

ONBOARD THE CONFLUENCE BATTLESHIP "ARDENT DAWN"

Space.

It was never silent. People who had never been out there clung to the romanticized notion that space was nothing but eerie, cold silence. But up here, in the thick of it, with the hum of engines and the static whine of comms channels, space was a living, breathing thing -- always moving and always whispering.

The stars outside the ship were still, distant pinpricks in the endless black void. The Ardent Dawn, one of the most formidable vessels in the long and storied history of the Confluence Space Corps, drifted silently through the void of interstellar space. Its massive leviathan hull consumed the weak starlight around it. Surrounding its flanks, a dozen escort frigates and destroyers maintained formation. They were all heading for the Everglow System, home to a recent insurrection that took place 10 days ago.

Inside the vast metal belly of the mighty kilometer-long battleship, Soldiers moved about, checking weapons, whispering thoughts on the mission ahead, and sneaking occasional glances at Ascendants Jack and Ubertsugori Seven, better known as Jack to everyone who'd ever lived long enough to forget how to pronounce that mouthful, and his lifelong battle-brother and heterosexual partner Nash Vendarian. The two Ascendants sat near the back of the briefing chamber, away from the rest of the Marines. Their immense armor marked them as something slightly more than human. Their presence was a comfort to some, and a reminder of how dire things had become also.

Jack rested his elbows on his knees, his face hidden behind his helmet's blue visor. Nash, sitting beside him, was quiet as usual, his helmet resting on the floor by his feet. Nash had that familiar scowl on his face, the one that made him look like he was always seconds away from throwing someone out of an airlock. But Jack knew better. Nash wasn't angry -- well, not always. It was just how his face turned when he wasn't talking, which was most of the time.

Jack broke the silence.

*Jack: "Remember Sky One?" **His voice was casual, like they were sitting in a bar and not about to drop into a warzone.** "The one with the jungle... and those lizard things?"*

Nash: "When you almost got eaten?"

Jack: "I let it get close for fun. Thought maybe I'd give it a fair shot."

Nash: "You screamed like a kid."

Jack: "It had good teeth and I felt compelled to comment."

The crackle of the ship's internal comms interrupted them.

"Approaching Everglow system. ETA, ten minutes to atmospheric drop. All units, prepare for briefing."

The voice echoed through the ship, stirring everyone into motion. Jack looked at Nash, who was already standing, slipping his helmet back on with a short grunt, which could've meant anything from "finally" to "I hate this." Jack couldn't really tell.

Everglow loomed ahead, the distant sun casting a faint glow over the fleet. Jack and Nash, alongside a few other Ascendants, stood at the briefing terminal, surrounded by officers and marines, but none of them dared stand too close. The mission was simple on paper: reclaim Asteria, free the Confluence troopers held hostage by the Confederate separatists, and suppress any resistance. The Primarch Council had sent Jack and Nash in because, well, that's what they were for -- cleaning up after the empire's failures.

The Fleet Commander, a rigid man with a face carved from stone, addressed the room.

Fleet Commander: "We'll begin the assault on Asteria upon arrival. The rebels have fortified multiple cities, primarily Colony-17, but they won't hold for long. Ascendants, you'll be leading the vanguard once we establish ground presence. Any questions?"

Nash glanced at Jack, then back to the commander.

Nash: "Just one. How many times have you failed to take this planet already?"

The room tensed. The commander's jaw clenched, but he didn't respond. He knew better than to engage with an Ascendant's sarcasm.

Fleet Commander: "This time will be different."

Nash: "Sure it will."

SPACE - EVERGLOW SYSTEM: APPROACHING ASTERIA

The fleet emerged from hyperspace, the planet Asteria coming into view -- a violet and magenta orb hanging in the void, its surface seemed calm and serene. The separatists had taken the planet ten days ago, and now, the Confluence was here to take it back. Or at least, try. Jack stood on the observation deck, watching as the smaller ships broke formation, preparing for the counteroffensive. Nash stood beside him, slightly taller, arms crossed.

As the fleet moved closer to Asteria, the first signs of resistance appeared -- a Free Reach flotilla, much smaller but still formidable, waiting in orbit. The Ardent Dawn, being the massive superstructure bristling with cannons and defenses that it is and with a much superior range, took the initiative and opened fire. The battle was very brief, the Confluence's superior firepower overwhelming the disorganized rebels in a few minutes. Soon enough, the rebel ships were in retreat, burning up in the atmosphere or destroyed outright.

Fleet Commander (over comms): "Orbital defenses neutralized. Begin ground assault preparations."

