when most teens graduated high school and by the time he turned thirty had collected four more.

“Overall, had we not encountered the topics that shall not be named, I think the mission was an outstanding success. Not because we discovered new worlds, not because we surveyed mineral deposits that will power the Colonies for the next twenty-thousand years, not because we traveled deep into uncharted space, but because we took a student body and exposed them to real scientific research during their formative years and in doing so, got them excited about what they were studying beyond how they could convert that knowledge into cubits,” Digby explained. “We have gotten so wrapped up on our campuses with social events, political rallies, this cause or that cause, that we’ve lost sight of what we’re there for. When we return, for better or worse, we will have created the next generation of scientists who will push back the cloak of ignorance and create knowledge.”

“Are you sure you’re a scientist and not a speech writer?” Colonel Jian Li, *Iris*’ XO, asked.

“Absolutely, Jian,” Digby replied to the almond eyed, dark haired woman. “I abhor politics and only deal with it when I have to.”

“You’re my hero!” Li swooned, which caused everybody but Franklin to laugh.

Musk saw the question on Franklin’s face, “Willie, when you sit in on as many staff meetings as we have with Jian, you’ll learn she agrees with the immortal bard; first we kill all the politicians.”

Understanding crossed the librarian’s face. “But what about the lawyers, I thought he said they were first?” she smiled as she asked.

“Ah!” Li smirked, “They’re next!”

When the dessert plates were cleared ten minutes later, Musk wiped his lips on his napkin and set it on the table. “Ok...now to the main event,” he started. “First, I fed you. Now...” he met each person’s gaze, “now...I think I’m going to scare you. Dr. Digby, would you please give us a briefing on what your team has put together about the tachyon bursts that we observed?”

“Certainly, Commodore,” Digby replied and slipped into a speaking style that was just formal enough to be formal, but relaxed and easy to listen to. “First, there were two primary observation events, about three days apart. The first one, we were able to determine, offered five unique tachyon signatures. We isolated each signature and then ran it through our database of known signatures. While different, we believe that the overwhelming majority of the first event’s signatures were Cylon...until about five hours later, when they stopped and signatures two, three, and four became dominant. The fifth signature stopped about the time the Cylon signatures stopped and we believe that it is somehow related to the fourth signature. Think of it as the difference between Colonial and Cylon weapons.

“The second signature,” Digby continued, “we have 100% certainty that it was Colonial. Signatures three and four are unique. After the Cylon signatures ended, there was a pause, and then we saw an uptick of Colonial and signatures three and four for about an hour. Oddly, during this time there were absolutely no Cylon or signature five events recorded.”

“Excuse me, Dr. Digby,” Commander Lindon Aydenon of *Iris* asked, “If I’m hearing you correctly, there were three phases that you recorded; the first phase where everyone was lobbing nukes, then a second phase where there was a pause, and finally a resurgence of Colonial and two others’ nukes. Is that about right?”

Digby nodded. “That’s exactly right, Commander. We then jump three days and once again we see Cylon signatures. That’s when we believe they struck the Colonies. Shortly after the first signatures were seen, we began seeing Colonial signatures, but not in the numbers we would have expected to see. But...” he held up his right index finger, “Just like the first time, the Cylon signatures simply ended as if someone threw a switch. It wasn’t like you turned off a water faucet, where the water flow slowed as you turned the knob, but rather as immediate as flipping a light switch.”

“And that was just like the first event?” Li pressed.

“Exactly, Colonel,” Digby stated.

“Do you have any speculation now that you’ve told us the facts and implied that there is at least one, possibly two other civilizations out there that we don’t know about?” Li asked.

Digby sat back and steepled his fingers under his chin. Musk shook his head, the academic was a born showman. “I do,” the scientist offered. “When I saw the data, I went back and studied all the records we had of ship to ship and fleet engagements going back to the Imperial era. What I found was that in no case...not one case on record...did things ever stop,” he snapped his fingers, “just like that. So...after discussing it with several members of the team, this is our speculation...”

There was a pause as Digby seemed to consider how he was going to say what was next. Musk knew and still had a hard time believing it, but it made sense. “Ok...we know that during the Uprising the Cylons tried to board our ships and attacked them electronically. That’s history. We believe that

somehow, someone developed a way to shut down the Cylons remotely. They're lobbing nuke after nuke, from multiple systems and multiple orbits, and then bam! They all stop. And it happened twice.

"The worrisome part of this is when we analyzed the Colonial response during the attack on the Colonies," Digby frowned. "We built a simulation with a quarter of the Colonial Fleet and over the course of the battle increased the numbers to the point where about 60% of the Fleet had been activated. Some were destroyed, so we never had that number actually fighting at the same time, but from beginning to end, we utilized about 60% of the fleet. Yes, Colonel von Peele?"

"Why 60% of the fleet? We could crash sail anything that wasn't laid up," Colonel Melchior von Peele stated.

"A good question and one I asked, too," Digby replied. "Our model was built based on the assumption that the Cylons achieved a near total surprise attack. Many of those ships never made it out of dock."

Von Peele nodded. "I thought that was what you modeled, I just needed to be sure."

"Understood," Digby stated. "Here's where we step into really unknown territory," he smirked. "The Colonial response seemed...jagged. Yes, we put them at a disadvantage, but even with that, there should have been more signatures. Our speculation, and it's just that, speculation, is that the Cylons either have a weapon that is excessively more effective than what they had before, or anything that we have for that matter, or they had a way to nullify our nuclear weapons. That's all we know or can speculate; for all we know once the nukes were seen as ineffective the Fleet went all in on kinetics and shot the shit out of them. We just don't know."

Musk allowed several questions about Digby's presentation before he moved to the next topic and presenter. "Dr. Franklin, you and your staff were able to digitize and review all the journals that Lieutenant Lutjens recovered from Dr. Eliza Schmidt's quarters and lab. Can you give us an update on what you found?"

Dr. Wilhelmina Franklin slowly nodded. "What Dr. Digby told you should scare you on a logical level; he gave you observed data that was developed and synthesized into a hypothesis. What he told you is not something we can deny; it happened. What I am going to share will, or at least it should, scare you on a visceral level. After reviewing the journals, I asked Lieutenant Lutjens to dig into the computer logs and databases to determine whether this was just sick fiction or whether it actually happened."

Franklin took a deep breath, let it out, and then took a sip of water. "It happened. All of it. Pathfinder was sabotaged from within; there was nothing that was 'in the air' and no 'exotic bug' from an unexplored planet, it was pure human evil." She paused and even though he had heard it before, Musk found himself sitting on the edge of his chair and leaning forward to hear what she had to say.

"It started before *Pathfinder* left Virgon, when Drs Clovis, Schmidt, and Escobar were approached by someone Schmidt only refers to as 'their benefactor's representative'. During the months before the expedition left, this person met with the three doctors several times and provided equipment and supplies for the experiments that they were asked to perform.

"Escobar was how they evaded security; he was in charge of Pathfinder's computers and network, so it was easy for him to loop video, erase things, and ensure that his other conspirators could do their work

unhindered. Clovis and Schmidt, however, were the real stars of this horror vid. They did genetic and medical experiments on their own crew; either individually once they snatched them, or via tailored chemicals they introduced into the atmosphere to heighten certain emotions...such as paranoia.

“By the time things fell apart, they were getting ready to flood the ship with a chemical that would cause the crew to become docile and completely susceptible to their suggestions. Bentonhurst deciding to purge the navigation data and lock the controls via Commander’s override derailed their plans. Instead, they released a chemical that caused extreme rage and when it wore off, suicidal guilt. A side effect was that it also extremely dulled the pain receptors, so people could be shot half a dozen times and never realize it until they either bled out, suffered an instantly debilitating hit, or had a bone broken.

“When Bentonhurst and the other survivors said that it looked like the dead had come back to life, to their eyes that really was what it looked like,” Franklin stated. “In the years since the ship was abandoned, Clovis, Schmidt, and Escobar continued their research on the survivors and managed to perfect two technologies. Well, perfect might not be the right word; they were given all the information how to create it, they just needed time and resources to make it happen.”

“What did they create?” Andresson asked.

“First, they perfected cloning...and not just one replication, but they did it in such a way that each copy was true to the original, whether it was one generation or a thousand generations removed...it was a perfect copy with no defects,” Franklin explained and narrowed her eyes. “Normally, with cloning, you may start to see glitches if you Clone B from A, and then clone C from B, and so on, cloning the next generation from the previous. You could secure the original samples and clone from them, but what happens if those samples are contaminated, destroyed, or just used up? Eventually, you must clone the previous generation for the next.

“However, they were able to make that a moot issue. One of their experiments was with fruit flies; they went to ten thousand generations and when comparing Generation 1 to Generation 10,000...they were identical with no defects.”

“Ok...now that is spooky. The implications are...” Li managed to softly say.

“They’re nothing compared to the second breakthrough,” Franklin declared. “You have a clone, but what about you? You want to live another lifetime, so how do you do that? You could do organ replacement without a chance of rejection, but what if you could also transfer your consciousness, that spark that made you...you, and all your knowledge, experience, etc., into that new body? The brain would be identical, the body would be exactly what you’re used to, all you would need is a way.”

“And...and they developed one?” Andresson asked, though to Musk’s ear it sounded more like a statement.

“They did,” Franklin answered. “Ideally, they’d fast grow the clone to its teen years. Schmidt said that it took them about three or four months to properly grow a clone, though she also says that their benefactor’s representative stated that they should be able to get that down to about 12 to 18 hours with the right technology.”

“Wait...” Colonel Natasha Farrell, *Arke’s XO*, asked. “You’re saying that this benefactor suggested that they could get the time to grow a complete clone to maturity down to only 12 to 18 *hours*?”

Franklin nodded. “Yes. Schmidt continued research on it, but given their current circumstances, she didn’t see a need to press forward at full speed due to resources and...controlling everyone.”

“That is sick...” Andresson stated to several nods.

“It is,” Franklin agreed. “The Gen 1s, as Lieutenant Lutjens called them, are biological children. Most of the Gen 2s, with the exception of Kip and Sally Slater and Liesl Metz, are naturally born, but those three, they’re clones. The siblings are clones of two people who survived the evacuation but proved...difficult...to control. Escobar killed them and then they all cloned them.”

“Do you have any idea who this benefactor is or was?” Musk asked and sat back in his chair, already thinking that he was going to visit sick bay when this was over so he could get an antacid tablet.

“No,” Franklin stated. “Schmidt had three theories on it, though. First, it was some rogue element within the Colonies who saw this as a way to push the envelope. She didn’t put a whole lot of confidence on that one. The next two, however, she believed one of those was most likely the truth. The second theory was that the benefactor was from an advanced human civilization that had split off either from the Colonies or earlier, from Kobol, and had been forgotten or the knowledge suppressed.”

