

# HADRON

## INCURSION

OPEN SEASON ON EARTH...



**BOOK 3**  
OF THE  
**HADRON**  
SERIES

**STEPHEN ARSENEAULT**



# HADRON

## INCURSION

OPEN SEASON ON EARTH...



# ***HADRON***

(Vol. 3)

## **Incursion**

**By: Stephen Arseneault**

*"Freedom is never more than one generation away from extinction. We didn't pass it to our children in the bloodstream. It must be fought for, protected, and handed on for them to do the same."*

*Ronald Reagan*

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## Table of Contents

### HADRON Incursion (Vol. 3)

<a href="#">Chapter 1</a>	<a href="#">Chapter 2</a>	<a href="#">Chapter 3</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 4</a>	<a href="#">Chapter 5</a>	<a href="#">Chapter 6</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 7</a>	<a href="#">Chapter 8</a>	<a href="#">Chapter 9</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 10</a>	<a href="#">Chapter 11</a>	<a href="#">Chapter 12</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 13</a>	<a href="#">Chapter 14</a>	<a href="#">Chapter 15</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 16</a>	<a href="#">Chapter 17</a>	<a href="#">Chapter 18</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 19</a>	<a href="#">Chapter 20</a>	<a href="#">Chapter 21</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 22</a>	<a href="#">Chapter 23</a>	<a href="#">Chapter 24</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 25</a>	<a href="#">Chapter 26</a>	<a href="#">Chapter 27</a>
<a href="#">What's Next?</a>	<a href="#">Books</a>	

## ▲ Chapter 1 ▼

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The weeks that followed saw life at the cave returning to normal. The still was brought back into operation, the gardens tended, and the other efforts toward making life sustainable resumed.

Liam Hobbs sat on the porch with the others. "Not that I'm complaining about the hospitality here, but we were promised a return home. Why again is that not happening?"

Mace frowned. "The only thing I can think of is they want to keep us together. Why that is, I don't know. It's obvious they don't need us for anything."

Jane said, "Well, at least they left us enough of those untainted food bars to last us a while. That will go a long way toward keeping us fed this winter."

Jeff stood from the steps, brushing dirt from his shorts. "One thing that's been bothering me—this food, they claim it is all from Earth, but where on Earth are they getting it from?"

Tres said, "Rumor has it they have farms out west and elsewhere that the zombies are tending."

Jeff replied, "While that might be possible, I find it highly unlikely. You don't just come in and start producing millions of tons of produce that they repackage into these food bars. If anything, I'd say they are made with the same stuff as before. Maybe a few extra flavorings to mask the drug, or anything that would give them a different taste."

Johnny said, "That would mean they must have a huge stockpile somewhere. They aren't bringing it in by ship. Those diplomatic ships only carry a small amount. And those warships are not transporting

food."

Mace scratched his beard. "Bontu promised a visit this week. I'll see what I can drag out of him. Sometimes his denials are very telling. "

Jasper rocked back and forth in his chair. "I have an opinion on all this."

Johnny said, "Of course you do. You have an opinion on just about everything."

Jasper smiled. "Well, yes, I do, ape-man. Anyway, I have two good reasons for them keeping us all here. The first, and most obvious, is the threat of the Kaachi is still out there. If they show up, they'll want to stuff us on a ship and throw us at them.

"The second is we know too much, and it's easier for them to keep an eye on us this way. They're probably spying on us right now."

Mace looked around. "Everyone did leave their comm devices inside didn't they?"

Nods showed confirmation.

Another dozen of the Human crewmen walked down the drive.

Jasper stood. "We're gonna need more chairs."

Jordan Crawford stopped in front of the gift shop. "Mr. Hardy, we're gonna head back over to Bedford in the morning. We have family and friends there, and places of our own to take care of."

Mace replied, "I have no interest in stopping you, Mr. Crawford. If you were looking for approval, you don't need it from me."

Jordan nodded. "Just the same, wanted you to know."

Mace said, "And take enough to easily feed your fifty-seven for a week. No, wait, we have vehicles, we can drive you. Might take three trips, but we can get you all there in a day."



Jordan nodded. "That would be appreciated, Mr. Hardy."

Mace leaned back in his chair. "Well, there goes two thirds of our force. When I talk to Bontu, I'll see about getting him to take the rest of you home. "

Two men in fatigues emerged from the woods on the mountain, walking across the field, over the bridge and up to the gift shop.

One of the men took a pack off his back as he spoke into a Mawga wrist comm. "Yes, sir, we're here now."

The man looked up. "Which one of you is Hardy?"

Mace stood. "I'm Mace Hardy. Who's asking?"

The man spat on the ground. "The King would like to talk to you."

Mace smirked. "The King?"

The man nodded. "Yes sir, the man who's leading the fight against the grays."

Mace stepped off the porch holding out his hand. "OK, well, here I am. And your name is..."

The man looked down and then back at Mace. "The king would like to know just what it is you're doing? You've been seen riding around with the enemy, and we were told at one point you crewed and piloted a warship."

The man gestured for him to follow. "Come this way, Mr. Hardy. We have some things to discuss in private."

Mace looked back at the porch. Jane was standing with her AR-15 at the ready. Mace waved her off.

"My name is Bains, but that doesn't matter. I was sent here to kill you for collaborating with the enemy."

Mace stopped. "Strange way to assassinate someone, don't you think?"



Bains replied, "I'm not paid to think, just to kill. But you're right, I do think. And what I want to know before I make things permanent, is what you were doing with the rats?"

Mace continued to walk. "We were told that another species was on its way here, to Earth. They're hostile to the Mawga, and supposedly would be more hostile toward Humans. The Mawga seem genuinely afraid of them. They called them the Kaachi. After speaking with the admiral in charge of the Mawga fleet, we convinced him to train us in the operation of their warships so we could be a part of the defense of Earth should the Kaachi come.

"Well, the Kaachi didn't come and now the Mawga have backed out of their deal. We were hoping to keep and maintain a cruiser, possibly to one day use it against them. You see, Mr. Bains, we hardly trust the Mawga ourselves."

Bains nodded. "Interesting. And why did you give up the ship?"

Mace frowned. "They pulled a fast one on us. You guys—at least I'm assuming it was you—anyway, you attacked the community center at Charleston. They conned us into thinking we were there to keep the peace. They used that opportunity to kick us from the ship. We all feel very foolish about it."

Bains shook his head. "Can't trust the rats, Mr. Hardy. Their motives aren't true."

Mace stopped, crossing his arms. "Mr. Bains, we're on the same side. We just have different methods of approaching the problem. We would both like to see them gone. Some of us plan and scheme, while others like yourselves hit and run, and still others, like the Russians and the Chinese, go all out."

Bains asked, "What do you know about those last two?"

"The Mawga think they'll have all resistance there mopped up in a month. Both have been getting their asses kicked. And get this, the Chinese are down to a population of about eighty million. The Mawga said the weapons of both are almost depleted. The Russians

are down to their last thousand resisters."

"Interesting," Bains said. "We knew they were fighting. We just weren't sure of how it was going."

Mace glanced up at the sky. "Those small ships they fly around here in, they call them diplomatic vessels. Those are the ones the Russians and Chinese have been fighting. They aren't heavily armored. A handful of stinger-type missiles will bring one down. According to my contact, they've lost at least a couple dozen of those ships, and probably double that of their shuttles .

"Now, you move up to their warships, the ones in space, they're huge. The armor is far thicker and the cannons far more powerful. You could hit one with a hundred stingers and not do much more than scratch the paint. And if they fire one of those cannons at the ground, it'll leave a crater ten yards deep and forty yards across. About the only positive is it takes a few seconds to recharge and fire. And they can only fire one cannon at a time."

"I'll take that information back to the King. And I'll tell him we had this talk. He said he's been by this cave before. Doesn't look like much to me."

Mace replied, "Well, it's a cave. Other than running for miles, its claim to fame is one of history. Around eleven hundred rebels lived in here for three winters during the Civil War. And it did keep us alive last winter. So does this King have a name, Mr. Bains?"

Bains nodded. "His name is Malcolm Stark. He's the one leader that can take us out of this hole we dug ourselves into. He has no fear of the Mawga or their ships. We will move like the wind and strike when they least expect it. Our numbers and support network are growing every day. Soon, all of the resisters will fall in line behind him. I can say here today, I hope that includes you and the others here. He'll be pleased to learn that we have people who can pilot those ships."

Mace frowned. "Sounds like he's been feeding you the same

food the Mawga have been feeding everyone."