Marine 1: "Look at those suckers sizzle! Woohoo!"

Marine 2: "They won't even have time to regret their life choices."

Marine 3: "Uh... what if we're strolling right into a trap when we hit the ground?"

Marine 2: "Nah, we've got Ascendants on our side this time. We're golden."

Jack tuned the voices out. He wasn't interested in what the others thought. They were just voices, noise that filled the silence before the storm.

But just as the empire's fleet began its descent towards Asteria, the sky ripped open. Portals and wormholes tore through space like jagged wounds, and from them emerged the sleek, oddly and unfamiliar-looking forms of Zal'kahn destroyers, corvettes, and battlecruisers. Tens of dozens of them. Much smaller than the Confluence's imposing battleship, but far more advanced, and far more numerous.

Pilot (panicked, over comms): "What the hell?! Incoming vessels – Zalkahn signatures – dozens of them!"

Another Pilot: "What in the void are they doing here?!"

The alarms blared as the Zal'kahn fleet opened fire, their weapons systems tearing through human ships with extremely accurate precision. Jack watched in stunned silence as the fleet's escorts were obliterated in mere minutes, and the massive Ardent Dawn they were on shuddered under the impact of multiple direct hits.

Then the ship shook violently. Jack's hand shot out, gripping the nearby railing just as the lights flickered. The ship shook again, harder this time. The alien ships moved fast, faster than anything Jack and Nash had ever seen.

Nash: "...Shit."

Jack: "I think that's an understatement."

Voice overhead: "ALL UNITS, CODE RED! SCRAMBLE TO EVAC PRIORITY! CODE RED!"

Before anyone could even react, the Zal'kahn ships concentrated fire. Green-esque beams of energy lanced across the void, slamming into the remainder of the Confluence's fleet devastatingly. The battleship shuddered again as explosions rocked the hull.

Fleet Commander: "There are far too many of them – It's an invasion! All hands, prepare for emergency evacuation! Abandon ship! I repeat, abandon ship!"

Jack and Nash exchanged a glance once again. There was no fear between them – it was just cold, calculating understanding. This was no longer about orders. This was survival.

Nash: "Let's move."

They sprinted through the chaos of the battleship's corridors, past panicked crew members and soldiers scrambling for escape pods. The walls trembled with each hit, sparks flying from broken consoles and ruptured pipes. Several wounded marines and even a couple Ascendants lay across the floor, injured from the initial Zal'kahn assault that violently shook the ship.

ESCAPE POD BAY

They reached the escape pod bay only to find most of the pods either destroyed or already launched. The ship was coming apart at the seams, and they were running out of time. A Zal'kahn corvette fired another volley, and the blast rumbled through the hull, sending debris flying through the bay.

Nash: "There's no time. Go, I'll take another one!"

Jack: "But we stick together—"

Nash: "Not this time! Both of us won't fit in one, I will catch you on the surface!"

Before Jack could argue, Nash jumped into a pod filled with Marines just before it seals shut. Jack cursed under his breath and jumped into the next available pod, its interior was packed with soldiers and was very claustrophobic, far too tight for a man of his size. The shoulder-to-shoulder press of fourteen terrified marines didn't help. Some of them were struggling with their armor, some half-fastened, some cracked or broken from the chaos. Through the small viewport, Jack saw Nash in the next pod give him a quick nod before his pod launched towards Asteria. A second later, the door sealed shut, and Jack's own pod rocketed away from the disintegrating battleship, just as more explosions tore it apart, hurtling through space toward Asteria's atmosphere.

The view from the reinforced viewport was grim. The Zal'kahn armada was swarming around like locusts and tearing through the fleet like wolves among sheep. The Ardent Dawn was now a crippled hulk, fires raging across its surface as it drifted helplessly. It was evident that the ship would soon crash onto the surface of the planet.

Pod Pilot: "Hold tight! Landing in 2 minutes!"

The pod hurtled toward Asteria at breakneck speed, the atmosphere burning around them as they descended. Jack's grip tightened on his seat as alarms blared around him. Something was wrong.

The pod's systems were failing.

ASTERIA – SAVANNAH BIOME

The escape pod plummets through the atmosphere, rocking violently as it enters Asteria. Jack held on tight, his enhanced muscles straining against the force of the descent. The pod's hull glows red-hot as it cuts through the purple sky.

Pilot: "Brace! Brace for impact!"

Marine: "We're not going to make it out of this alive!"