“And the third?” Digby asked.

“The third theory was that the benefactor was one of the Lords of Kobol,” Franklin calmly stated.

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Beyond Known Space, *HMS Pathfinder*

“How does it feel to be in charge of the most celebrated ghost ship in Colonial history?” Captain Daniel Warwick asked as he twirled the spaghetti on his fork.

“It’s good to be the Queen!” Lieutenant Gretchen Lutjens chuckled. “For the small amount of personnel that we have and that we’re essentially a caretaker crew, it isn’t bad. It’s enough to know that I’ll leave this kind of job to the experts in the future.”

“I am absolutely amazed at the level of automation that we have here,” Warwick said after he chewed and swallowed the pasta. “We can effectively sail the ship, even fight if we have to, with who we have aboard. If we take damage, though, we’re going to be in a bad spot, but otherwise, this is really more like flying a simulator than reality.”

“But the simulator never had monsters in the brig,” Lutjens said and punctuated the point with a quick stab of her fork. “Finding out that everything that happened was caused by those three...Danny, I really want to evacuate their cells and just flush them into deep space.”

“I hear you, Gretch,” Warwick agreed. “I’m just hoping that we can keep them in their bottles until we get home and let people higher up the food chain deal with them.”

“If they don’t, then we handle it,” Lutjens told him. “From what Commodore Musk told me they found in the journals, he has more than enough evidence to sit in judgment on them and render a verdict. I just hope there’s someone to take them off our hands when we get back.”

“There will be,” Warwick confidently stated. “We beat the Cylons once, we can do it again.”

“I wish I had your confidence,” Lutjens told him and was about to say something more when the klaxon sounded.

“Action Stations! Action Stations! Set Condition One throughout the ship!” Corporal Aiden Kilgore’s voice announced over the 1MC.

Lutjens was on her feet before she realized what she was doing and had her hand on the intercom handset. “This is Lutjens, what’s going on?” she asked.

“Lieutenant, we have six bogies that just jumped in at extreme range and are moving to intercept us, CBDR,” Kilgore stated. “Warbook has no identification for them...wait one...” he quickly said, and the line went quiet for a moment. “*Unicorn* reports high confidence that they’re Cylon...”

“I’m on my way,” Lutjens said and hung up the handset. “Dinner’s over, Danny...the Cylons just found us.”

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Beyond Known Space, Earth Union battlestar *Medusa*

Commander Feleena Kaylen covered her mouth with her right hand as she yawned. The celebration the night before lasted into the wee hours of the morning and she wasn’t about to shut it down, especially since it represented that the hardest – and longest – part of their journey was over. They secured from high speed cruise to standard cruise and would make a series of FTL jumps to finish the trip to the Colonies.

“Has the drone returned yet, Al?” Kaylen asked Captain Alphonse Daidone.

Daidone looked at the chronometer, “Should be back in about a minute and a half, Commander.”

“Good...” Kaylen replied. “It feels weird sending one ahead before each jump, but I want to make sure I know what I’m jumping into before we arrive. It wouldn’t be good form to drop in unannounced on someone’s bar-b-que.”

“Did you have to say that word?” Colonel Silas DeMer groaned. “I was over on *Sequoia* last night and they pulled out all the stops...I think I ate a whole cow.”

“I warned you,” Kaylen chuckled. “After Stephens and his buddies spent a week in the brig, they changed their tune pretty quickly and now they seem to want to get back into everyone’s good graces through massive feasts.”

“At least we have the food,” Captain Selene Tesla commented from the weapons station. “I was reading a book about a ship that had a drive issue and the crew had to live on e-rats for six months. I think if that happened, I’d have no need to go to the gym!”

“What are you saying?” Daidone shot back, “you can eat the XO under the table and never have to spend a day in the gym.”

Tesla shrugged. “Good genes and a fast metabolism. My mom thought I was part goat when I was a kid because I was always eating. Never hurts this, though,” she added and ran her hands up and down her torso.

“When are they going to come clean?” DeMer leaned over the plotting table and asked Kaylen. “They must be the worst kept secret on the ship.”

Kaylen shrugged. “Dunno, Silas. I envy them, though,” she replied.

Before DeMer could answer, Daidone announced, “Dradis contact! I have confirmation that it’s our recon drone...telemetry is being downloaded.”

“That went a little smoother than I expected,” Kaylen said and waited for Daidone to interpret the data.

“The jump area is clear,” Daidone announced a moment later. “All that the drone saw was deep space.”

“Good...” Kaylen said and fought back another yawn. “Colonel DeMer,” she said formally, “Please have navigation prepare jump coordinates and have them distributed throughout the fleet. I’d like to jump in three hours.”

“Have navigation prepare jump coordinates and have them distributed throughout the fleet for a jump in three hours, aye,” DeMer formally replied and looked at Daidone and nodded.

“You have the con, Colonel...I’m going to nip two hours in the rack and hopefully a shower,” Kaylen told DeMer. “Call if anything comes up.”

“I have the con, aye,” DeMer told her and then added, “get some rest, I’ve got this.”

“Thanks, Silas,” Kaylen said and walked to her quarters where she proceeded to do exactly what she said she would.

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Beyond Known Space, Earth Union battlestar *Euryale*

“Mind if I watch the jump from CIC?” Gillian McGovern asked as she carried the lunch plates to the sink in Commander Annabelle Isles’ quarters.

“Sure,” Isles replied and finished washing her face at the sink in the head. She looked at her face and brushed some of her wine-red hair back behind her ears and then used a towel to dry her face. “Should be routine based off the telemetry we have.”

“Cool,” McGovern said and slid her arms around Isles from behind her before resting her chin on the officer’s shoulder. “As a kid I read history, Bel, now...” she paused and Isles could see the wonder in her lover’s eyes, “now I’m living it. Granted, if I had the choice of why, I wouldn’t have taken what happened.”

“No one would have, Gill,” Isles told her and wrapped her arms around McGovern’s. “This is the hand we’ve been dealt; this is what we have to play with,” she said. “Now...let’s go to CIC; we’re about fifteen minutes from jumping.”

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“*Euryale* is at Action Stations, Jump Conditions and Condition One are set throughout,” Colonel Camden Julii reported after Commander Annabelle Isles formally took the con.

“Excellent,” Isles replied and looked around at the CIC staff. The excitement was palpable and then her eyes flashed up to the observation gallery where Gillian McGovern sat with Michelle and Jean-Michael, Camden’s wife and two-year-old son. “Let’s make history, people,” she said to a cheering response.

“*Medusa* has sent our jump coordinates and we’re ready for the order,” Captain Matthew Dearborn stated.

“Good...what’s on the clock?” Isles asked.

“Jump clock is paused at thirty seconds while every ship does a final check,” Dearborn replied. “Ah...just got the notice, the clock will start...now. Twenty-five seconds to jump.”

“Cam...” Isles said, a sudden feeling of worry suddenly flooding her body. “This isn’t going to be good.”

“Huh?” Julii asked as the clock reached ten seconds.

“Prepare to sail into Harm’s Way...” Isles said and braced herself for what they were going to find on the other side of the jump.

“The drone...” Julii said as Dearborn counted down the last seconds.

“Three...two...One...JUMP!” Dearborn announced and Isles felt as if she was being forced into a shell of herself that was several sizes smaller than she needed, and then just as suddenly the infinite instant was over, and she felt normal again.

“Mr. Dearborn, expand dradis to 100k, full search,” Isles ordered before anyone could say anything congratulatory about the jump.

“Copy, expand dradis to 100...dradis contacts!” Dearborn announced. “Range, ten thousand kilometers! I have...three huge contacts and a smaller one being attacked by six large ships and...lots of fighters...there must be at least six hundred out there now.”

“Commander? I have *Medusa* Actual on the line,” Lieutenant Elsa Vickers stated.

“Down here, please,” Isles replied and picked up the handset. “*Euryale* Actual,” she said.

“Bel, has Matt given you an ID on those bogies yet?” Commander Feleena Kaylen asked.

“No...he just gave us sizes,” Isles replied.

“Three of them are returning Colonial IDs, one an Imperial Virgon ID, and the other six are claiming to be something called Cylon,” Kaylen told her. “We came here to find the Colonials...”

“Yeah...I hear you,” Isles agreed. “It isn’t much, but shall we lend a hand?”

“Yes,” Kaylen stated. “I have Gish trying to make contact, so for now, let’s launch the fighters but keep them close, once we make contact, we’ll commit them. Until then, let’s start dealing with those...Cylons.”

Isles’ smile tuned predatory. “Wind me up and point me at ‘em,” she told her sister. “Let’s do this.”

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Beyond Known Space, Colonial Deep Space Research Vessel *Arke*

“That was too damned close!” Colonel Natasha Farrell growled as she clung to the plotting table as the massive research ship shook in a way it was never supposed to.

“Laz, what’s the status on our FTL?” Commodore Andre Musk asked the navigation officer.

Captain Lazar Truett studied his systems displays for several moments and grimly shook his head. “It’s offline and Chief Uhl told me it would be at least fifteen minutes to bring it back.”

Musk shared a look with Farrell and then stood tall. “Maisy, please connect me to *Unicorn*, *Iris*, and *Pathfinder*,” he asked Communications Specialist Maisy Claremont.

“Wait one...” Claremont replied. “They’re on your handsets,” she said a moment later.

“Commander Andresson, I want you to take *Iris* and *Pathfinder* and jump out of here. *Arke* will stay behind and distract them. That should...” His next words were interrupted by the dradis pinging off new arrivals.

“Dradis contacts! Unknown configurations...” Truett declared. “Pinging their transponders...this...this can’t be...”

“What is it Laz...” Musk growled as *Arke* was rocked by another near miss.

“Sir...the transponders claim they’re from the Earth Union...” Truett said as if he’d seen a ghost.

“Commodore...” Claremont announced, “we’re being hailed...it’s the battlestar *Medusa*...from the Earth Union...”

“Put it on with the others,” Musk said and said a prayer to any god that might be listening that these new arrivals would line up on the friend side of the ledger.

“This is Commander Feleena Kaylen of the Earth Union battlestar *Medusa* to the Colonial formation commander, please respond,” a strong female voice announced over the headset’s speaker.

“Two baseships are breaking off to intercept...” Musk heard Truett say in the background.

“This is Commodore Andre Musk of the Colonial Deep Space Research Vessel *Arke*,” Musk replied. “We are a little busy...might I ask your intentions?”

“Do you require assistance, Commodore?” Kaylen replied. “We’ve come a long way to meet you and didn’t come all this way to be bystanders.”

Musk was overcome by emotion and fought back the tears. “Commander, any and all help would be greatly appreciated.”