Bains' face turned to one of scold and anger. "You best be careful, Mr. Hardy. If he deems your existence counter to the rebellion, I'll be back. And believe me when I say that a second visit won't be so cordial. I'll return the information you've given. You work on how we can rid ourselves of these rats, and on how you can cooperate with us to do so. That's all I have to say today, Mr. Hardy. You won't see me or my associate again."

Bains waved over at his friend. They walked back across the bridge, up through the field and into the woods at the foot of the mountains. Mace returned to the porch, rubbing his temples.

Jane asked, "What was that all about? "

"That was two of the fanatics from the resistance, the ones who've been attacking the community centers. They have some crackpot who calls himself a King. And they're his subjects. Says they were sent here to assassinate me for collaboration with the Mawga, but he wanted to know for himself what we've been up to.

"He also said if I wasn't cooperative with the King, I would find myself dead. And I have no doubt he would try if ordered to do so. The rifle his friend was carrying in that sleeve over his shoulder, I'm betting it's a sniper rifle with a fat scope and a suppressor. Could pick me off this porch from a thousand yards and be long gone before we could get after them."

Johnny shook his head. "Great, now we have to fight some of our own."

Tres added. "And they're crazies."

David raised a hand. "Do we want to start patrols or do we have a good scope where someone could keep watch, like maybe from up at the house?"

Mace replied, "You can't protect from that. If they want me dead, and if they can find me, I'm dead."

The day soon turned to night. David went to town and came back with a high-powered telescope. He was convinced he could use it to spot anyone setting up to shoot at the porch from the mountain woods. It was an effort that occupied his time. No one complained.

The following morning, the Bedford gang was waiting in front of the gift shop. Johnny and Jane had volunteered to drive them over the mountains to their home using the RV. As they began to board, a shuttle landed in the field and Bontu emerged down the ramp, scurrying toward the gift shop.

Mace asked, "What's the urgency?"

Bontu was frantic. "You must prepare your team. The Kaachi have arrived. Their move at the rift was merely a deception. The admiral is calling for you to man the *Lousy*. Already the first ship of the line is engaging. Please hurry! "

Mace turned and yelled, "Everyone, listen up! The Kaachi are here! We're being called back to the ship! If anyone is missing, someone please go get them now!"

Bontu was ringing his hands together. "Please, Mr. Hardy. I implore you to hurry."

Mace turned back. "And hurry! The fighting has already begun!"

Ten minutes later, a second shuttle arrived. The eighty-nine member, trained Human crew boarded the shuttles and were soon on their way into space.

Johnny shook his head. "Wouldn't it have been easier to bring the *Lousy* ship here?"

Bontu replied, "Oh, no. That would not be possible. The rules of engagement state that you must have all your assets available when the hostilities begin."

Mace sighed. "So the *Lousy* is in line for the fight?"



Bontu nodded. "Yes, we should be receiving signals from them at any moment."

A crewman said, "Chancellor! Video and data feeds are coming in!"

Bontu turned, "Push them to the main screen!"

Seconds later, the view of a tiny ship showed in the center of the screen. A bright plasma round entered from the left, obscuring the view and shrinking as it moved away from the camera. It was the admiral's own ship, the *Delisant*. The first into battle, as always. As the round continued to shrink and finally to miss, a bright flash appeared to emerge from the target.

Bontu stood nervously. "Oh, please do not make contact. Please..."

A sigh of relief was heard as the orange fireball passed by without yielding damage. Seconds later, another round came onto the screen, this time from the right side.

Johnny shook his head. "This is their fight? What the heck?"

The second round impacted the Kaachi vessel. The Mawga crew stood and cheered. Bontu was giddy with excitement.

Mace laughed. "Kind of a roller coaster for you, Mr. Montak?"

Bontu took a breath and replied, "I'm sorry, Mr. Hardy. I'm a diplomat. This is my first battle. If we win, I look forward to receiving a participation pin."

Mace shook his head. "You people have some strange drives."

Bontu raised his hand. "Shhh, data on the hit is coming in!"

A crewman said, "Sir, they've sustained moderate damage to their port nozzle. Another hit and they will have to be towed!"

Bontu shook with excitement. "A moderate hit! Gentlemen, we were witness to the first strike of the battle!"

The next round from the Kaachi ship offered only a glancing blow. The reported damage was minimal.

The next ten minutes saw several near misses before a Mawga plasma round struck the center of the Kaachi ship. Instead of a celebration, the Mawga all stood in silence. The Kaachi ship was declared a loss and assistance was moved to help her as she moved away at half speed.

Johnny asked. "You won, didn't you? They're moving away."

Bontu passively nodded. "Yes, it is a victory, a victory that comes with high casualties for the Kaachi crew. May their dead be accepted peacefully into the afterlife."

Johnny scratched his head in frustration. "I'm just not getting this whole thing."

Mace replied. "I have to admit, it's bizarre."

Bontu held up a hand. "Quiet, a Kaachi ship has engaged."

Jane asked, "How do you know? They haven't fired."

Bontu nodded. "It is customary for the victor to have the first round at the next ship in the line. The same as it is customary that the defender have the first shot of the battle."

Johnny sat down in a chair. "I don't think I can watch. This is too suspenseful. Somebody wake me when it's over. "

The fight continued for sixteen hours, seesawing back and forth as one side scored a decisive hit against the other. After a four-ship lead by the Mawga slipped away, the *Lousy* and her now Human crew moved closer to the fight. Orders were barked as the twelfth Mawga cruiser withdrew from the fight.

Mace opened a comm to Bontu, who had remained on his shuttle. "Hey, question, are we restricted to staying back at that distance. Or can we move and fire?"

Bontu offered a confused expression. "Move and fire? It is

customary for the fight to proceed as we have seen."

Mace asked again: "Is it against the rules to move while firing or defending?"

Bontu replied, "Why no. But why would you risk such maneuvers? Your accuracy while moving will be much lower than when sitting still."

Mace shook his head in disbelief. "Yeah, well, the accuracy of the opponent will diminish, too. And in our simulations, we practiced firing while on the move. It's what we know. And as far as that goes, what other aspects of this fight are customs versus actual rules? Can we engage the next ship in the line as soon as the current one leaves, or do we have to wait for them to engage?"

Bontu looked nervous. "The rules only state one engagement at a time. However, it's customary to—"

Mace held up his hand as the Mawga cruiser in front of them took a hard hit. "Save it, Bontu."

Mace closed the comm. "Mr. Hobbs, when it's our turn, I want you to head straight for the Kaachi ship. The moment they fire at us, veer off. We should have several seconds before the round arrives. They won't shoot again, so take us right in and we blast them from up close."

Liam smiled as he looked around at the others on the bridge. "Indeed, I do like our captain!"

An explosion on the Mawga cruiser had the admiral ordering a withdrawal. As the cruiser slowly turned away, Mace looked around the bridge at his ready crew.

Johnny said, "All the marbles?"

Mace nodded. "All the marbles. Mr. Hobbs, take us in."

## ▲ Chapter 2 ▼

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The Mawga cruiser moved forward in its normal whisper-quiet way.

Coran Daughtry stood beside the central chair. "Waiting for your orders, Captain."

Mace gestured toward a station. "You'll direct the weapons from over there. I want a hit exactly where the Mawga made a hit on that fourth Kaachi ship. One shot and the Kaachi ship withdrew. I then want to repeat that shot on every ship we attack. If the first submits, we have first shot at the next one. Mr. Hobbs?"

"Yes, sir?"

"As soon as we have a confirmed victory I want you to take us right up to the next ship. Mr. Daughtry will be ready for his next shot."

Hobbs replied, "Just so you know, sir, we may not have a full charge by the time we get there."

Mace nodded. "Understood. Time our trip so we arrive when the charge well is ready."

Liam grinned. "Yes, sir."

Mace opened a general comm to the rest of the ship. "This is your captain. We're heading into battle. Seal all decks and bulkheads. Helmets should be locked and secure. Those with tethers at your stations, attach them now. We'll do our best up here to avoid damage. If everyone does their part, we should come out of this on top. And just to repeat what I've already said, I couldn't have hand-selected a finer crew to work with. Now, it's time we show them what fighting Humans is all about!"



The comm closed .

Johnny turned from his comm station. "A little cheesy, but not bad."

Mace replied, "Hey, it's on-the-job training. Hopefully I'll get better as we go."

Coran yelled, "We have incoming!"

Liam Hobbs set a new waypoint, turning the *Lousy* only seconds before the full plasma charge arrived. As the crew watched on their monitors, the orange ball slipped past the port nozzle without making contact.