Another Marine: "HERE IT COMES—"

The pod slams into the ground with a deafening crash, skidding across the savanna, leaving a deep trench in the soil. Trees and dirt are thrown into the air as the pod grinds to a halt.

Silence.

Jack's ears ring. His vision is blurry, his helmet's HUD flickering. He slowly gets onto his feet and glances around the interior of the pod. Fourteen soldiers, all dead. Either from the crash or from the violent shaking during descent. The pilot was slumped over his controls, lifeless too. Jack is the only one left.

He kicked the door open, stepping out into the open air of Asteria. He takes a moment to absorb in Asteria's violet foreign landscape and skies, then assess his surroundings. In the far distance, he can see Colony-17, its towering spires reaching into the clouds. The Nine Spires loom ominously as they dwarf even the tallest buildings in the city. Far above, Zal'kahn dropships descend through the cloudy weather, attempting to take the city through a ground invasion, it seemed.

Jack stands motionless for a couple seconds as he looks at the distance, then he gathers his gear. He checks his weapons, making sure everything is functional. There's no time to mourn the dead, because there never is. He looks toward Colony-17, the only sign of civilization in this wasteland, and starts walking.

ASTERIA - REMOTE HILLS

Just a few miles away, Nash and his squad land with less chaos but no less urgency. Their pod, damaged only slightly, holds together long enough for a safe landing. Nash steps out and surveys the landscape -- a series of rolling hills, barren and exposed. Not the best place to hold ground.

Marine: "Sir—what's the plan, sir?"

Nash: "We hold here. Build some defenses. They are already on us."

He points to the sky where Zal'kahn dropships are descending, their silhouettes unmistakable against the clouds. One dropship veers toward their position. The marines simply stare at the incoming ships in shock. Some of them were conscripts; it was their first time ever seeing a non-human ship. Nash turns to the Marines, annoyance apparent in his tone.

Nash: "Get moving, people!"

They scramble, setting up makeshift defenses among the rocks.

Nash: "I hate this fucking army."

He moves with his usual trained-for precision. Nash knows they won't likely hold for long, but they will give the Zal'kahns hell before they go down.

ASTERIA - SAVANNAH BIOME

The heat of the savannah presses down on Jack as he marches toward Colony-17. His footsteps leave imprints in the dry soil, his armor and gear clanking quietly with every step. The landscape is vast, desolate, and eerily quiet. Far on the purple horizon, the silhouette of the Nine Spires still looms. The Zal'kahns should be bombarding the city from orbit, but they aren't. They seem extra careful not to break something precious, Jack thinks to himself. His visor flickers with occasional status updates from his suit, but nothing of immediate concern. For now, it's just him and the horizon.

He checks his weapons again. His assault rifle clicks as he runs a quick diagnostic. All clear. He looks up at the Zal'kahn dropships continuing their descent toward Colony-17. They're everywhere, filling the sky in a steady stream.

Suddenly, his HUD pings with movement. Several red dots appear on the periphery of his vision, closing in fast. He shifts into a crouch, scanning the horizon. Zal'kahn troopers, a small squad, is approaching from the west. They have likely spotted the wreckage of his pod and were coming to investigate.

Jack: "Only a handful of them. Should be easy."

He moves swiftly, taking cover behind a large boulder as the enemy squad approaches. His muscles tense and his mind sharpens. The Zal'kahn troopers, two meters tall, physically superior in muscle mass compared to the average human, clad in their dark alien armor, fan out as they near the wreckage.

Zal'kahn Squad Leader (hissing in their guttural language, his oral tentacles wiggling): "Search the area. Kill any survivors."

Jack hears the command through his suit's auto-translation system. He clenches his fists around his rifle, waiting for the right moment. The troopers are sweeping the area in tight formation. One passes dangerously close to Jack's position.

With a swift, fluid motion, Jack steps out from behind the boulder and fires a single, precise shot. The high-caliber round hits the trooper square in the head, sending him falling backwards to the ground. Before the others can look at his direction, Jack was already on the move, weaving between cover and taking down two more with rapid bursts of gunfire.

The remaining troopers scatter, attempting to regroup. But Jack relentlessly closes the distance with speed, his combat knife flashing as he takes out the last of them in close quarters -- one quick slash, then another, and the final Zal'kahn falls.

Jack (wiping the blood from his blade): "Should've stayed in space... Or wherever you came from."

He checks the bodies for anything useful, but the Zal'kahn weapons are too alien and too incompatible with his gear. He discards them and moves on, his mind already focused on reaching Colony-17. The distant sound of explosions and gunfire echoes from the city. It was now certain the Zal'kahn invasion has begun in earnest.