“Consider it done, Commodore,” Kaylen stated. “I suggest you withdraw any fighters so that they don’t get caught in the crossfire.”

“Ah...ok...we’ll set an exclusion zone of five kilometers from each of our ships, will that suffice?” Musk asked and pointed to Captain Steffan Bonner to make it happen.

“That would be ideal,” Kaylen told him. “We will be with you momentarily.”

“I’m getting a couple gunstar sized ships at ten thousand kilometers and a lot of civilians...wait one...” Truett said and modified the resolution with the dradis. “Frak me...they’ve got an entire stealth squadron! Two battlestars...two gunstars...they just jumped in...range 100...”

“My gods...” Farrell said as she watched the new ships plow right through the two baseships that had moved to intercept. In a handful of heartbeats, the two Cylon warships were rendered into nothing more than scrap being torn apart by sympathetic internal explosions.

“Cylons just launched fighters on the Earth Union ships...” Truett declared. “I have more than two thousand contacts...”

“What’s that?” Musk asked and pointed to something that separated from one of the gunstars and was on a CBRD course for the fighters. It was followed a few moments later by another object.

“I don’t know,” Truett replied. “It’s way too big to be a missile...”

“Oh...my...gods...” Farrell swore as the Ragnarök drone suddenly began dispensing submunitions and decoys.

“There must be more than...this can’t be right...” Truett said, his voice full of disbelief. “There’s more than forty **thousand** submunitions...”

“I bet most of them are decoys,” Musk said and realized that *Arke* hadn’t taken a hit since the Earth Union showed up.

“That’s it...the Raiders are gone...” Farrell said as Musk watched the submunitions close and immolate the Cylon Raiders. “What’s going on with the second fist of god they launched?”

Truett shook his head in disbelief. “It just dispensed its submunitions and they’re on intercept courses with the baseships.”

“Maybe we might just get home after all...” Musk said to himself as two of the four remaining Cylon baseships did a short-range jump to engage the Earth Union ships.

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Beyond Known Space, Earth Union battlestar *Euryale*

Commander Annabelle Isles watched the dradis as *Euryale* kept pace with *Medusa*. Just in front of them were *Ersa* and *Eiresione* providing primary point defense. The Ragnarök drones had cleared the Cylon fighters from existence and were on the way to doing the same for the remaining four baseships. The

first two they encountered died as soon as they were engaged as if they lacked any sort of armor. The 1-meter kinetics punched straight through them, destroying everything in their path and leaving nothing but shattered hulks in their wake. Even though these weren't the traitorous Chrome Brigades, it felt good to draw the sword of wrath and let loose the dogs of war.

"What's our range to intercept?" Isles asked Captain Matthew Dearborn.

"Coming up on fifty kilometers," Dearborn replied.

"Mr. Carrera," Isles said and turned to *Euryale's* weapons officer. "Let's kill another one, shall we? All batteries, fire as you have a target."

"Kill another one, aye, all batteries fire as the target presents itself, aye," Captain Leonard Carrera confirmed and Isles immediately saw the telltales showing the 1-meter kinetic batteries, both turreted and fixed, firing at the baseship that Commander Kaylen had assigned to them.

Shot after shot punched through the Cylon baseship, barely pausing as it smashed vital systems into junk and tore through the life-giving structure of the living ship.

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Beyond Known Space, Cylon Baseship *Cinder*

The older man had both hands immersed within the water table that was located in the baseship's CIC. "What the frak is going on? Who are those people, Vina?" the older, salt and pepper haired man growled.

"I have no clue, Aldrich," Vina, the brunette that stood across from him hissed back. She was attractive, but in an athletic sense; her clothes displayed a strong body with a moderate bosom and topped with a sharply featured face that was, as Aldrich always thought, five whiskey shots pretty.

"Huxton and Dory are about to be flattened, and we have more ordnance coming in than we can handle. It's time we cut our losses and get the frak out of here," Aldrich told his cohort.

"I think you're right..." Vina replied as the baseship seemed to twist under them. "What the frak?" she swore and closed her eyes. "How the hell..." she managed to get out before more than a dozen 2-meter kinetic rounds and a host of smaller 1-meter kinetics tore through the ship.

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Beyond Known Space, HMS *Pathfinder*

"Oh yeah! That's what I'm talking about!" Captain Daniel Warwick shouted as Lieutenant Edward Nelson announced that the ship's batteries had, at extreme range, engaged the Cylon baseship and scored numerous hits.

"Bring us around, Danny," Lieutenant Gretchen Lutjens told the acting navigator. "Flank speed, CBDR...let's run that bastard into the ground!"

"Hoo yah!" Warwick shouted and Lutjens could feel the adrenaline dump course through her veins. I. Am. ALIVE! she thought to herself as she watched the dradis mirror what she was seeing through the panoramic bridge windows.

The big ship quickly accelerated and proved that just because she was older than anyone on the bridge, she was fast, maneuverable, and had teeth that were eager to draw Cylon blood. Lutjens watched as the guns sprouted golden plasma blooms as the plasma squibs cleared the accelerator bore of any errant matter before launching the hardened kinetic penetrators toward their targets.

Another volley slammed into the crippled baseship before it suddenly appeared to ripple, glow from the inside, and then exploded as its reactors went critical.

Lutjens didn't even consider telling her crew to focus on their jobs; they all knew that the Cylons had likely just destroyed their homes and suddenly had a chance to exact payback. Despite the situation back home, she felt good to be alive.

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Beyond Known Space, Earth Union battlestar *Medusa*

"What do we do now?" Commander Feleena Kaylen asked the two women who flanked her in the portside top primary reception lounge.

"I guess 'take me to your leader' is out," Commander Jessica Raynes quipped and drew a round of chuckles.

"Somehow I think that formality isn't going to be the word of the day," Commander Annabelle Isles replied.

"Hmm...you have a point, there, Bel," Kaylen told her sister. "Maybe we can arrange something once repairs are finished, and we get a jump or two beyond where we are."

"We could have it over on *Eurypyle*, under the dome," Raynes suggested as the hatch telltale turned from red to green.

"Showtime," Kaylan said as the hatch opened and a tall, middle aged man with dark hair and wearing a dark blue uniform stood waiting.

"Permission to come aboard, Commander?" he asked.

"Permission granted, Commodore Musk," Kaylen replied.

As Musk's right foot touched the deck, the boatswain announced, "*Arke arriving!*", and then proceeded to pipe him aboard.

Musk turned and offered the boatswain a brief nod acknowledging the announcement. "Thank you for inviting us over to meet a legend," he said as he stopped in front of Kaylen and offered his hand.

"I hope we lived up to the stories, Commodore," Kaylen replied and shook his hand. "We're glad to have found you," she said. "And I'm glad we found you when we did."

Musk nodded. "You can say that again; I had just given the order for the other ships to jump and we would try to distract the Cylons since our FTL was offline."

"Well, doubly good...last stands rarely end well," Kaylen told him as Musk stepped aside.

“I believe that is Commander Andresson,” Musk stated as someone else stepped to the hatchway.

“Permission to come aboard, Commander?” a trim, blonde woman asked.

“Permission granted,” Kaylen replied.

As the woman’s foot touched the deck, the boatswain announced, “*Unicorn*, arriving!”, and then piped aboard the Colonial officer.

“Thank you, Boats,” Andresson warmly said to the boatswain. “It’s nice to see that some traditions are universal.”

“You’re welcome, ma’am,” the boatswain replied.

“I’m Commander Siv Andresson,” the blonde said after she walked to where Kaylen and the others waited. “My compliments to your gunnery crews, Commander,” she said and offered her hand. “Their shooting would have won the *Columbia* Trophy.”

Kaylen shook her hand. “Serendipity and endless training,” she replied. “We had a lot of time on our hands and it appears we put it to good use.”

“Whatever the reason, there are a lot of people alive because of your serendipitous arrival,” Andresson told her. “Including this guy,” she nodded her head at Musk.

“Allow me to introduce my associates,” Kaylen stated. “This is Commander Jessica Raynes, she heads up my operations team.”

Raynes took a step forward. “That’s just one of my hats,” she quipped and shook Musk’s then Andresson’s hand.

“And this is Commander Annabelle Isles, commander of *Euryale*,” Kaylen said and introduced Isles.

“Pleased to meet you, Commander,” Musk said and shook her hand.

“As am I,” Andresson said and shook Isles’ hand. “I’m honored to meet all three of you. Not just for the historic significance, but because you offered to help us before we had a chance to ask. That...” she paused a moment and appeared to be trying to control her emotions, “that means a lot. Thank you.”

“You’re most welcome,” Isles replied. “We knew who we were looking for, and even if we turned out to be a squabbling family, someone was picking on one of ours...”

“...so we had to get involved,” Kaylen finished for her sister. “Come...let me give you a brief tour while we walk to my quarters for a bite to eat and a chance to get to know each other. I’ve arranged for your escort and flight crews to mingle with their counterparts so we can all start building some bridges.”

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Beyond Known Space, Roc 563, Callsign Glamor

“I’m still in shock that we found the Colonials,” Captain Esmeralda DeCinci told her co-pilot and the Roc’s primary Electronics Systems Officer.

“Ezzie, you’ve said that five times since we launched,” Lieutenant Spencer Lightfoot chuckled. “Are you in shock that a pair of their Vipers are flying formation with us?”

“No...but I have to say, those birds make ours look pretty damned plain,” DeCinci replied.

“That they do...” Lightfoot agreed before his voice trailed off.

“What is it?” DeCinci asked, it wasn’t like her ESO to just stop in mid-sentence.

“I’m getting a dradis hit at extreme range,” Lightfoot answered. “It’s moving parallel to the main fleet, almost like it shadowing them.”

“Viper 216, Roc 563, still with us Poacher?” DeCinci said over the wireless frequency they shared with the two Colonial Vipers.

“Roc 563, Viper 216, still with you Glamor,” Captain Max Pellew replied. “What’s up?”

“I’m going to pass over some dradis telemetry, can you check it against your warbook and see if it’s one of yours?” DeCinci replied and silently cursed Lightfoot for telling Pellew her call sign.

“Sure...ok, got it...” Pellew stated and was silent for a moment. “Hmm...she’s about the dimensions of our older *Lydia* class, but the return image is all wrong. Warbook is flagging this as unknown.”

“Frak...I was afraid of that,” DeCinci said out loud. “Spence, call it in and let the brass know what we found and let them know that we are turning to intercept and get a better dradis image.”

“Copy,” Lightfoot replied and began contacting Flight Control on *Medusa*.

“Poacher, Glamor,” DeCinci said over the wireless, her tone all business. “Let’s take a gentle turn and go check out our new friend,” she added.

“Glamor, Poacher, copy,” Pellew confirmed. “Can you continue feeding us the dradis telemetry?”