Mace said, "Mr. Hobbs, take us to within a kilometer and let's return the favor!"

"Yes, sir! Estimate our arrival in eighteen seconds!"

An image of the Kaachi ship showed on the massive bridge holo-wall. The long alien vessel sat motionless as the *Lousy* approached.

Johnny shook his head. "I can't believe they're going to just sit there. I'd be pushing the pedal to the floor."

Jane came over the comm. "Charge well shows full. All reactor readings are nominal."

Mace replied, "Thank you, Jane. We'll be taxing those reactors in a few seconds. Keep your eyes peeled for problems."

Coran Daughtry hovered over his console. "Set to fire first plasma round in five... four... three... two... one... charge away!"

Jasper let out a hoot from his sensor station. "Yeah! Precise hit. Exactly as ordered! Secondary explosions happening now! Whoa! She's breaking in half!"

The bridge display showed the long, tan, boxy Kaachi warship violently ripping in two as at least one of its reactors was

compromised.

Mace barked out his next order as everyone stared at their console displays. "Mr. Hobbs, take us to target two please."

Liam Hobbs nodded as he set the next waypoint. "Twelve seconds, sir! "

Jane said, "Charge well at 50 percent! Now 60!"

Coran Daughtry followed: "Set to fire plasma round in five... four... three... two... one... charge away."

Jasper again yelled, "Direct hit! Secondary explosions! Kaachi ship is breaking in half!"

Eight more Kaachi warships took devastating damage before the invaders withdrew. "This is Admiral Jenkel. We wish to negotiate our surrender and forfeiture of any claims to this territory."

Mace took a deep breath. "Surrender accepted, Admiral. You may send in rescue crews if you so desire."

The admiral bowed on the video feed. "May I have your name, sir?"

Mace ordered the camera pointed at his chair. The Kaachi admiral stared with a look of shock.

Mace stood. "We are Humans, Admiral Jenkel. This is our territory. Our planet. We will meet all coming invaders and punish them for their transgressions. Now, prepare your flagship to be boarded."

The admiral pulled back. "Sir, it is customary to—"

Mace held up a hand. "Don't care about your customs, Admiral. You invaded our space to attack our world. You're lucky we don't finish the job of protecting our homeland right here and now. As I said, Admiral, prepare to be boarded. Send the rest of your ships to rescue your survivors."

The Kaachi admiral again slowly bowed. "As you wish, Mister...?"

Mace returned a stern and confident expression. "Mace Hardy of the Human Earth."

Johnny chuckled. "Human Earth..."

Mace offered a dirty look in response.

The Kaachi admiral turned and gave orders in his native language. Kaachi crewmen could be seen scurrying about behind him .

Fatso Geerok opened a comm. "Captain Hardy! Congratulations on the victory! A hard fought and righteous effort. We have just completed an initial analysis of the battle and have found no clear violations of the rules. We will prepare to broadcast the recordings at the next available opportunity."

Mace nodded. "Thank you, Admiral. The training your people put together was thorough and I believe it showed. As to the recordings, I would ask that those not be broadcast until the latest possible opportunity."

The grin on Fatso's face faded. "Might I ask why?"

Mace crossed his arms. "We would like the opportunity to review them ourselves first."

Fatso rubbed his gray chin. "I suppose the rules don't specify a deadline for transmission. They are sent so the outcome can be verified and any claims or disputes registered as open or resolved."

Mace nodded. "Good, then. We'll hold the recordings until we're ready to officially close out this fight."

The *Lousy* came to a stop beside the long, sleek flagship of the Kaachi invading force. A transfer tube was connected between the ships. Mace Hardy, Johnny Tretcher, and Coran Daughtry crossed over to the Kaachi vessel. The ultrathin, four foot tall Kaachi leader

stood at the airlock with his sword held out in surrender.

The captured admiral bowed. "Captain Hardy, with this sword I —"

Mace shook his head. "Skip it. Keep the sword. I'm sure it has meaning to you. Just take us on a tour of the ship."

The admiral straightened with a smile. "By all means, Captain. Please, come this way."

The tour of the Kaachi ship ran on for twenty minutes. Other than form and layout, many of the features and functions were similar to that of the *Lousy* .

Johnny said, "At least the bulkhead doors are taller, but now they're narrow. "

Coran replied, "Finding it difficult to be a monster Human, are you?"

Johnny laughed. "I've had to squeeze through worse in my day. I'll keep the height and weight advantage if it's OK with you."

Coran nodded. "If only Jasper were here to add one of his quips."

Johnny shook his head. "If Jasper were here, he'd be picking these poor guys up and shaking them. Looks like Bontu was right about the size of the aliens out here. We must be pretty intimidating to both species."

After a quick tour of the bridge, Mace nodded his head as he looked around at the stations. "OK. Looks good, Admiral. I think we'll take it."

The admiral returned a stunned expression. "What? Take what?"

Mace said, "This ship. What'd you call her again?"

"The *Grotta* . Her name. Captain, it is not customary to—"

Mace held up his hand. "Sorry, Admiral. The fight is over."



Technically, we own all of your ships and your crews. You surrendered. Now, we're a fair minded people. You attacked, you lost, you pay the price. And the price is this ship, and the rest of you leaving this territory. Do you accept these terms, Admiral?"

The admiral lowered his head. "I suppose we have no choice."

Mace smiled. "Good. Then please take your crew over to the *Lousy* . We'll transport you to one of your other ships. You will then leave this star system."

The Kaachi were rounded up and taken aboard the Human-run Mawga cruiser. The admiral and his crew were almost overcome with fear as they looked upon the monstrous aliens holding them captive. Twenty minutes later, a second transfer saw the Kaachi relocated to another vessel.

Shortly after, with their rescue efforts ended, the admiral ordered his fleet to leave. The seven long tan ships slipped off into the blackness of space. There would be no portal opening to bring them back to the rift. The journey would take four years of their lives. Continued punishment for their loss.

Johnny placed his fists on his hips. "OK, so... we have another ship. What do we do with it?"

Mace replied, "I want a crew over here to pilot it. We're taking it home. Mr. Daughtry, would you assume command of the *Lousy* for the ride back?"

Coran grinned and nodded. "Aye, Captain. As you wish."

Fifteen crew, including the others from the cave, joined Mace and Johnny on the *Grotta* . Four hours later, the great ship was hovering a hundred meters above the treetops at Organ Cave. A Kaachi shuttle brought all but a skeleton crew, including Tres and Vanessa, to the ground. Bontu Montak landed a few minutes later. The Human crew from the *Lousy* and the *Grotta* stood around the gift shop porch.

Bontu approached. "Mr. Hardy. Congratulations on an overwhelming victory pulled from certain defeat. You have certainly shaken things up with the Kaachi. They will be smarting for some time. However, even though we can find no evidence of rule violation, we expect a protest to be lodged with the Union. Seeing as this was an unusual battle, it's not out of the question the Kaachi's denial of claim will be waived. If that were to happen, there is the possibility of a larger force being sent. And that force would be unlikely to follow customary protocols."

Bontu glanced up at the Kaachi warship that hovered over their heads. "You have taken an admiral's flagship. A highly unusual move, and one that is likely to inflame not only the Kaachi, but a number of their allies."

Mace replied, "I'll be doing another recruiting tour to round up a crew for either this ship or the *Lousy* . What are the chances we can get you to make us more of these suits and helmets? I'd like to outfit my crews with the exosuits as well."

Bontu smiled. "I will have to consult with the admiral, but I believe he will be open to that request. "

Johnny asked, "Mr. Montak, the gravity on this Kaachi ship doesn't feel quite as strong as that of the *Lousy* . Is that why the Kaachi are thin? Their world has a lower gravity?"

Bontu nodded. "Astute observation, Mr. Tretcher. The Kaachi world of Hathius is slightly larger than Earth, only with a less dense core. The gravity is 8 percent lower than that of this world."

Johnny nodded. "OK, sounds about right. Probably also why I kept bumping my head on those low ceilings. A little too much spring in my step."

Jasper chuckled. "Or too much helium in your bulbous head."

Johnny flexed an arm in Jasper's direction before looking back. "The *Lousy* feels much the same as here. The gravity on your world similar to Earth?"

Bontu replied, "Yes. Within 2 percent. Our transition to Earth was rather easy as compared to many of our other worlds. Fully one third of the colonies in the Empire require us to wear the exosuit over our battle—"

Johnny pointed. "You were about to call them battlesuits, weren't you? I knew it. They were a bit much for just being in space."