COLONY-17 - OUTSKIRTS

At last, after an hour of running past Zal'kahn patrols and endless fields. The outskirts of Colony-17 were a maze of dilapidated buildings and debris-strewn streets, a stark contrast to the gleaming spires that dominated the city's skyline and had been left untouched by the battlefield.

Jack moved carefully through the ruins, his enhanced senses alert to every sound, every movement. Firefights erupted between pockets of separatist rebels and Zal'kahn patrols everywhere around him, the staccato bursts of laser and rifle fire echoing through the deserted streets. Jack wasn't interested in picking sides. His mission was simple for now: just survive. But as he rounded a corner, he found himself in the middle of a desperate firefight. A small group of rebels, clearly outnumbered and outgunned, were pinned down by a squad of Zal'kahn troopers.

Rebel 1: “I knew I should've become a farmer!”

Rebel 2: “With your luck, the crops would shoot back.”

Rebel 1: “Well, next time, *YOU* pick the escape route.”

Rebel 2: “Oh no, I insist you continue your perfect track record, dipshit.”

Jack watched for a moment, assessing the situation. The rebels were brave for holding their ground – or stubbornly stupid, but they were no match for the disciplined Zal'kahn. He decided to step into the fray.

He walked out of cover, and with a click of his weapon, he took aim and started shooting; his assault rifle spitting a hail of deadly fire. The Zal'kahn troopers, caught off guard by this sudden action, turned their attention to the new threat. Jack moved with inhuman speed, weaving between laser blasts and taking down troopers with his usual brutal efficiency that is to be expected from an Ascendant.

Within seconds, the remaining Zal'kahn were either dead or in retreat. Jack lowered his weapon, his slightly cracked reinforced visor scanning the stunned rebels, who slowly lowered their weapons in return.

Rebel 3: “Are you with us or against us?”

Jack: “I'm with whoever's not shooting at me at the moment.”

Rebel 1: “Oh yeah? How can we trust you?”

Rebel 2: “Scratch that, what's your name?”

Jack: “Shouldn't you have better priorities? Get to a safer place.”

Rebel 2: “Right. We owe you one, whoever you are.”

Jack simply reloaded his rifle and walked away from the rebel squad, leaving the bewildered men behind. He had no interest in their gratitude, or their cause anyway.

COLONY-17 - FORTRESS GATES

Jack eventually reached a massive fortress, its walls scarred by recent battles but still standing defiant. Rebels manned the ramparts, their weapons trained on the surrounding landscape, engaging a stream of light Zal'kahn infantry from all directions. This was clearly a stronghold, a place where the Free Reach had dug in for a long fight.

As Jack tried to look for a way to infiltrate the fort, a young rebel, barely out of his 20s, stepped forward on the wall and spotted him. He was lean and wiry with a medium-length purple-tinted hair.

Malik: “Halt! Who goes there?”

Jack looks up.

Jack: “Confluence Space Corps.”

Malik's eyes narrowed to see better, and he was stunned to find an Ascendant.

Malik: “Oh, a genocide machine. What are you doing here?”

Jack: “Reclaiming Asteria.”

Malik burst out laughing, a harsh, almost hysterical sound.

Malik: “Reclaiming Asteria? You're a bit late for that, don't you think? The Zallies own this rock now.”

Jack: “Not for long.”

Malik: “Sure. And I'm the long-lost son of Primarch-Cadet Korr Safeiros. Look, if you want to live, you better come inside peacefully. We can use all the help we can get. Just don't get too comfy. We're not exactly set up for Ascendant-sized guests. You might have to duck.”

Jack considered for a moment. He didn't trust the rebels, but he didn't have much of a choice. He was outnumbered, outgunned, and stranded on a hostile planet.

Jack: “Fine. But I'm not taking orders from you.”

Malik: “Fair enough. Just don't shoot us in the back.”

Jack walked into the fortress' front gates, shooting down a handful of aliens nearby, as the gates opened briefly then clang shut behind him. Malik went down to personally meet Jack at the gates. He offered a handshake, like some sort of sealing a formal agreement.

Malik: “Name's Malik.”

Jack looked down at Malik's stretched hand – his natural height being a meter taller than most humans – then looked back to Malik, ignoring the handshake.

Jack: “I'm not touching your hand.”

Painted on his chestplate were the tiny words 'Jack-007' which Malik notices as he pulls back his hand to his side.

Malik: “Good to have you on our side, Agent-Seven-Jack-thing. Follow me, I have something you might want to see.”