“Can do,” DeCinci said and gently banked the AEW configured Roc onto an intercept course with the new bogie.

“The Boss says to approach the bogie but RTB if it begins aggressive action,” Lightfoot told DeCinci a few moments later.

“Copy...” DeCinci told her ECO and then keyed the Colonial wireless frequency. “Poacher, Glamor, the brass says to approach the bogie but RTB if it gets uppity with us. We’re going to keep our FTL drive spun up with a running nav update, do you need us to send you the feed?”

“Glamor, Poacher, copy the plan,” Pellew responded. “We can run the nav coordinates, but let’s feed off your system so if we jump, we stay in formation and don’t have any accidental fender benders.”

“Copy that, Poacher...the insurance forms would be a nightmare to fill out,” DeCinci chuckled as the navigation cues on her HUD stabilized and pointed the small air group toward the bogie.

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Beyond Known Space, Earth Union battlestar *Medusa*

“They’re still a good way off,” Commander Feleena Kaylen told the people who sat around the conference table. “We’re here,” she pointed to an icon on a monitor that served as a dradis repeater. “And they’re here,” she pointed to an icon that was close to three light-seconds distant. “This is a composite display between our own dradis and that of our AEW Roc. Our own dradis can reach out that far, but given the recent encounter with the Cylons, keeping our own systems focused on shorter ranged threats and allowing our AEW craft to expand our horizon seemed more prudent.”

Commodore Andre Musk nodded his agreement. “Right now, I wish we had a nice nebula that we could hide in until all the repairs are completed. Thank you again for the DC crews...they’ve been a big help turning what might have been several days’ worth of repairs into something that should be completed in another twelve to eighteen hours.”

“My pleasure,” Kaylen replied. “Besides, it wouldn’t be neighborly not to help,” she grinned.

“What is the plan once we’re ready to continue the trip home?” Commander Siv Andresson asked.

Kaylen looked at Musk and nodded. “Well,” Musk began, “we’re going to proceed at our best speed, and we anticipate that we should be at our final jumping off point in about two days. From there, we’ll jump to Thule and get brought up to speed on what’s going on.”

“Saga?” Colonel Natasha Farrell asked and turned to look at Musk. “Why not Aqaba or one of the other outer colonies?”

Musk smiled and Kaylen sat back, eager to hear the answer. “You know the term, ‘hidden in plain sight’, right?” he asked, and Kaylen found herself nodding along with Andresson. “Well, Saga is perhaps the best kept secret ever hidden in plain sight.” He held up his hands to forestall any comment and continued, “For centuries, first the Imperial government of Virgon and later the Colonial government, maintained the masquerade that local conditions were not agreeable with Colonial agriculture or biology. But...” he paused and shrugged, “it’s all a lie. Virgon wanted a world where the nobility could go that would be private and started the cover that humans couldn’t consume local flora or fauna and Colonial transplanted crops and livestock couldn’t flourish without a massive importation of Colonial soil and sterilization of local soil. The truth of the matter is that it’s a garden world that’s relatively untapped in any way.”

“Wait...you mean that there’s nothing wrong with Saga?” Andresson interrupted and asked.

“Pretty much, yes,” Musk smirked. “After the Uprising, money was dedicated to creating the most realistic training ranges ever constructed. Those who didn’t have a need to know simply believed what they were told; the best way to create a realistic environment would be to build one. And that’s what they’ve done over the past forty odd years; they built a city, suburbs, rural towns and farms, everything that we might have to face in a ground battle was built. And it was built to be ready for evacuees to move into at a moment’s notice.”

Commander Jessica Raynes raised her hand and Musk nodded. “So, what you have is a planet that is capable of supporting human life that everyone thinks can’t, and you’ve built an entire city and supporting infrastructure to train in, but it’s also able to perform it’s advertised function?”

“Exactly that, Commander Raynes,” Musk replied. “There’s a caretaker population present, and the city is a functional city. Most of it is uninhabited, but everything is there; all that’s needed are people, and even bringing their own clothes is optional. We also...” he paused, pursed his lips, and Kaylen thought

he looked deep in thought for a moment. “We also offered homesteads to select people so that we’d always have a cadre of experienced personnel present. Some are retired, some are in the prime of life with their families, but this gives us people who can organize the refugees, train them, and if necessary, lead them.”

“You have a lifeboat...” Raynes stated.

“Precisely,” Musk confirmed. “And...if there’s anything left of the Fleet, it’ll go to Saga as a rally point. There’s something about that system that we found plays havoc with the Cylons; their response times drops, their accuracy suffers, their coordination goes all to hell, and short of finding someplace that outright slags them upon entry, it’s the best option we have.”

“Good,” Kaylen finally said. “That would also be where any of our people would likely be directed if they made it to the Colonies.”

“Most likely,” Musk replied. “I don’t see why they wouldn’t.”

“Good...then I guess we have our plans for the next few days,” Kaylen stated and met Commander Annabelle Isles’ and Raynes’ gazes and saw both women nodding in agreement. “I hope that this will teach us a lesson that won’t ever be forgotten...mankind was not meant to play god and create sentience from nothingness.”

“So say we all,” Andresson stated.

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Beyond Known Space, Viper 216, callsign Poacher

“Hey, Meow, you still awake over there? You’ve been awful quiet,” Captain Max Pellew asked Lieutenant Augusta Learner.

“I’m here, Poacher,” Learner replied, her laid back Cancerian accent almost purred. “I’m just taking it all in, you know...processing what’s happened over the past few days.”

“You’re...thinking?” Pellew chuckled.

“Yes...I’m thinking,” Learner chided back. “It’s how I graduated top of my class...and not...what was it?” she asked. “Third?”

“Yeah...yeah...so you beat me there,” Pellew replied and thought back to when he met the feisty little blonde from Canceron on her first day at the Academy. “I knew you’d be trouble...”

Learner laughed and Pellew could picture her smile and shaking head. “Yeah...I aim to satisfy!” she quipped and suddenly drew silent as Captain Esmeralda DeCinci broke into their conversation.

“Poacher, Meow...target has changed it’s aspect and bearing...it’s turning into us,” DeCinci stated. “I’ve already alerted the fleet. We’ve been told to interrogate them and see if we can find out what their intentions are.”

“Do you want to make the call or should I?” Pellew asked.

“You’re the closest thing to a local...” DeCinci told him. “Commander Kaylen says that Commodore Musk agreed you should make the call.”

“Copy...switching to Guard...” Pellew replied and keyed the Guard channel, something that even the Earth Union had used for two thousand years before they fled their homes. “Attention unknown ship approaching my location, this is Colonial Viper 216, callsign Poacher, please identify yourselves and state your intentions.” He paused a moment, shrugged mentally, and repeated the demand.

“Range is twenty-five thousand,” DeCinci announced.

“Glamor...can you connect me to your systems and then boost the output?” Pellew asked.

“Sure...just start talking on our private frequency and we’ll push it out on Guard,” DeCinci confirmed.

Once again, Pellew repeated the demand and a split second later it was pushed out by the Roc on Guard and at a much higher power. “If they don’t respond to that, then I suggest we go to weapons safe...if they launch or fire, we do what we need to do until we can jump.”

“I concur...” DeCinci replied. “Poacher...don’t be a hero...let’s all go home and have a beer...first round is on me, ok?” she added, concern in her voice.

“Ooooo...Poacher...I think Glamor likes you...” Learner’s voice teased over their private frequency.

Pellew grinned. “You jealous?” he asked, teasing back.

The silence lasted a little longer than it should have before Learner replied, “Nope...no...not jealous.”

That was different, Pellew thought, and just as quickly dismissed it for now...there would be time to work through whatever it all meant after they got back to *Arke*. “They just went active with a search dradis...no high PRF yet...” he said on the group frequency when his dradis warning sensors alerted him to an unknown or hostile dradis signal being emitted from the bogie.

Several minutes passed as the range closed and DeCinci announced that she had the bogie on the Roc’s long-range optics. Who the hell was this, Pellew thought as he filed DeCinci’s announcement for the future. “Ok folks...” he allowed his voice to trail off as he saw the first signs of the bogie that was approaching. “Let’s prepare to...woah!” he exclaimed as the unknown disappeared in silver flash. “Glamor, let the fleet know what just happened!”

“On it, Poacher!” DeCinci acknowledged. “*Medusa* reports that the bogie didn’t jump close and that their dradis doesn’t show any unknowns.”

“Thank the gods,” Pellew sighed as he exhaled. “Any orders?”

The happiness was clear in DeCinci’s voice that she liked what she had heard, “Oh yes...we’re to RTB fastest for debrief...”

“Oh yeah!” Pellew grinned.

“We’re to RTB to *Medusa*...” DeCinci added a little uncertainly.

“You did say you were going to buy the first round,” Pellew teased as the three craft turned and pointed themselves back towards the fleet before executing a group FTL jump.

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Beyond Known Space, Earth Union battlestar *Medusa*

“Do you have anything else to add?” Commander Feleena Kaylen asked the four officers and four NCOs seated around the large conference table. “Yes, Captain Pellew,” she said when Captain Max Pellew raised his hand.

“Just one thing, Commander, and it’s more an observation coupled with a gut feeling,” Pellew started and stood. “May I?” he asked and gestured towards the display.

“Please,” Kaylen told him.

“Thank you,” Pellew said and walked over to the display. “I might need some help if I mess this up,” he chuckled and accessed the menu that displayed the briefing clips. He found the one he wanted, tapped it, and it began playing on the monitor. “Ok...this is the dradis recording of the bogie as it shadowed the fleet at about three light seconds. After we turned and began our intercept, it decided to turn into us, then after we hailed it, it activated its search dradis here and still maintained wireless silence. It gets into range of Glamor’s optics and then jumps.”

“Ok...we’ve covered that,” Commander Jessica Raynes said and narrowed her eyes.

“I know...but I wanted to run through this one more time, out loud, so I would walk myself through my thought process,” Pellew offered. “First, the bogie is about the size of one of our *Lydia* class battlestars, though where the *Lydias* seemed to be stockier throughout her body, our bogie has a wasp-waist central hull, so overall displacement is probably going to be slightly less. But here’s the thing; if you compare this ship to any of ours, where the head meets the central hull and where the engines meet the central hull, are rather small; unless they have materials that we can’t conceive of, their turn rate isn’t going to be close to ours due to stress. Now let’s go back to the telemetry...”

Pellew stepped the dradis recording back in slow motion until just before the bogie turned. “Now, watch the turn...” he said and played the recording at normal speed. “I spoke with Captain DeCinci and consulted my own sources so we could compare turn rates of our battlestars. I used a *Lydia* and Captain DeCinci used *Medusa* as our baselines...when we compared our notes, at the velocity the bogie was traveling both *Lydia* and *Medusa* would turn much quicker. Granted, this probably means nothing, but normally when you turn onto an intercept, you don’t dawdle...you make the turn and recover.”