Bontu sighed. "I refrained from using the term because of a fear of causing anxiety. I apologize if I have now done that which I have attempted to avoid."

Jane said, "We'd prefer that you just be honest. And now that we're allies, that's especially true."

The chancellor nodded. "Well said, Mrs. Tretcher."

Mace asked, "Something that has been bugging me. When all this started, several airliners crashed after their passengers and crews disappeared. Do you know what happened?"

Bontu nodded. "I do. They were removed to test for health concerns regarding the EM storms. When it was determined no apparent health issues existed, they were returned to the places of their original destination. Unharmful, and not remembering being taken. "

The Mawga chancellor soon left to consult with his admiral. A load of untainted nutrition bars was hauled up to the newly captured warship. Mace stood on the bridge with several of the others.

"This ship needs a new name. A Human name."

Jasper grinned. "I christen thee the *E.A. Collins* ."

Johnny laughed. "Sounds more like a ship to take around pumping bilge rather than a warship. What's the E.A for?"

Jasper scowled. "You're the only one pumping bilge around here. And the E. A. is for Earth Alliance."

Jane said, "How about the *Rogers* ? For Don and Cam?"

Mace stroked his beard. "I like it. Fitting. And a reminder of why we're here. To fight for everyone."

Liam Hobbs shrugged. "You're the captain. And to honor a fallen Human is as good a reason to title a ship as any."

Coran Daughtry agreed. "A worthy title."

Coran turned toward Jasper. "Perhaps we name the admiral's shuttle the *E.A. Collins* ?"

Jasper winked. "I could get on board with that."

Mace gestured toward the Kaachi consoles in front of him. "I'd like to get a team of Mawga on here to help us convert all this to English. If we're going to do more than fly this thing in a straight line, we need to know what all the controls mean."

Jeff Moskowitz held up a hand. "I have another suggestion. This was the flagship. It has four reactors. Why don't we see if we can acquire another four? I think we could do a lot better than having to wait six to eight seconds to fire a single cannon."

Mace replied, "I doubt the Mawga will give us any reactors. Having more than four is against the rules of the Union."

Johnny laughed. "Last I knew, we weren't in any union. And I bet we could salvage a few from those damaged Kaachi ships we left up there. They broke in half. Some may still have working reactors. "

Jeff slowly nodded. "That might be possible. Although, salvaging parts from a ship in space may prove troublesome. We have no experience at such."

Mace pointed at Johnny. "Between you, Johnny, and David, we should have enough brains to figure something out. And if we do this, I don't want the Mawga involved. Any talk of updates will have to be handled as top secret from now on. That means only those within this room will know anything about it. This could give us a huge advantage over the Mawga should the time come for us to part ways. Does anyone here oppose that strategy?"



The room was silent.

"Good," said Mace. "First opportunity we get, we head back out there to check on what can be salvaged."

Mace opened a comm to Fatso Geerok. "Admiral, I was wondering about your damaged ships. How do you plan to carry out repairs?"

The admiral passed an image of a new ship over the comm. "This is one of our repair vessels, Mr. Hardy. With our victory, I've asked the Military Council to send one through to us. They are quite pleased with the outcome of the battle. I see no reason for that request to be denied."

Mace asked, "Will one repair ship be enough?"

The admiral nodded. "Yes. The ship itself is really little more than a repair dock. Once in place, it unfolds into a facility that can house an entire cruiser, with atmosphere. And with the proper raw materials and the machinery aboard her, another dock can be constructed."

Jeff stepped forward. "What are the chances we could get one of those for our own use, Admiral? We might want to make a few updates to the *Rogers* ."

"The *Rogers* ?"

"Yes, sir. We named the captured ship after some of our fallen brethren. We're interested in converting the language aboard to English. And we'd like to make a few modifications to accommodate our larger frames. What are the chances of also getting some assistance from a few of your scientists and engineers?"

The admiral smiled. "Glad to see you taking the initiative. I will have a team assembled as soon as possible. When would you like to begin?"

Mace replied, "Send them whenever they are ready, Mr. Geerok. And thank you for the support."

The portly Mawga bowed. "I shall see to it that you have assistance in short order, Mr. Hardy. After all, we are allies in the defense of this planet, are we not? And... I am in your debt, Mr. Hardy. You managed a great victory over our enemy when all was surely lost."

### ▲ Chapter 3 ▲

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Jasper was given the honor of piloting the *E.A Collins* on her first mission. They flew first to Charleston. On the way, with inertial dampeners on maximum, the shuttle zipped over the contours of the land.

Johnny shook his head. "Let's hope he doesn't crash us into the side of a hill before we get there."

Jasper grinned. "Sixty-five years of driving a car and not one accident. I'll put that record up against anyone on this shuttle."

Johnny gave a half laugh. "Yeah, well, that would be because you're older than Mace and me combined."

Jasper ducked over a hilltop, running the shuttle down to as low as fifty feet above a hay field. "Twice the age, twice the wisdom."

The shuttle landed on the lawn in front of the Air National Guard building in Charleston.

Johnny walked down the ramp and pointed to a plane. "Would hate to be fighting the Kaachi in one of those. What is that? A P-51?"

Jasper shook his head. "That's an F-51. And the only thing you'd be fighting in one of those is gravity."

"Were they hard to fly?"

Jasper laughed. "No, I'm just saying they'd be hard for you to fly."

Sergeant Jack Holmes met them at the door. "Mr. Hardy. If you're looking to recruit, I can't help you. We've been placed under the control of West Virginia Military Command. After more than half my people left, the resistance command asked for control. We

complied and now report to General Mayfield. If you want. I could arrange a meeting with one of his officers."

Mace asked, "What happened to Captain Turner? "

Jack replied, "He's still here. Reports directly to the general. But they don't trust him. He's off the Mawga drug, though not really the same as he was. Lost some confidence. And with the loss of trust he's kind of an outcast. What's the visit for?"

Mace gestured toward the *Collins* . "Those other aliens I said were coming... they did. The Mawga trained us and we took their warship into the battle. We won. And as our prize we took the alien flagship. I'm looking for volunteers to man the Mawga cruiser we also have."

Jack winced. "Had I known all that was going to actually happen, I would have come with you before. There was just too much going on at the time."

Mace looked around. "Glad to see the resistance finally out of the shadows. They have a command structure set up covering the whole state now?"

Jack nodded. "The whole country. Don't know if you heard or not, but we now have a king."

Mace frowned. "We heard."

Jack crossed his arms. "Not sure just yet what to think about it, but the resistance command is backing him."

Johnny asked, "This isn't the same nut-job that was attacking community centers, is it?"

Jack gave a cautious look behind him. "I wouldn't say that too loudly. He has spies everywhere. And yes, it's the same guy. I think what bothers me most is the fact that he won't show his face. The general said it was for his own safety. I have to wonder what he's hiding from. You know about the alliance, right?"

Mace said, "We were the first to get aboard. Are you saying there are others?"

Jack nodded. "The entire military command, under the guidance of our new king, signed an alliance agreement with the Mawga yesterday. I heard no mention of any agreement you had. You might want to talk to your contact about that."

Jasper scowled. "This the same jackass king you were talking to before the fight? "

Mace replied, "It would have to be."

Jack again looked around. "As I said before, I'd be careful with your references to the King. Word is there's little tolerance for derision. I've heard of a couple executions. They take his security and his absolute rule seriously. They've been walking around here saying he's not only going to lead us out of our troubles, but with this alliance, we'll soon be conducting war off-planet. And he plans on bringing all nations under one Earth banner."

"This all sounds crazy," said Johnny.

Mace replied, "It all just sounds like we don't know what's going on. I can't say I like that after what we just accomplished."

Jack reached out his hand. "Thank you again for all you did for me before, Mr. Hardy. I'd stay and chat but I've been given a task to complete. And they're very strict about orders being carried out immediately."

Mace shook his hand. "Thanks for the intel, Jack. We'll get going. And take care. If you ever need us, come looking at Organ Cave."

Jack nodded as he walked away. "Will do, Mr. Hardy."

"What now?" asked Johnny.

"We go talk to Bontu and the admiral. I think they owe us some answers."

A short time later the *Collins* docked with Bontu's ship. Mace, Johnny, and Jasper were met in the main conference room by a smiling Bontu Montak.

"Mr. Hardy, I'd like to answer what questions I can about the new alliance with your people. This in no way affects the alliance we signed with you. At the moment, consider yourself and your ships as autonomous from the Human king. He agreed to allow you to choose between self-governance and joining the kingdom."