The fortress interior buzzed like a beehive on steroids. Rebels zipped around, patching up defenses, bandaging the wounded, and gearing up for the next round of alien smackdown after halting the earlier Zal'kahn assault. Jack and Malik walked through the fort until they hit the rear mountains, where a colossal reinforced steel door marked the entrance to an extensive tunnel system carved into the rock. As they approached, the door obligingly slid open, and they ventured into the artificial caverns.

They hit a section of the fortress that had been DIY-ed into a makeshift prison. Inside the cells, Confluence marines huddled together, their faces grim and their morale in the mud. Most looked like they'd just graduated from military kindergarten, save for the Sergeant among them.

Malik: “Here's your welcome committee. Keep the peace, alright?”

Jack strolled into the cell block, his visor giving the prisoners a once-over. They were a pitiful lot, uniforms in tatters, and weaponless. The moment the Marines laid eyes on him, their eyes lit up like Christmas lights.

Marines 1: “About damn time you showed up!”

Marine 2: “Command kept blabbing about a rescue fleet. Didn't think they were actually gonna send someone.”

Marine 3: “Hooray, we're not going to die in this hole!”

Marine 4: “I heard the boom-booms up top and thought, ‘That's got to be our guys kicking some serious butt.’”

Sergeant: “You're it? You're the whole rescue party? They went with the ‘quality over quantity’ approach, I see.”

Jack: “...Aliens have invaded. The fleet is no more. The Ardent Dawn is gone. We are all stranded.”

The marines gawked at him in disbelief and silence for a few seconds.

Marine 1: “...Come again?”

Sergeant: “Soldier... How the heck did that happen?”

Jack: “It doesn't matter. We're in this together now. If we want to live to see another day, we need to work together.”

Sergeant: “Work with the rebels?! Is this a prank, or did we run out of sane options?”

Jack: “Bicker and fight later. Let's save the family feud for after the tentacle men are off our lawn.”

After a standoff, the marines reluctantly agreed. Malik unlocked the cells, the marines joined the ranks of the rebels, and they were given weapons – both human and alien made – to fight a common enemy now.

As Jack rallied the men and prepared to head back to the surface, Malik received something on his earpiece. He nodded and walked over to the Ascendant and knocked on his armor, grabbing his attention.

Malik: “Hey, just so you know, there’s *some woman* over in the lab down this corridor tapping her foot, claiming you’re late. Like, super late.”

Jack: “Who is she, and what am I late for?”

Malik: “Just go before she flips. I’m allergic to drama, and she turns scary when she’s angry. I will be at the surface in case the Zallies attack again.”

Malik walks with the marines and Confederate militia personnel away, and Jack looks at the corridor Malik pointed at, slightly confused.

Down there, deeper within the fortress' tunnel system, Jack found himself in a dimly lit research facility of sorts. It was actually a corridor filled with a lot of terminals, and large cables snaking everywhere. A young woman with striking purple eyes and short white hair sat hunched over one of the terminals, her fingers flying across the keyboard, her back turned to the approaching Ascendant. She didn't even bother to look up as Jack's footsteps echoed through the corridor.

Velvet: “Centurion-class Jackor Ubetsnigori Seven. Aegis II Ascendant. Seventy-Five years of age. Institutionalized at age five. Fought in over twenty campaigns. Impressive, even by Ascendant standards. Favorite food: nutrient paste number four, and two, the pink one. Adorable.”

Jack stopped dead in his tracks.

Jack: “How did you get my—”

Velvet: “The Confluence databases are surprisingly easy to hack, if you know where to look. And it’s even easier now when they're preoccupied with the chaos of this sudden invasion.”

She swiveled around to face him, a sly smile playing on her lips.

Velvet: “Velvet Hecate. Former Confluence intelligence officer. I suppose you could call me a Confederate now.”

Jack: “You were Confluence?”

Velvet: “Yep. Tried to warn them about the Zal’kahn two years ago. Told them we were on the invasion express. But nooo, they called me paranoid and demoted me. So I figured, if you can't beat 'em, join the ones who are actually paying attention.”

Jack: “Join who, the Confederates? Your only hope is a handful of disgruntled marines and armed civilians with no combat experience?”

Velvet: “Ah, but we've got an ace up our sleeve. Something the aliens want. And I've got a pretty good idea where to find it.”

Jack relaxed his tensed muscles. Though he was starting to think this woman was more than meets the eye.

Jack: “And that something is...?”

Velvet: “Patience, Centurion. All in good time.”

FOLLOWS. . .