“That’s an interesting observation,” Raynes said. “Could it be that the bogie has a much higher density than ours? Like say instead of air, they breathed water and thus the ship was filled with water?”

“It’s possible,” Pellew conceded and looked back at the display. “But I’m not convinced. I’m not going to play the ‘recorded history’ card, but in all the thousands of years, we haven’t found a way to refine and forge metal in a liquid environment and you’d almost need to have that level of technology to even take a water breathing race into a gaseous atmosphere.”

“I’ll give you that point,” Raynes smiled and Kaylen watched as her sister subtly tested the Colonial officer. “What else do you have for us?”

“That was the observation,” Pellew said and advanced the telemetry to a point right before the bogie jumped. “This is my gut feeling...” he said and looked over where DeCinci and Lieutenants Augusta Learner and Spencer Lightfoot sat and all three nodded. “Well, it’s our gut feeling,” he amended before

continuing, “Whoever was in command of the bogie lacked practical experience, operational experience, or institutional experience, or a combination of all three.”

“Why do you say that, Captain,” Commodore Andre Musk asked.

“Again, sir, it’s a gut feeling...” Pellew offered. “Let me turn the tables and ask you Commodore...and you Commander Andresson, if you were in command of a Colonial battlestar and you encountered an unknown fleet with our composition, would you shadow and then when a small group moved to intercept, something that clearly wouldn’t pose a threat, you slowly turned into them, and finally after allowing them to get within optical range, you jumped? Would you do that?”

Commander Siv Andresson slowly shook her head. “Andre?”

Musk, likewise, shook his head. “No, I wouldn’t. They didn’t have any active dradis for most of the encounter, so they were fully passive, which wouldn’t have gotten them much except perhaps dradis and communications frequencies, but that’s it. I see where you’re going, Captain, and now that you point it out, it’s one of those things that can’t be unseen.”

“I agree,” Commander Annabelle Isles added as she leaned forward in her chair. “We wouldn’t have done it either. It was amateurish.” She sat back and tapped her fingers on the table, “And that is what worries me. Amateurs are unpredictable in their unpredictability.”

Kaylen studied the dradis telemetry and steepled her fingers under her chin. “If you had to bottom line it, Captain Pellew, and give me a summary in two or three sentences, what would it be?”

Pellew nodded. “Commander Kaylen, I’d tell you that I think we should project that we’re dealing with a power that is at least as advanced as we are – technology, ship construction, etc. – but that they lack the operational or institutional experience to best design, employ, deploy, and fight their ships.”

“Thank you...” Kaylen smiled and slowly nodded. “Your assessment dovetails nicely with my own. You and your team have my respect for a job well done.”

Pellew stood a little taller at the praise Kaylen had just delivered. “Thank you, Commander; it truly was a team effort...I just drew the short straw to present it.”

Kaylen smirked, “Short straw or volunteered?”

Pellew returned the smirk, “First thing any plebe learns is never volunteer for anything, ma’am.”

Pellew’s comment drew a round of laughs from everyone at the table and lightened the mood slightly. “With your permission Leena,” Raynes said and after Kaylen nodded, continued, “Commodore Musk, would it be possible for Captain Pellew and Lieutenant Learner to stay aboard *Medusa* until we at least reach Saga? I’d like to have them develop this a little more in the game room.”

“I don’t see where that would be a problem,” Musk replied. “It would certainly help build those bridges we talked about earlier.”

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“That was some really insightful analysis,” Commander Jessica Raynes said after the flight crews had been dismissed. “You hit the nail on the head, Andre, when you said it can’t be unseen now that it’s been pointed out.”

“I wonder if they’re from the other location?” Commodore Andre Musk mused.

“Other location?” Commander Annabelle Isles asked.

“We detected a large...no...an obscenely huge number of tachyon pulses in a completely different direction than home about three days before we detected the ones we believe originated at home,” Musk explained and then went into the details about the multiple signature profiles they collected and the conclusions that they had drawn.

“Leena, do you think?” Isles asked.

“It’s possible...” Commander Feleena Kaylen replied. “Andre, I’m going to give you some signature files of our own nuclear weapons...could you compare them...” she let the statement hanging.

Musk slowly nodded. “Yes, I see what you’re asking for,” he smiled. “I’ll have Dr. Digby do a full analysis.”

“Maybe someone else survived?” Raynes speculated.

“I hope,” Isles added.

“This second culture you say suffered a nuclear bombardment...I’m going to give you the coordinates for someone we used to trade with, the Meropian Communion. Contact with them slowed to a trickle over the centuries before our exodus, so I don’t even know if they still exist. But...” Kaylen shrugged and arched her eyebrows, “that might tell us who the other civilization was.”

“We’d be glad to review it,” Musk replied.

Kaylen sat back and looked at the officers seated around the table. They had met under fire, joined forces to defeat a foe, and now she firmly believed that the professional relationships were evolving into personal friendships.

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Captain Max Pellew’s head felt like a small troupe of angry gnomes were using tiny pickaxes to try and mine their way out. “Oh...man...” he managed to groan before his nose twitched. He tried to move his right arm to scratch it or brush whatever was tickling it out of the way but discovered he couldn’t move either arm.

He also realized that there was a warm presence on either side of him.

Slowly, and with much trepidation, he turned his head to the right and opened his right eye. Blonde hair greeted his clearing vision, even though his eyelid still felt like it was cemented shut at several points. What did I drink last night, he wondered to himself? He closed his eye and turned to the left, opening his left eye...brown hair. The question in his mind changed from what did I drink to how much did I drink?

Slowly, Pellew performed a breathing exercise that his Aunt Rose taught him. She wasn't an aunt by relation, but was one of his mom's closest friends, and had taught him several things during the summer before he went to the Academy. One of them was body control and while he didn't pay it much attention at the time, he quickly learned that it worked especially well after a hard night of drinking.

Pellew focused on his breathing and slowly cataloged what his physical senses told him. That there was a woman on either side of him, at least he hoped they were women, was fairly well established. Who they were was still up in the air. It took him more than three minutes to cancel the headache and a further two minutes to flush out the body aches.

"Unnn..." the brunette muttered and rolled over so that she was laying half on him and half off him. Pellew opened his eyes a moment before she did. "Well...I guess I won..." she purred and kissed him on the lips.

"Wrong..." a tired voice croaked from Pellew's right and he felt that body roll over and mimic the left one. "We won..." Lieutenant Augusta Learner said somewhat triumphantly.

"Oh yeah...that's right..." Captain Esmeralda DeCinci grinned. "Something about sharing, I believe?"

"Something like that," Learner replied. "I think we need to ask Leadfoot for the details, but he was a couple sheets to the wind, too. Last I saw him, he was curled up with Sparrow..."

"Uh...what happened?" Pellew finally managed to ask as he ran his tongue across his lips to wet them.

"We happened," DeCinci laughed.

"Ok...good enough...I'm sure it'll come back to me as I recover," Pellew said after trying to take a deep breath despite the weight on his chest.

"Come back to you?" Learner growled. "You don't remember?"

"Bits and pieces..." Pellew admitted and closed his eyes. "What was that blue stuff that we did shots with?"

DeCinci chuckled. "Electran Gin...shit'll put hair where you don't want it."

"Yeah...I believe it..." Pellew swallowed and felt some moisture returning to his mouth.

The sound of someone pounding on the hatch distracted them from any other conversation. "What?" DeCinci shouted a moment before Pellew and Learner groaned in pain.

"You're up!" Lieutenant Spencer 'Leadfoot' Lightfoot said through the hatch. "I figured I'd get you up now...we're due to meet Commander Raynes in an hour."

"Oh...frak me..." Pellew said as he watched DeCinci and Learner push themselves up and off him, before sliding out of bed and stretching in the room.

"Later," Learner teased and started giggling with DeCinci. "Now...we need to shower and change into the fresh uniforms that Sparrow brought over."

"Yeah...ok..." Pellew said and sat up and looked around the room. "Where are we?"

“VIP Guest quarters,” DeCinci answered. “All officers and Chiefs have private quarters...the VIP Guest quarters are just a little bigger and a little more nicely appointed. I think the shower is big enough...”

“Let’s go!” Learner said and grabbed Pellew’s arm. “You’ll feel better after a shower...I know I will.”

“Yeah...yeah...yeah...I’m getting up...” Pellew said and swung his legs over the side of the bed and stood up. He looked at Learner and then DeCinci and said a prayer thanking the gods that he was still functional and in one piece. Yes, he thought letting his gaze linger on DeCinci, we started building some bridges last night.

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Consciousness returned and with it came the pain of being alive. Commander Feleena Kaylen reached up and punched the quick release on the webbing that held her into seat in the Roc’s passenger compartment. She slowly moved her head and then her fingers and toes, satisfied that they worked she let out a sigh and pushed herself out of the seat. She couldn’t put into words why she had decided to join the small relief force that ventured to the planet’s surface to link up with the resistance; how can you describe a compulsion to those that have never experienced one?

The interior was dark except for some emergency lights that had activated during the crash and some light that filtered in from the flight deck accessway. Kaylen drew her sidearm and verified it was loaded before she stood and returned it to the holster that rode on her right hip. A look forward showed that there was no way the flight crew could have survived, and since she was the only other person on the Roc, that removed any need to search for survivors. It also meant that she was alone; a stranger in a strange land.

One of the crates had broken open during the crash and from it she extracted a combat rifle and two bandoleers of pre-loaded magazines. She removed a magazine from a third bandoleer, inserted it into the rifle, and then charged it. Kaylen’s next stop was the emergency survival packs that contained everything she needed to survive for at least seventy-two hours. As she forced the rear ramp to open, she also picked up a portable two-way wireless.

Twenty minutes after regaining consciousness and dragging the bodies of the flight crew into the passenger compartment and covering them, Kaylen stood fifty meters from the crashed Roc and surveyed her surroundings. She was deep in a forest of old growth timber, sometime near the local dusk, and the air smelled of pine, honeysuckle, and a recent rain. The small navigation tablet showed her position and as she zoomed out it also showed her destination fifteen kilometers distant.

Turning around in place, Kaylen surveyed her surroundings and looked for someplace where she could go to ground an attempt to make contact with either *Medusa* or some other SAR asset. There, she thought, about a hundred meters from where she now stood was a cluster of rocks that defined the term ‘immovable object’. Slowly, carefully, she followed a roundabout route to the rocks, stopping and kneeling every dozen steps to listen to her surroundings in case someone...or something...approached.