"What brought on this new alliance?"

Bontu sat in a chair across from the three. "Why, your success, of course. The admiral was so thrilled with the outcome that he offered four of our cruisers to King Stark. They begin training tomorrow. If all goes well, the Emperor has promised another twenty cruisers to the King. It is an exciting development. Once training is complete, the King has promised six cruisers and their crews for an upcoming campaign in a new sector. The Bolivi, a squalid race of water-breathers, have taken it upon themselves to claim the oceans of a newly discovered, uninhabited world."

Johnny held up his hand. "Wait, you're saying six of these crews will be going off to fight in your wars elsewhere?"

Bontu nodded. "Yes. But they are no longer Mawga wars, Mr. Tretcher. They are wars being conducted by the Royal Alliance. Humans, under King Stark, Mawga under Emperor Degiis. And Tervans under the Ogre Lord of Romulez. You see, Mr. Tretcher, the Union members are organized into four tiers. Tier one is of course the founders. There are fourteen alliances that make up tier two. With our new alliance, the Mawga and the Tervans will move up to tier three."

Jasper asked, "And the Humans?"

Bontu clasped his hands. "Your species is not yet a member of the Galactic Union, Mr. Collins. However, with the assistance of my people and the Tervans, should our wars go as well as we believe they will, you will have a much-elevated chance of acceptance."



Jasper scowled. "And what if we don't want to join your union?"

Bontu set his hands flat on the table. "In that case, you open yourself up to conquest by every other species or alliance out there. If you have filed for acceptance, most will leave you alone."

Mace leaned forward. "Why would any other species attack if you're here to help protect us?"

"The galaxy is a dangerous place, Mr. Hardy. The Royal Alliance is young. Should one of the tier two alliances take interest, or Josep forbid, one of the founding seven, I'm afraid our help would not do you much good. "

Johnny asked, "Who's this Josep? I've heard his name used several times now."

Bontu pulled up an image of a Mawga emperor on the room's holo-display. "Josep is considered the first ruling emperor of the Mawga worlds. He united the four loosely-governed planets and colonies in our original star system. Under his rule we were introduced to interstellar travel and began to trade with another species, the Kovutz. Consequently, they were eventually absorbed into the empire. After that, we applied to the Galactic Union and were accepted."

Bontu cleared the image. "Perhaps one day your people will be able to say the same about King Stark. Speaking again of the King, what is your level of interest in joining with his force? I'm certain you would all receive commands of your own, having already been trained and having a victory in battle."

Mace sat back, crossing his arms. "I don't think we're ready to join up just yet, Mr. Montak. I'm sure the others would like to talk it over for a bit first. Especially given that there is no urgent need for such."

Bontu nodded. "Yes. However, after discussion with the admiral, it has been suggested by his advisers that he ask for the return of the *Lousy* . Now, before you get upset, I would like to add

that it was only a proposal, and that I was vehemently opposed to any such action. Given your recent victory, you have earned the right to command her."

Jasper shook his head. "So what you're saying is you're a bunch of Indian givers?"

Johnny laughed. "You are so old, old man. I don't think I've heard anyone use that term in thirty years."

Jasper shrugged. "You are what you eat."

Johnny returned a confused look.

Mace asked, "What can you tell us about Stark?"

Bontu tilted his head. "I have yet to actually meet him. Although, from what the admiral says, he's decisive, much like you. Although you are perhaps a bit more reserved. You attempt to analyze a situation before making a decision. King Stark is much less patient in his deliberation. "

Johnny frowned. "Sounds like a hothead. And given that he calls himself king, I think it best we keep our distance for the time being."

Mace replied, "Until we've discussed this thoroughly with the others, there won't be any decisions made on our part."

Bontu raised a finger. "I do have one question for you, Mr. Hardy. Your trip to Charleston, were you able to add any volunteers to your team?"

Mace slowly shook his head. "No. With the new alliance you just signed, that places everyone in limbo. With the current forces coming together, no one wants to be viewed as a defector. Especially given that the King has supposedly already beheaded several of his detractors. I think most don't want to stir that pot."

Bontu looked concerned. "Beheadings? I had not heard of such. Is this recent?"

Mace nodded. "From what we hear."

Bontu rubbed his chin. "This gives me pause, Mr. Hardy. It does not speak well of the temperament of your new ruler."

"Just because someone has taken power doesn't make them a good or kind leader. In fact, usually the opposite is true of Humans. They're often good at war but terrible at ruling. Raw power corrupts."

Bontu looked down in thought before replying. "Perhaps this is a discussion for another day, Mr. Hardy. Just know that as you go forward, you have my support ... although that support has its limits."

Mace nodded as he stood. "Thank you for this talk, Mr. Montak. It has filled in a few holes in what we know, and need to know. Oh, how goes the repair dock? Has it arrived?"

Bontu replied, "The repair ship has been approved. We expect it here within the week."

The shuttle ride back to the cave was quiet. After settling in the field, the ramp lowered and the three men made their way back to the gift shop where the others were gathered around.

Jane asked, "Well? "

Mace shook his head. "There's been a few big changes. And I don't think you're going to like them."

Liam inquired, "Are there more Kaachi?"

Mace sat on the steps as the others gathered closer. "We now have a king ... and the Mawga have signed an alliance with him. Somehow Malcolm Stark has managed to anoint himself. And get this, he has the backing of the U.S. Military Command. The States—and from what I hear, Mr. Mallot and Mr. Hobbs—Canada and Britain have joined with him, sort of duchies within his kingdom.

"Negotiations are taking place the world over to bring the entire planet under his rule. And with this consolidation goes our pool of potential fighters. We talked with Jack Holmes in Charleston.

Everyone there is backing the King and just want to keep their heads down. The Mawga will be training his warship crews, starting tomorrow."

Coran Daughtry held up a hand. "What does this mean for us? And any word from Australia, or Europe?"

Mace shrugged. "As to what this means for us, we've been given the choice of joining up or staying on our own. I have the feeling if we take the first of those choices, we'll be split up and shuttled off to train others. And I have to believe they would be keeping a close watch on us. As to Australia, Mr. Daughtry, I'm sorry, but I don't have any word about them. They may or may not have been contacted yet."

Coran stood. "I would think we would want first crack at them then. We have two warships at our disposal. That would offer some leverage in any talks. And we could be there in a matter of hours if not less."

Jane said, "I'd have to agree with Mr. Daughtry. If we can convince the Australians to join with us, that gives us all the trainees we should need. And it keeps that prize out of Stark's pocket."

Mace glanced at Johnny. "You have an opinion?"

Johnny laughed. "Yep. What she said. Mr. Daughtry knows the people there. And we'll be flying the *Rogers*, which will be hard to deny. I say we pack up and go right now. "

Mace looked around. "OK, let's have a show of hands. Who's for a trip to down under?"

The vote was unanimous.

The *Rogers* was soon hovering over downtown Sydney. Two Australian generals were brought up to the former Kaachi cruiser. Mace, Johnny, and Jane joined Liam Hobbs, Humphrey Mallot, and Coran Daughtry in a main conference room.

Mace said, "Sirs, I must apologize for the setting. I know the

chairs are small and the ceilings low, but this is what we have to work with at the moment. Given time, those things will change."

Mace talked for twenty minutes about what his group could offer. The generals were intrigued. When the initial pitch had ended, he placed his hands on the short table, leaning over it.

"Gentlemen, first I would like to ask what contacts you've had with the King or his people. And second, I want you to ask us any questions you'd like. We'll answer honestly as best we can."

General Mel Banbridge stood. "Mr. Hardy, Stark has already offered us a ship. Do you bring the same offer?"

Mace nodded. "We do. In fact, we have the ship the Mawga gave us. It's available to crew. This ship, the *Rogers*, will be ours to pilot. We're in need of a crew for the *Lousy*."

The general half frowned. "The *Lousy*?"

Mace smiled. "It's not as bad as it sounds, General. All the Mawga cruisers, except for the flagship, are identical. Apparently, *Lousy* was an early and powerful family name in Mawga history. And, frankly, the ship will be yours to command, so you can name it whatever you want as far as we're concerned. The *Rogers* is equally equipped. It seems the ship structures and appearance are all that differ. The reactors and the cannons all come from the same suppliers.

"The Mawga, and the Kaachi we defeated, are members of a Galactic Union ruled by seven powerful species. They each have rules of engagement they have to fight under. The consequences for violating those rules are extreme. From what we can tell, it's a system that allows species to largely govern themselves, while at the same time enriching the seven founding members."