Kaylen saw that the rocks were jumbled in such a way as to form a natural cave and offered her protection from the elements should they decide to add insult to injury. “Now it’s a matter of settling in and calling for help,” she muttered to herself as she rigged a bivy sack as a sleeping bag and carefully pulled leaves and pine needles over her to camouflage her location.

A hum and clanking noise dragged Kaylen back to awareness. She blinked her eyes several times and noticed that it was dark with a silvery moon overhead. Some of the aches and pains were replaced with new ones from her lumpy bed, but she put that out of her mind and focused on the noise that had triggered her awakening. Slowly, carefully so as not to make any noise, she reached for her rifle and felt the comforting texture of its grip settle into her right hand.

Kaylen willed her ears to listen as close as possible, hoping the old wives' tale that said when you limited one sense that the others expanded to compensate would be true. The clanking had stopped, but the hum remained. Now...she narrowed her eyes and tried to reach out with her ears...she thought she heard footsteps.

"This is it!" a male voice said just loud enough to be heard.

"What about the occupants?" another male voice asked.

"Two dead, but someone laid them out in the back," the first voice declared.

"Good...then she's still alive," the second voice stated. "Ok, people, let's do a spiral search..."

Several other voices, male and female, replied, but they were either too far away or talking too quietly for Kaylen to hear. She slowly shuffled deeper into the small cave and waited. If she tried to leave, she'd be spotted, and until she knew who these new actors were, she was going to play it safe.

After five minutes, Kaylen heard footsteps crunching the pine needles and fallen twigs. Whoever it was, they weren't making any attempt to be quiet as they approached.

"Commander Kaylen? You in there?" a female voice asked.

Kaylen hesitated; the voice sounded familiar. Again, the voice asked if she was in the cave. Finally, she raised the rifle to her shoulder and said a prayer that she wasn't making a mistake, "Yes..."

"Thank the gods!" the female voice replied. "Ah...who told you coming down here was a bad idea?"

Kaylen grinned. "Commander Jessica Raynes," she replied.

"She's your biological sister, right?" the voice prodded.

"No...but she is my sister in all the ways that matter," Kaylen explained.

"You passed, Commander," the voice told her. "We're here to get you back to our camp and from there we can arrange for your return."

Kaylen let out the breath she was holding and slowly crawled out of the cave, pulling her pack with her and leading with her rifle held in one hand as if it was a giant pistol. When she reached the cave's mouth, she stood and brushed the leaves and pine needles off her and got a look at her rescuer...

...at the same time her rescuer saw her.

"Who are you?" Kaylen forced herself to ask.

"Ah...Captain Mary Katherine Mosby...Princess Elizabeth's Own Hussars, Virgon Imperial Guard," a woman who could have been Kaylen's twin replied.

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Commander Feleena Kaylen sat up in bed and stifled the scream that threatened to spill forth. Her right hand pressed against the center of her chest as her heart pounded as if she had just sprinted from one end of *Medusa* to the other. “What the hell was that?” she asked between breaths.

She fell back and her head was cradled by her still warm pillows. Once her breathing was under control, she rolled over and reached for the intercom handset that was next to the bed.

“CIC, DePalma,” Lieutenant Gish DePalma answered.

“What are you doing on watch this early, Gish?” Kaylen asked without thinking after noting the time.

“Good morning, Commander,” DePalma replied. “I couldn’t sleep and stopped by and am watching the board while Theo hits the head.”

“Ah...ok...that makes sense,” Kaylen muttered. “Can you connect me with Commodore Musk on *Arke*, or if he’s not available, Commander Andresson on *Unicorn*?”

DePalma repeated the request and asked for a moment to make the connection. “I have Commodore Musk on the line, Commander,” she said a few moments later.

“Thanks,” Kaylen said a moment before she heard two beeps indicating that she was now connected with the wireless. “Commodore Musk, Feleena Kaylen; I hate to bother you, but I have a question...”

“Good morning, Feleena,” Musk replied warmly. “What’s the question?”

Kaylen paused for a moment and collected her thoughts. “Andre, I know this is going to sound weird, but is there something in the Colonies known as the Virgon Imperial Guard, specifically Princess Elizabeth’s Own Hussars?”

Musk was silent for several seconds. “Ah...yes...” he replied, hesitation in his voice. “How do you know about them?”

“Promise not to laugh?” Kaylen asked.

“Cross my heart,” Musk offered.

“I had a dream,” Kaylen began and then explained what happened but omitted who she encountered. “Ever since I was little, I’d have these visions. Normally they’d be a flash image or a few moments, but never this long or this detailed.”

“Wow...that’s pretty cool,” Musk replied. “Do they ever come true or is it just something that might happen?”

In for a penny, in for a cubit, Kaylen thought to herself before she replied. “Andre...” she realized she sounded more serious than she really wanted to be, but right now her nerves were driving her actions. “Andre,” she said again, hoping she didn’t sound as serious as before, “they’ve all come true. Every one of them.”

“Oh...my...” Musk replied, and she could hear the faint sound of his breathing over the cracks and pops inherent to scrambled wireless communications in deep space. “That sounds like it could be a blessing and a curse at the same time.”

“Yeah, it is,” Kaylen said and was glad that Musk hadn’t dismissed her confession as a hallucination or fantasy. “When I get up and ready for the day, I’d like to discuss this in a little more detail with you and anyone you might have who might have firsthand experience with the unit I mentioned.”

“I’ll put the word out,” Musk told her. “Are we still on for the 0800 planning session over here?”

Kaylen looked at the chronometer that displayed 0419. “Yep...I’m going to try and get another hour’s sleep before I start the day, though.”

“I’ll have the coffee and hot chocolate ready,” Musk replied. “And I’ll see if I can’t get some pastries and fruit, so don’t worry about breakfast.”

“You’re a lifesaver, Andre!” Kaylen grinned. “See you at 0800.”

“Can’t wait,” Musk told her and ended the connection.

Kaylen rolled on her back and stared at the ceiling above her bed as she snuggled down under the comforter. Ever since they had met the Colonials, she had felt a strong sense of camaraderie with them. It could have been the shared heritage, which after thousands of years was still remarkably similar, or it could have been the fact that they were good people. Or, it could be both.

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Beyond Known Space, Earth Union battlestar *Euryale*

Commander Annabelle Isles studied the contents of the folder laying on her desk and then looked up at the man who sat waiting for her comments. “We’re so close I can almost see it in the distance,” she finally said.

Colonel Camden Julii smiled and nodded. “One jump to a system that Andre says used to be a resort, then two jumps to the positive control point before we jump for Saga.”

Isles closed the folder and sighed. “Looking back, it feels like it was last week that we broke Earth orbit and jumped to save *Libertas*.” She paused and turned her head at a sound that came from her bedroom. “Morning, Gillian,” she smiled as Gillian McGovern walked into her day cabin.

“Good morning, Bel,” McGovern warmly replied and leaned down to give her a good morning kiss. “Good morning, Cam,” she said and then smirked, “want one, too?”

“I’m good, Gill,” Julii chuckled while Isles shook her head. Ever since she had told McGovern that Julii had had a crush on her, she’d tease him with little things like the offer of a kiss.

“You don’t know what you’re missing...” McGovern prodded. “I can talk to Shelly and ask for a permission slip...”

“I know she offered,” Julii smiled, “but that’s not my style, Gill. You’re just going to have to wonder what it might be like...”

“Oh...he got you on that one,” Isles laughed. “You ready for the next jump?”

McGovern nodded enthusiastically. “Oh, yes! After all these years, and even more than encountering Andre’s group, this is going to make it real, you know?”

“I do,” Isles told her. “In fact,” she looked at the chronometer on the wall, “we have about fifteen minutes to walk over to the CIC and get ready.”

“Are Shelly and Jean-Michael going to be there?” McGovern asked.

“I don’t think a herd of wild horses could keep them away,” Julii smiled.

“Then I think we should head on over,” Isles said and stood. “Let’s live some more history.”

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Colonial Sphere, Orbit of Wildwood, Earth Union gunstar *Angelos*

“What do we have down there, Aramis?” Colonel Chiara Savoy asked Captain Aramis Stokes who was managing the navigation workstation.

“Preliminary scan is showing...” Stokes narrowed his eyes as he studied the display. “The highport is gone, nothing but wreckage and anything that might have been there is either long gone or destroyed. The downport, which really wasn’t much to begin with, and the primary settlement appears to be undamaged and I don’t see any signs of ships or small craft, though they could be hidden.”

“They probably thought that taking out the orbital facility would be enough to doom whoever was on the surface to a long and painful death,” Lieutenant Colonel Sebastian Beckett said and shook his head; this was the third world they had surveyed and the first that didn’t show signs of surface bombardment.

“Whatever happened, we need to go down and find out what happened and if there are any survivors,” Savoy replied. “Is Tabby ready?”

Beckett nodded. “She just had Woo let us know they’re on the Roc and ready to depart,” he told her and narrowed his eyes. Something’s coming from the deep black, boy-o, the little voice on his shoulder whispered in his ear.

Savoy looked at Beckett. “What’s up, Sebastian? You have a weird look on your face.”

“Ah...I just had a thought,” Beckett quickly answered and hoped that Savoy would accept his explanation. “Since we don’t see any signs of surface bombardment, I’d like to do a detailed dradis scan of the known settlements around the downport to see if we can find any signs of life before we send Tabby down. That way we can vector her to the largest concentration of survivors rather than have her wander around a ghost town.”

“Ok, that makes sense,” Savoy agreed and quickly shot him a look that he interpreted as ‘I trust you on this...’. “Aramis, let’s do the scan.”

“Copy, full dradis scans of known settlements and looking for sings of life in the general areas of the settlements,” Stokes said and confirmed the order.

Beckett tapped his index and middle fingers on the plotting table as he tried to make sense of what the little voice said. Whatever was going to happen, he felt certain that it was imminent.

“How is Channing doing?” Beckett finally asked and broke the silence.

Savoy offered a warm smile. “She’s doing very well,” she replied. “You saved her; you know?”

“I like to think that we saved her; all I did was assess the situation and ensured that she got away from Asshole,” Beckett admitted. “I think what you and Tabby have done since then has helped just as much.”

“Yeah...I don’t think anyone is ever going to lay an unwanted hand on her ever again,” Savoy chuckled. “I was down in the gym yesterday and I watched her, Tabby, and Cramer sparring...she threw poor Cramer across the mat.”

“Good,” Beckett nodded, “that has to help her confidence.”

“And I’m working on other aspects...” Savoy started to say but was cut off by the dradis suddenly pinging off new contacts.

Bingo, the little voice on Beckett’s shoulder said, you’re about to see history...again. Beckett suppressed a smile and looked at Stokes.

“I have dradis contacts...” Stokes announced without any additional excitement as if this was nothing more than a routine intercept. “I’m seeing numerous military grade dradis emissions...transponders are...my gods...” He looked up, a look of complete surprise on his face.

“What is it?” Savoy prodded.

“Most of the transponders are declaring that they’re Earth Union ships, three are Colonial, and one is from the Virgon Empire,” Stokes managed to stay.

“I think we need to hail them,” Beckett advised.

“Becky, can you open a channel on Guard and put it down...no, please put it on the speakers,” Savoy asked.

“You’re live, Colonel,” Specialist Rebecca Slocum replied a moment later.

Savoy took a deep breath and lifted the handset to her head. “Attention fleet that just jumped into orbit, this is the Earth Union gunstar *Angelos* operating in cooperation with the Colonial Fleet, please identify yourself and state your intentions.”

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Colonial Sphere, Orbit of Wildwood, Colonial Deep Space Research Vessel *Arke*

“Jump complete,” Captain Lazar Truett announced. “All elements accounted for and in formation,” he added. “Wait...dradis contact! Single ship...transponder identifies it as the Earth Union gunstar *Angelos*.”

“How do you want to handle this, Andre?” Colonel Natasha Farrell asked Commodore Andre Musk.

“Carefully,” Musk slowly replied. “Maisy, can you get Commander Kaylen on the line and pass it down here, please?”

Communications Specialist Maisy Claremont repeated the order and added, “On it.” A moment later, she announced she had Kaylen on the wireless and passed her down to the plotting table handsets.

“Commander Kaylen, Commodore Musk...” Musk said by way of greeting. “Even though we’re in Colonial space, that’s one of yours out there...do you want to reach out to them?”

“Thank you, Andre,” Commander Feleena Kaylen replied. “That might be best; I wasn’t going to do it without discussing it with you, first.”

“Understood, Leena. Have at it...I’m sure they’re going to be excited to know that more of their people survived,” Musk told her.

“Commodore? We’re being hailed...” Claremont announced.

“On speaker, please,” Musk told her.

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Colonial Sphere, Orbit of Wildwood, Earth Union battlestar *Medusa*

Commander Feleena Kaylen opened her mouth to reply to Commodore Andre Musk when Lieutenant Gish DePalma announced that they were being hailed. Kaylen quickly told her to put it on speakers.

“...that just jumped into orbit, this is the Earth Union gunstar *Angelos* operating in cooperation with the Colonial Fleet, please identify yourself and state your intentions,” a female voice announced. After a moment’s pause, she repeated the hail.

“*Angelos*?” Kaylen frowned.

“Yeah, she wasn’t commissioned yet when everything went down,” Colonel Silas DeMer replied.

“Perhaps in transit?” he offered.

“Dunno...” Kaylen said and turned to DePalma. “Do I have a channel?”

“You’re live, Commander,” DePalma answered.

“Thank you,” Kaylen told the communications officer and picked up the handset. After sharing a shrug with DeMer, she corralled her excitement and keyed the handset to transmit, “Attention ship identifying itself as *Angelos*, this is the Earth Union battlestar *Medusa*, please transmit your bona fides as we send ours.”

“Copy, *Medusa*, we’re transmitting our credentials now,” the voice answered.

“Others made it...” DeMer whispered almost reverently.

“They’re valid, Commander,” DePalma said, her voice sounding hallowed, and confirmed *Angelos*’ legitimacy.

“*Angelos*, this is Commander Feleena Kaylen, *Medusa* Actual, who am I talking to? We were unaware that you were an active unit at the time of the Exodus,” Kaylen requested.

“Actual, this is Colonel Chiara Savoy,” the voice stated. “A lot has happened, and it might be best if we discuss this face to face rather than over the wireless. Would it be possible for us to come to you?”

“I think that would be best, Colonel,” Kaylen replied and met DeMer’s gaze as her XO slowly shook his head.

“Excellent,” Savoy replied. “I realize that this is unorthodox, but there is a method to the madness...I would like to bring my XO and Weapons Officer with me.”

“I don’t see where that would be a problem,” Kaylen replied and narrowed her eyes. “We will be prepared to receive you on our portside top flight deck; our ground crew will guide you to the umbilical. I would like for some other officers to join me, so let’s plan on meeting in thirty minutes.”

“Copy, Actual, thirty minutes,” Savoy said. “*Angelos*, out.”

“*Medusa*, out,” Kaylen replied reflexively. After she replaced the handset, she asked DeMer, “What is it, Silas?”

“I just checked the Fleet directory,” DeMer started, “there’s no one named Chiara Savoy listed.”

“It was five years...maybe she married and took her husband’s name?” Kaylen offered.

“Dunno...but I think we need to be ready for anything,” DeMer told her.

“That, my friend,” Kaylen chuckled, “goes without saying.” She turned and swept her gaze around the CIC, “We...are...not...alone!” she announced and a moment later everyone began cheering.

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Colonial Space, Orbit of Wildwood, Viper 216, Callsign, Poacher

“You have to admit, Glamor,” Captain Max Pellew, callsign Poacher, said over the wireless, “this is rather unique...”

Captain Esmeralda DeCinci laughed and Pellew forced himself to focus on the mission. “Yes, Poacher...Colonial Vipers launching from a Union battlestar to meet a Union envoy from a Union gunstar in Colonial space...that’s not something you see every day.”

“This is Roc 228 from the Union gunstar *Angelos*,” a new voice said over the shared frequency. “You’d be amazed at what you don’t see every day,” it added.

Pellew narrowed his eyes when he heard the voice; it sounded so damned familiar, exactly who it reminded him of danced around the periphery of his awareness as if to tease him. “Well, we did find a ghost ship that was lost for almost sixty years,” he managed to reply.

The voice, it was so familiar, Pellew thought, replied, “I saw...congratulations. Did you solve the mystery of her disappearance or is that still a matter of conjecture?”

“Ah...yeah...we figured it out...” Pellew said and switched to the discrete frequency that he shared with Lieutenant Augusta Learner. “Meow...what the frak is going on? That voice...so damned familiar...and they seem to know all about *Pathfinder*...”

“I noticed that, too. I...” Learner paused, and he could almost picture her shaking her head.

“Ah...yeah...it does sound damned familiar.”

“Glad I’m not going nuts,” Pellew chuckled and switched back to the shared frequency. “Ah...I think you might have me at a disadvantage. For someone not from around here, you sure seem to know a lot about our ghost ship...”

“I’m from a lot closer than you think, Poacher,” the voice replied. “Do you remember Bonnie Bain from down the street?”

“Bonnie...” Pellew narrowed his brows as he repeated the name from his youth. “Bonnie the Bitch?”

“The one and only...and do you remember who fixed you up with her for Junior Homecoming?” the voice prodded.

“Yeah...but...Sebastian?” Pellew asked and finally realized why the voice was so familiar.

“In the flesh, Maxwell, in the flesh,” Sebastian Beckett’s voice replied.

“What...how? What the frak is going on?” Pellew demanded and felt like he was losing control of his reality. Sebastian Beckett had been posted to *Hecate* and had left the Colonies before the Pioneer Mission, and if Beckett was back, that meant that *Hecate* and Chase were back, but why was he on an Earth Union gunstar?

“There will be plenty of time to discuss it when we arrive on *Medusa*. I think you probably have a story or two to tell as well...” Beckett said in a tone of voice that Pellew thought sounded more mature and more seasoned than the man he remembered.

“I’m looking forward to it,” Pellew answered. “Will you be free after the VIPs board?”

“Ah...no...I’m going to ask that your group be included in the introductions,” Beckett told him. “I think it might be good for everyone if people can be vouched for. You’re going to need to trust me on this, ok?”

Pellew thought a moment and nodded even though no one could see him. “Yeah...how could I not?”

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Colonial Space, Orbit of Wildwood, Earth Union battlestar *Medusa*

“I’m not sure what’s going on,” Commodore Andre Musk told the officers and civilian that were standing with him on the hangar deck. “Poacher told me that he’s certain that someone on that Roc is Captain Sebastian Beckett, a Colonial officer who left on a deep space exploration mission before we left the Colonies. I’m not sure what they were searching for, but Admiral Chase took a Tier One combined arms battlegroup that would be sufficient to put a hurt on just about any smaller colony world.”

“Perhaps they encountered another Union refugee fleet?” Commander Jessica Raynes suggested.

“That’s possible,” Commander Feleena Kaylen agreed and frowned after a moment. “But that sort of begs the question why they’re here and not with the rest of the Colonial fleet?”

“We’re going to find out in just a few moments,” Gillian McGovern quipped as the alert light next to the massive airlock door began flashing green while several amber lights snapped on around the door’s perimeter.

“Do you have a feel for this, Leena?” Commander Annabelle Isles asked.

Kaylen shook her head. “No...I wish I did, though,” she replied and looked at the small party that had assembled on the hangar deck. Raynes stood to her left and Isles stood to her right with McGovern on Isles’ right. To Raynes’ left, Commodore Andre Musk stood and next to him was Commander Siv Andresson. It had been decided that Commander Lindon Aydenon would remain on *Iris* as the ‘odd man’. She would have preferred one of the mayors to attend, but they deferred to McGovern as the civilian representative given her...closer...ties with the military command structure. A small honor guard stood nearby, and a squad of Marines provided security.

The hatch opened and a yellow shirted ground director motioned the Roc forward. Once it cleared the hatch, the hatch closed and the green alert light and amber warning lights both turned red. The next cycle would bring down the two Colonial Vipers while the Roc she had dispatched would be brought down on a different lift. Two additional yellow shirted handlers quickly chocked the Roc’s wheels and moved away.

After a few moments, the rear hatch lowered and a youthful looking woman with chestnut hair stepped to the edge of the lift. Kaylen narrowed her eyes; the woman had a professional bearing, but the uniform was black and an unknown design, very different from the daily khakis that Union officers wore.

“Colonel Chiara Savoy, *Angelos* Actual; permission to come aboard?” the black uniformed woman asked.

Kaylen stepped forward, “Permission granted, Colonel; welcome to *Medusa*.”

“Thank you,” Savoy replied a moment before she stepped foot on the deck.

When Savoy’s foot touched the deck, the boatswain piped her aboard and announced, “*Angelos* arriving!”

Savoy smiled warmly and turned to the boatswain, “Thank you, Boats, I feel good to be here.”

Before anyone else could do anything, the lights around the hatch once again announced that it was going to cycle and a handful of seconds later two Colonial Vipers were directed into the hangar bay and secured. Savoy walked to where Kaylen and the others stood, offered her hand, and smiled, “Colonel Chiara Savoy; you are going to make some people back home very, very happy.”

Kaylen took the offered hand and shook it. “Commander Feleena Kaylen,” she replied and then asked the question she had been dying to ask since they had identified *Angelos*’ origin, “Others survived?”