Liam Hobbs came over a comm channel. "Mr. Hardy, a Mawga shuttle is approaching. We're being hailed."

"Patch them through to here, Mr. Hobbs."

Seconds later the comm on Mace's arm pad came to life. "Mr. Hardy, I'm Captain Hawthorne, here representing King Stark. I understand you have General Banbridge and General Seavers with you."

Mace nodded. "We do."

Hawthorne returned an arrogant look. "I would like the opportunity to speak with the generals, immediately if possible. We have urgent business with the Australian Command."

Mace pursed his lips. "I will pass that information on to the generals when we are done here, Captain."

Hawthorne leaned toward the comm camera. "I should like to join you in your discussions, Mr. Hardy. As I said, our needs are urgent and are the business of the King."

Mace slowly shook his head. "Your urgency will have to wait until after ours, Captain. I believe the generals will be available in about a half hour. You're welcome to hang out there until we're done."

Hawthorne scowled. "This will be in my report, Mr. Hardy. We have no beef with you at present, but that may change if you continue to interfere with our work."

Mace returned a coy smile. "I'll make note of your dissatisfaction, Captain. Now, I have business to tend to."

The comm closed. "Gentlemen, as I said, I'm prepared to offer the *Lousy* up immediately for your command. And we would be happy to provide you with all the training you will need to fly her. Also, keep in mind, with us, you can change your mind at any time. With Stark, you give up that option, permanently."

Mel Banbridge stood. "Mr. Hardy, your offer is generous. We would like the opportunity to hear Stark's position before making a decision. "

Mace stood. "Absolutely. Take whatever time you need,



General. You can contact me over the comm when you've decided. And, General, I'd like to say that working with Mr. Daughtry and the others has been a pleasure. The three of them are both hard working and professional."

The generals boarded a shuttle and were soon on the ground. The King's representative was waiting for an immediate pick-up.

Coran Daughtry stood looking at a bridge monitor. "Two things I think we have against us, Mr. Hardy. The intimidation factor of so many others already committing to Stark. And his ability to get more ships from the Mawga. From the sound of it, they seem prepared to give him as many as he wants."

Johnny said, "We offer freedom of choice, Mr. Daughtry. That's a powerful motivator."

Coran returned a concerned look. "I think that used to be a prime motivator, Mr. Tretcher. But the world has changed. The first instinct now is to survive. And how better to do that than to join with the crowd? We have two ships. What other security can we offer?"

The discussion on the bridge continued for most of an hour before a comm came in from the generals. "Mr. Hardy, we've decided to accept your offer."

Mace smiled. "Excellent, General! You'll want about a hundred fifty or so for your initial training crew. It won't take that many to fly her, but you'll want to pick your best. Also, your trained crew will then become your trainers. We have some clout with the Mawga at the moment because of our victory over the Kaachi. I can push for more ships. And I'm confident I can get them."

The general nodded. "Let's hope that's the case, Mr. Hardy. When will you be ready to begin the training?"

Mace replied, "Whenever you're ready, General. Just say the word."

## ▲ Chapter 4 ▲

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One hundred eighty Australian volunteers were waiting on the ground. The shuttle from the *Rogers* landed in front of them. Most of the crew walked down the ramp behind Mace Hardy. The *Lousy*, with her skeleton crew, set down in a nearby field. A quick tour was given to everyone before the training sessions began. After a month of hand-to-hand fighting and repeated simulations, the volunteers were again assembled in the field by the shuttle.

Mace raised a hand in the air. "Attention! Everyone! Listen up!"

When the crowd settled, he began his speech. "You have all come through this training with the goal of being able to crew that warship. For the next several weeks we'll be taking her out for live drills. She's a good ship, and believe me when I say you'll be able to apply all you've learned toward making her your own. You've each earned a commission in the Earth Alliance and I'm certain that will show with your continued commitment.

"I believe... if we can show the Mawga we mean business, and that we are not only good, but great at what we do, they will give us another, and then another cruiser, to man and to fight with. Our mission here was to turn each of us from having focus on our individual survival to focus on defending the whole Earth. According to the Mawga, there are many other alien species out there, and they all have the potential to try to take this planet for themselves. It will be up to us to prevent them from doing so.

"Now, as I'm sure many of you know, King Stark has been given four of these warships. His teams are just now getting their live flight training. In a few weeks' time, those ships will be fully turned over to Stark and his minions. If for some reason you have in your head that going over to their side is a good thing, I ask only that you

keep this in mind: here, duty with us, is voluntary. You can leave or quit at any time. With Stark, you are permanently in his military. Leaving is desertion, which is punishable by death. So you can serve as free citizens with us, or under lifetime contract with the King. I ask that you all give some deep thought to that before we take this ship out. And just so you all know, I've tried to warn the Mawga about Stark but they don't seem to care."

The speech continued for several minutes. Individuals were recognized for outstanding achievements. When Mace concluded, he stepped back and Jane walked out before the crowd.

"Come, follow me over to your new ship! We'll do a few on-ground reviews and then we'll take her up!"

Cheers rang out.

Coran Daughtry stood beside Mace. "I think they were just as good as us. They'll make a fine crew."

Mace returned an uneasy look. "I just hope we can train and crew enough of those cruisers where Stark isn't so much of a threat. I've got a bad feeling about all these people falling in line behind him. I don't get the appeal."

Coran walked alongside Mace toward the *Lousy*. "I think what he offers is strength. He might be a bit ruthless, but he does show decisive leadership, which is something most want to see. People see him as the solid rock in a turbulent stream. They're looking for someone else to shoulder the burden of decision for a while. I have to admit, I've thought of joining up with them. I may not like many of his methods, but he seems to have a solid organization supporting him."

Mace shook his head. "I think people are too quick to give up their freedoms. I don't have issue with us taking up arms to defend Earth. What I don't understand is the willingness of others to join in a fight against other species who are not threatening us. How is that a better form of survival?"

Coran shrugged. "They won't be hungry, for one. Meals are provided. For another, they'll have purpose. You take all those zombies in the community centers, if you take away that drug, they'll need something to occupy their minds. "

Johnny joined the conversation. "You know, maybe this was their plan all along. Take the big Humans and turn them into fighters for their cause. We aren't bound by the Union rules. And if their usual wars are anything like that little skirmish we had, they could use us to dominate this galaxy."

Mace stopped. "You saying you think they came here to fill out their military ranks? If that was the case, why let so many of us die of starvation? That's millions of soldiers they would have lost out on."

Johnny replied, "Well, could easily be they wanted to take us down a peg or two. Our population now would be much easier to control than what we had before. People had to be made desperate before they'd be willing to give up their old lives. We can see that now with the droves who are joining Stark."

During the two weeks that followed, the new Australian crew was taken out into space and evaluated. As Coran Daughtry had suggested, their skill and adaptability matched that of the first Human crew. After a short ceremony, the *Lousy* was turned over to Coran to command. In a surprise move, he declined, instead choosing to remain as first officer of the *Rogers* . General Banbridge was quick to assume command.

Mace, Johnny, and Jane sat around a conference table with Admiral Geerok. "Sir, we've shown that we can train a crew for those cruisers," said Mace "We now have a large pool of personnel to choose from. I'd like to take possession of two more ships if possible."

Fatso Geerok grinned. "Mr. Hardy, I would love nothing more than to give you more ships. I just don't have any to spare at the moment. The Military Council only sent two ships for King Stark. I had to give up two of my own to fill out our commitment to him.

Frankly, I would like to have a hundred ships with Human crews. With them I could push the Kaachi out of this entire sector, bringing their expansion attempts to an end."

"Can you at least tell me what your plans are for Stark's cruisers? Will they be used in defense of Earth? Or to subdue the rest of the people here? "

The admiral held up a hand. "I'm sorry, Mr. Hardy. I cannot discuss the arrangements we might have with the King. I offer you the same courtesy. The King's men have questioned our alliance with you. They have also been denied a response."

Johnny asked, "So who's in charge of Earth's defense?"

Geerok smiled. "We all are, of course. Mr. Tretcher, we do not control the King, just as we don't control you. We are each allies. If your group wishes to communicate with the King, to make arrangements or alliances of your own, you are welcome to do so. Our agreements with each of you will be honored and kept on an equal basis."

When the meeting had adjourned, the three returned to the *Rogers* .

Johnny sat back in a conference room chair with his arms crossed. "I don't think we'll be getting any cruisers. Stark will be first in line."

Mace nodded. "I agree."