Savoy’s smile went wide as she nodded. “Oh yes, Commander, there are quite a few who made the trip.”

Kaylen felt the tears suddenly threaten to spill out of her eyes already going blurry with the liquid. “Thank you, Colonel...that...that news is the best thing I’ve heard since we left the Union.”

“Commander, there’s a lot we need to tell you,” Savoy said and turned to the Roc. “I think the rest of my team should come down?”

“Please,” Kaylan told her. “They all have permission to come aboard.” She saw the two Colonial Viper pilots had climbed out of their fighters and were standing near the Roc’s wing.

The first person who walked down the ramp wore the dark blue Colonial uniform that Kaylan had become used to seeing; he was at that age where he was probably in his late 20s or early 30s, yet he moved with a maturity that belonged to someone older...or someone who had worn responsibility for a while. “This is Lieutenant Colonel Sebastian Beckett, my XO,” Savoy said and motioned Beckett forward.

“Rockstar? Is that really you?” one of the Colonial pilots asked as Beckett was introduced and stepped off the ramp.

Beckett turned and held his arms open, “Max! It sure is little brother!” A moment later Pellew and Beckett were in a crushing hug as the old friends reunited. “You got the posting to Pioneer?”

“Yeah...best thing that ever happened...” Pellew replied and held Beckett at arm’s length, “well, other than realizing just what kind of a person Bonnie was!”

“My gods...” Beckett shook his head. “Have I got some stories for you. But first...duty calls.”

“First round is on me...they have this stuff...” Pellew told his old friend.

“Electran Gin...yeah...still have the headache!” Beckett chuckled and turned back to where Kaylan and the others waited. “My apologies, Commander, Commodore...”

“None needed, Lieutenant Colonel Beckett,” Kaylan said and offered her hand. Up close, she saw that he was handsome, but also had something intangible about his manner that spoke of leadership, competence, and compassion; this man wasn’t just a leader, she thought, this man was a war leader. His handshake was firm, not crushing, and communicated self confidence and control. He was also a man to watch, she added silently.

The next officer to step off the Roc wore the uniform Kaylan expected to see, Union khakis. “Captain Ekaterina Petrova,” the woman said and saluted.

Kaylan returned the salute and offered her hand. “Welcome to *Medusa*, Captain. You were what I expected,” she grinned.

“We’re a motley crew, Commander,” Petrova replied. “But I have never served with a better team, officer and enlisted, in my more than 2000 years of service,” she added with a straight face.

Kaylan rolled her lips between her teeth and gently bit them to try and keep from laughing at Petrova’s comment. She ceased trying when Isles started laughing and was soon followed by everyone else. “I bet we have a really impressive pay voucher waiting for us...” she replied.

“I don’t know about that, but we have all the Cylons we can shoot, we know who caused the genocide, and the Admirals, President, and Empress have a plan to run them all to ground,” Petrova said proudly.

“You know who caused the genocide?” Raynes asked and then introduced herself, “Commander Jessica Raynes.”

“Pleased to meet you, Commander,” Petrova replied. “Ah...yes, we do, and like many things we’re going to brief you about, it’s complicated.”

“I understand,” Raynes said and Kaylen could see her sister’s analytical mind already starting to consider the possibilities.

“I’d also like to bring along Lieutenant Tabitha Wellington,” Savoy interjected and waved a young officer off the Roc. She was in her late teens or very early twenties, Kaylen surmised, so she would have been a young teen when the genocide happened.

“Lieutenant Tabitha Wellington,” Wellington said after she had come to attention and saluted the officers.

“Good to meet you, Lieutenant,” Kaylen said after she returned the salute. “Allow me to introduce everyone else so we all know who everyone is,” she said and made the introductions. “I’ve had some refreshments prepared so let’s move this to the reception lounge and then we can decide whether we want to stay there or move to someplace more formal.”

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Commander Annabelle Isles sat back after Colonel Chiara Savoy, Lieutenant Colonel Sebastian Beckett, Captain Ekaterina Petrova, and Lieutenant Tabitha Wellington finished their briefing about everything that had happened and been discovered. “That’s...a lot...” she managed to say.

“It is extremely enlightening,” Commodore Andre Musk added. “Now we know the truth about the first set of tachyon pulses we recorded. I’m still...”

“Overwhelmed?” Commander Feleena Kaylen asked and arched her eyebrows. When she considered everything that the four officers told them, she had to admit that it was a lot to take in. “Any one of those encounters would have been a once in a lifetime event, but all of them happening in the span of a few months? Wow...”

“If I hadn’t been there to witness it from the beginning, I would have trouble accepting it, too,” Beckett told her. “Some of the revelations hit rather close to home.”

Kaylan thought the comment was odd but filed it for a later opportunity to talk with Beckett. “We’ve discussed what happened, but I’m curious as to why an Earth Union warship is commanded by officers from the Communion and Colonies and carries a mixed crew of all three nationalities.”

“When Admiral Marlowe’s group escaped from Electra, they had several ships in the final stages of fitting out carried aboard three mobile graving docks,” Petrova explained. “Since we had already had several encounters with drone ships, the Admirals decided that rather than have the now finished ships stay in the graving docks, they would be launched and crews drawn from all three nationalities, though primarily from the Union, would man them. This way it would give us more maneuver units, give the new crews a chance to get their feet under them, and should we be attacked, it might add to the survivability of everyone involved.”

“That makes sense,” Raynes observed. “Are all the new ships crewed by multiple nationalities?”

“They are,” Savoy replied. “Tabby?”

Wellington shifted uncomfortably in her seat. Kaylan saw she was young for her rank, probably in her late teens or twenty at best, but with a maturity that was beyond her years. “Ah, thank you, Colonel. My father, well, my adopted father, Admiral Eric Wellington, rescued me and my brother on Athens Station. Once we escaped and were on the way to the Colonies, they setup schools and an academy. Everyone learned the basics, then we went on to advanced stuff. I thought I wanted to go flight and then be a line officer like my dad, but I decided I really liked working with the Marines.”

“The Marines?” Isles asked.

“That was one of the curricula changes that Dad insisted on,” Wellington explained. “He commanded *Enyo*, an assaultstar, so he had a slightly different outlook on things. He made sure that every cadet trained as both a Fleet officer and as a Marine officer, because he felt that we all needed to be able to lead people in combat given how the drones fought.

“I really enjoyed working with my team and when this program came along, I joined them on *Lamia* as part of her Marine group,” Wellington said and took a sip of water. “Colonel Christobella Symphony, from the Communion, was our regimental commander and several battalion commanders were from the Colonies, so we had a real eclectic mix of staff. That gave us the opportunities to pull the best traditions and practices from each group and blend it into something new and better.”

“I like that,” Isles remarked. “That was good thinking,” she added. “Even better now that we’re all going to be working very closely together.”

“Exactly!” Wellington said excitedly. “Everyone that I’ve talked to has been really enthusiastic about it.”

“Very nice,” Musk said and nodded.

“I sense Admiral Chase’s fingers in this,” Commander Siv Andresson chuckled.

“You know Admiral Chase?” Beckett asked.

Andresson smiled and nodded. “She hand picked me to take over *Unicorn* when she transferred to *Hecate*. We go back quite a few years,” she added. “I can still remember some of the discussions we had about tactics and leadership with Kevin and Titiana.”

“Kevin?” Beckett asked soberly. “Admiral Bannasalle?”

“Yes, Kevin Bannasalle,” Andresson confirmed. “What’s wrong?”

“Ah...Admiral Bannasalle was killed during the Battle of Meropis Alpha when the Colonial Expeditionary Fleet tried to help defend the Communion homeworlds,” Beckett explained.

Andresson frowned and even though Kaylen had never met the man, she knew Andresson and through her felt the sense of loss. “Is Addison ok?” Andresson finally asked.

“Addison?” Beckett asked cautiously.

Andresson sighed. “Kevin’s aide,” she prodded. “You were seeing Cora before you left, so I assumed you knew Addy.”

“Ah...yes,” Beckett replied. “My apologies. Admiral Chase recognized Addy as her daughter and heir.”

“Thank the gods!” Andresson swore. “No one said anything, but Girlfriend and I both knew...anyone who saw Addy and Sera together and knew how close she and Kevin were could have put two and two together.” She stopped and offered Kaylen and the others a smile, “My apologies for going off on a tangent. Kevin was a mentor to several of us and his loss is going to be hard to make up.”

“There’s no need to apologize,” Kaylen warmly told her. “We all have mentors and friends who are close to us; I’m fortunate that the two most important people to me are in this room.”

“Thank you,” Andresson said. “I guess the big question is what happens now?”

“You can either do directly to Saga,” Savoy offered and then paused. “Or, you can come with us as we survey one more world before heading home. It should only add a few hours to a day to the trip.”

“Andre?” Kaylen asked.

“I think it would be best to travel with *Angelos*,” Musk offered and looked at Andresson. “Siv?”

“I concur. I want to get back home,” Andresson said, “but I also want to learn a little bit more about what we can expect, too.”

“What about you, Jess?” Kaylen asked.

“One day isn’t going to hurt, and as Siv said, it will give us another day to acclimate our people to what they can expect,” Raynes said and then turned to Isles. “Bel? Your thoughts?”

Isles slowly nodded. “Another day is probably for the best,” she agreed. “I’d like to have a seminar for all communications and navigation personnel to make sure they’re briefed and understand Colonial terminology so that we have a smooth transit and don’t make any faux pas that can be avoided.”

Kaylen narrowed her eyes and looked at Isles and then to McGovern. “Gill, you’re rubbing off on her...I don’t think I’ve ever heard her say that phrase correctly.”

“She polishes me, I polish her,” McGovern quipped.

After everyone had a chuckle, Kaylen looked at Musk, “Looks like we have a new route to take before we come in from the black.”

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The discussions and general get-to-know each other socializing had lasted into the early evening with the Viper and Roc crews joining the senior officers. Commander Feleena Kaylen had watched the interactions between the various nationalities and had a good feeling about the future. Now, she was in her quarters, laying in bed, reading a book that Andresson had suggested and given her.

Despite trying to read, her mind kept going back to the people she had met over the past few days. New people meant new opportunities, she told herself, and since it appeared her sisters had each found someone, perhaps her someone waited for her in the Colonies. She put the book on her nightstand and stretched before turning off the light. As she drifted to sleep, her mind cleared, and she saw Beckett and several other men standing near an altar waiting as several women in dress uniforms or evening gowns were escorted down the aisle and took positions opposite the men. Then, as the music changed,

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a pretty blonde in a gorgeous white dress was escorted down the aisle by a distinguished looking older man. When they reached the altar, he put the woman's right hand in Beckett's left.

A moment later, the priest stepped forward, smiled, his eyes flashed red, and then he detonated the bomb vest that was concealed under his vestments.