Jane said, "We talked before about making updates to this ship. The admiral indicated the Mawga repair dock was almost operational. He didn't seem interested in committing to us getting one of our own."

Jeff Moskowitz came through the door. "Excuse me for imposing, but I overheard your conversation from the hall. I believe we should move forward with our attempts to modify this ship on our own. David and I studied the bulkheads. We believe the doorways

can safely be expanded to better accommodate us. Unlike the Mawga ship, the structure here will allow it."

Jane asked, "What about the reactors? Any thoughts on whether or not we can add more?"

Jeff smiled. "Actually, I believe we can. The main charge conduits run just under the quarters for the soldiers who are usually on this vessel. Bunks could be cleared and reactors connected directly to those conduits. Where we have concerns are with the logistics of getting new reactors aboard. And I suppose there's also the issue of acquiring reactors for that purpose. "

Jasper tapped his hand on the table. "Excuse me, but didn't we discuss looking at the Kaachi ships we destroyed? Could be salvageable reactors just floating out there waiting for us."

Johnny nodded his head. "We did talk about that briefly. Shouldn't we at least go check? We don't have crews to train without having ships to put them on. We have the time."

Mace stood. "Mr. Daughtry? You want to take us out?"

Coran pushed back his chair as he rose. "I would. We could use more adventures like this. The crew has been getting restless."

Mace turned and stopped. "Wait. Let me give Bontu a call. He promised us enough of those exosuits to outfit our whole crew. If we decide there's a need to do salvage work, we'll be needing those."

Half an hour later, the *E.A. Collins* docked with Bontu's diplomatic vessel. Two large containers, holding two hundred exosuits that had been sized to fit Humans, were transferred to the shuttle's cargo area. The *Collins* returned to the *Rogers* and a course to the remains of the Kaachi ships was laid in. The short journey took four hours.

Liam sat at his nav station. "We should see the first of the ships on the big screen any moment. From that point, it will be another eight minutes."

Johnny sat at the sensor station. "I'm picking up several large chunks of debris between here and there. I'd advise a cautious approach."

Liam replied, "Adjusting course."

Mace turned toward Johnny. "How big of chunks are we talking?"

Johnny transferred the data to the display wall. "We have four items of about a meter in diameter each. According to our training, the shields and plating on the front surfaces of this ship should handle it, but there's no guarantee of that. The target section we are looking for should be about a quarter size of this ship. This was the first ship we hit and it came apart pretty good. And... I now have it on the sensors. Should be visible any moment now. "

Jasper pointed. "Got it. Lower left corner."

Johnny shook his head. "How is it the old man can see better than me?"

Jasper replied, "Because the old man is better than you."

Jeff said, "I've read up on the data about those suits. It seems just about the only thing they don't help with is regrowing hair."

Jasper scowled. "Looks like I'm stuck with the chrome dome. The ladies will be disappointed."

Johnny couldn't resist. "When it comes to you, the ladies will always be disappointed."

Jasper slowly turned. "Does it make you feel better to pick on an old man, Johnny Tretcher?"

Johnny nodded as he laughed. "Yes, yes it does."

Liam pushed nav data to the wall. "We'll be alongside that chunk in about sixty seconds."

Johnny replied, "Preparing a deep scan. Heat signatures should



tell us if anything is still active on there."

As the *Rogers* slowed, the sensor data came in. "OK, I have absolutely nothing. No activity. No power. Section doesn't appear to have held anything other than crew quarters and maintenance facilities."

Mace nodded. "Do a second scan when we're at a full stop. If it shows the same, we'll move on to the next piece."

Twenty minutes and two sizable ship parts later, the *Rogers* slowed to a dead halt.

Johnny pushed data to the screen. "I've got a heat signature. That section has to have a reactor running. This is remarkable. What's it been? Six weeks or so?"

Mace nodded as he opened a comm. "Tres, this is your gig. Prepare to pull that section close with the grappling. Dr. Jeff, I want you and David to offer an analysis of what we're looking at. If it's a reactor, can we get to it? "

Johnny said, "Uh, before we do that, you might want to look at the bioscan result. It's showing movement. We might have someone still on there."

Coran agreed. "I would have to say he's right. The signature says that's a living being on there. Looks like at least one of the Kaachi crew got left behind."

Mace opened a comm to Humphrey Mallot. "Mr. Mallot? Are you looking at the data?"

"I am. My team is readying now for a jump. This will be our first time out there since training. The single airlock on that section of the ship appears to be half missing. Might be why they were abandoned. We're looking over the schematics to see if there's another way in. That ship is identical to this one. So we should be in good shape as far as that goes."

Mace nodded. "Keep us informed. And let us know when you're

ready to go over."

Jasper stood. "I'm going with them."

Mace shook his head. "Not necessary. Humphrey's team can handle this. We need you right where you are."

Jasper returned his usual scowl. "Need me? I'm not doing anything but sitting on my hindquarters. I'll be joining Mr. Mallot for his jump across to that ship."

Johnny said, "You do realize you'll be free floating out there, right?"

Jasper shrugged as he walked across the bridge deck. "So? Not like I'm gonna get sucked into a void or something. If I somehow miss catching onto that ship, you can just swing around and pick me up."

Johnny raised his hand. "OK. Just be careful out there and ask Mr. Mallot to do the same."

Jasper hurried out of the room and was soon in an airlock with Humphrey's team, looking out a portal at the ruined ship. "Looks like crap."

Humphrey replied, "We'll be angling for the yellow flashing beacon. There's a thin section of hull behind that plate that has an access panel we can go through. From there, we'll have to cut through the inner hull. Should place us in a storage room with a sealed bulkhead door."

Jasper winced. "You know those doors won't open if an air leak is detected. It won't unlock."

Humphrey smiled. "We'll be welding the plate back in place once we're in. Other than a repressurization of that room, the door should open freely. My biggest concern is with getting to that access panel."

Jasper waved his hand. "Not a problem. Here, put your fist

about an inch away from the wall. Now, with your other hand, fully activate the magnetics for that fist."

A clang could be heard as the fist plate of the exosuit energized, pulling it hard into the wall of the airlock chamber.

Humphrey nodded. "Excellent. When we arrive, we'll be able to take hold."

Jasper replied, "Yep. And if you do the same thing with that suit and your feet, although at a lower level of activation, you'll be able to walk around on that hull. Dr. Jeff spelled all that out to me when he studied up on the suit."

Liam came over the comm. "Mr. Mallot, we are in position. I've matched our speed to the rotation of the remnant. We should stay directly over the beacon as you directed. You'll be crossing approximately one hundred twenty meters. If you miss or bounce off, don't worry your poor little Canadian mind, we'll pick you up."

Humphrey nodded. "Thank you, Mr. Hobbs. No worries at all."

The air pressure dropped to nothing. The airlock door slowly opened. Jasper was the first out, springing from the back wall of the airlock out into the void of space. Humphrey Mallot and his two teammates followed.

Over his comm, Jasper said, "Can't say this is as exciting as I thought it'd be. Floating in space is kind of boring."

Johnny replied, "No one there to laugh at your jokes?"

Jasper cleared his throat. "Your concern is touching."

Less than a minute later, Jasper could feel the heavy clang as his fist plates attached to the cruiser's hull. With the flip of a holo-switch from his arm pad, he stood, walking effortlessly toward the access panel Humphrey had designated. Seconds later he was joined by the others.

Humphrey said, "Step aside if you please. Man needs to cut a

hole."

Jasper replied, "You going through right here?"

Humphrey nodded. "Between those beams."

Jasper frowned. "Don't think we'll fit through with the exosuits on."

Humphrey held up. "What are you suggesting?"

Jasper chuckled. "Not suggesting anything. Just don't think we'll fit. Mace, can you send someone to room 6-4B? Tell us how thick that beam is to either side of where we'll be cutting."

"Give us a minute."

Jasper looked around at the others. "Smoke 'em if you got 'em."

Several minutes passed before an image of the room came up above Humphrey's arm pad. "Got it. Looks like Jasper's right."

Jeff Moskowitz joined the comm. "The wall to your left, it's at least an inch thicker, but it leads into a closet with ample room for a cutout the size you need."

Humphrey looked over the image. "Looks like a better option. Thanks, Mr. Moskowitz. We'll cut through there."

As the plasma cutter began to rip through the hull plating of the Kaachi cruiser, a fireball shot outward as the pressurized air inside began to escape. A startled Humphrey took a deep breath before continuing. Fifteen minutes later, the plasma cutter was turned off.

Humphrey pushed on the cutout plating. "I don't understand. It should fall free."

Jasper raised a boot, kicking hard at the plate. The Kaachi steel fell inward and Jasper Collins moved the other way, coming free from the hull, spinning head over heels as he slowly drifted away .

"Aw, crap. Can somebody toss me something to grab?"

Johnny took the opportunity to pounce. "I can send you an energy bolt from the weapons console if that will help."

Jasper scowled as he spun. "Shut your hole, Tretcher! Don't need your kind of help."

Johnny laughed. "Hey, you're the one flipping out, not me."

Johnny turned toward Mace. "We got any rope or something else we can use as a tether?"

Mace half frowned. "That's a hundred twenty meters. I doubt it."

Liam joked. "Not so well prepared for space, are we?"

Johnny stood. "He's only fifteen feet away from them. The more we wait the longer a rope we'll need."

Humphrey said, "Hold on. I think we have some materials in this room we can use."

A bail of wire was unfurled and stretched out. Jasper took hold and was slowly pulled back toward the hull. After banging his helmet and then his boots, he was successfully brought through the opening. The artificial gravity within the room took him to the floor, where he was soon on his feet.

"Well, at least we're in. Let's get this plate welded back up."

After a half hour of attempts, Humphrey set down the plasma torch. "I can't get this thing to seal."

Jasper turned, ripping the closet door from its hinges. "Here, tack this down over it. Improvise, it's the name of the game."

Humphrey began his work. "Remind me to never try to lock you in a room, Mr. Collins."

Jasper shrugged. "Simple problems call for simple solutions."

When the welding was complete, attention was turned to restoring the air pressure in the room. Directions were given to a

control panel beside the sealed bulkhead door. A hissing could be heard getting louder through their helmets as the room filled with breathable air. A clank and a green light indicated the door could be opened. Jasper reached for the handle.

## ▲ Chapter 5 ▲

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**T**he bulkhead door opened into a dimly lit hallway. Humphrey Mallot was the first to move forward. After a short, slow walk, the end of the hall was reached.

Jasper said, "To the left is storage. The right has the reactor and crew quarters."

Humphrey replied, "On the *Rogers*, food was in the storage to the left. I might be tempted to set up house there if I'd been trapped here for six weeks."

Jasper nodded. "OK, you take the back and I'll check up here."

Mace came over the comm. "Negative. Nobody goes it alone. If you split, two and two."

"Fine," said Jasper. "Hey, one of you Canucks come with me."

Humphrey shook his head. "You Yanks and your names..."

Jasper shrugged. "You like hockey? Kanooks. Let's go, eh."

Johnny came over the comm. "Don't be offended. He's old and senile. Can't help himself."

Jasper began to walk down the right-hand hallway. Humphrey gestured for Francois Pellande to follow. As the two men reached the end and turned the corner, four doors were on the left side of the new hall.

Jasper pointed to the first. "Might as well start here."

The door was slowly opened. Jasper Collins moved into the room with his Mawga plasma rifle at the ready.

Francois said, "Wouldn't it be best to use the sword?"



Jasper laughed. "If you want to use that frog sticker, feel free. I'm not too worried about damaging this pile of junk. I'd rather shoot at them before they shoot at me."

Johnny came over the comm. "Hey— "

Jasper sighed. "What you want now, ape-man?"

Johnny chuckled. "Was just going to tell you a new scan just finished. The bio in question should be in the next room. Mr. Mallot, you'll want to move forward before he goes in. And Jasper, wait for the others."

"Sorry for the ape remark. And thanks for the heads-up."

Johnny laughed. "I know you can't help yourself."

The four men were soon standing outside the door in question. Jasper stood to the side as he slowly turned the handle. The door popped as it was opened. Humphrey pushed with his rifle as he peered around the doorway.

Jasper stepped through. A Kaachi crewman rushed forward, slicing hard into the rifle tip with his short sword, disabling the plasma weapon. Jasper jumped back before driving forward. An attempted stab at a critical suit joint failed. The five-foot nine-inch Human grabbed the retreating alien by his throat and sword hand, lifting him off his feet.

Jasper Collins came to a stop. "Well, hello there, little fella. You come to play?"

Mace came over the comm. "Don't hurt him. Put him down. He might have valuable information the Mawga haven't told us."

Jasper scowled. "Ack. You're taking all the fun out of an old man's adventure."

The remainder of the ship remnant was thoroughly searched. The stranded Kaachi crewman was taken to the storeroom, where one of the Canadians helped ferry him across to the *Rogers* . Jasper and

Humphrey made their way to the working reactor.

Humphrey looked over the controls. "Functioning normally. Supply looks good. Output stable. Would probably run on for another year or two. Our friend had a good stockpile of food available and the water recycler in this section is still functional. "

Jasper checked a second set of monitors. "The feeds all look intact. If we can figure out how to move this beast, I think we could make use of it. Should I shut it down?"

Jeff came over the comm. "David and I are working on a solution. Without atmosphere, your suit is only good for about a half hour of air. I would leave the reactor running until we have a full plan."

The grappling was extended, taking hold of the large remnant. A team of cutters was assembled and sent over. Interior walls and bulkheads were removed, clearing a path for the reactor's transport. Once shut down, the atmosphere was vented and a final wall cut through. In zero gravity, the twenty-cubic-meter reactor was moved through the cutout opening without issue. The grappling released the remnant and took hold of the reactor, pulling it safely aboard the *Rogers* .

When the bay door had closed, Jeff stood looking at the reclaimed prize. "Seven hours. Not bad."

David replied, "Still thinking of the old soldiers quarters for housing it?"

Jeff nodded. "We just have to figure out how to get it in there."

Mace joined the conversation. "Can it be disassembled?"

Jeff tilted his head. "I'm concerned about doing that. This thing houses a fusion reaction. Assembly would have to be precise. If we take it apart, we risk it no longer working."

Mace put his hand on Jeff's shoulder. "Only costs us an unused reactor if we fail. I'd rather take a shot at that than risk compromising

our bulkheads. You've already stated some of our bulkhead door modifications might be suspect."

Jeff replied, "We're taking steps to bolster those doorways, but you're right, there is a risk. We don't have the technology available to the Kaachi when they built this ship. Maybe the Mawga repair dock can accomplish that."

Mace slowly shook his head. "I don't think we'll ever see one. That promise was made before they signed their deal with Stark. I'll push for it, of course. Only I don't think there's much chance of it happening. "

The *Rogers* was backed away from the partial Kaachi cruiser. Twenty minutes was spent on target practice, leaving no piece larger than a football, a size the warship shielding could handle an impact from when traveling at speed.

A course was set to the remains of the next cruiser. Over the day that followed, three additional generators were salvaged with no further Kaachi rescued. The journey back to Earth took six hours. The *Rogers* again settled over the cave complex.

Mace walked into the conference room where the Kaachi crewman was being held. "Any luck with him?"

Johnny, Jane and Coran shook their heads.

Johnny said, "Been quiet as a mouse. Don't think we'll be getting much out of him."

Mace sat in front of the Kaachi. "You have your translator running. I know you can understand me. I'll start by saying you are our prisoner. Your fleet was soundly beaten and you were left for dead. We, you and I, don't have to be enemies. You see, the Mawga showed up here acting like heroes, like they were only here to save the day. We don't trust them. The timing of their arrival is a bit hard to swallow. We have a loose alliance with them right now, but I'd just as soon have an alliance with the Kaachi if it were to benefit us."

The Kaachi sighed. "They are here for you. For Humans. They wish to have you in their armies and fleets."

Mace leaned forward, pointing at the Kaachi and then at himself. "Now, that's exactly what I've been thinking. They bombard us with magnetic waves, take out our power and comms, wait for us to self destruct, and then come in to save those who survived. And now, just as you say, they have us fighting for them. Exactly what I've concluded. They do have an agenda, and the agenda is us. Let me guess, your people came this way because they wanted the prize Humans, too?"

The Kaachi nodded. "I only have the rumors heard from my former crewmates. And yes, our intent was to have you for ourselves, but as partners from the beginning."

"You have a name? "

"I am called Gnaga. Gnagarian Klept. I was a reactor maintenance tech."

Mace began to smile. "Could you take apart and reassemble one of the reactors on your ship? Is that possible?"

Gnaga nodded. "It is. I've done it several times during my career."

Mace opened a comm channel. "Jeff, come up to the conference room. I may have a surprise for you."

Several minutes later, Jeff walked through the door. "Reactor's almost done. What'd you need?"

Mace pointed to a chair. "Jeff, this is Gnaga. Gnaga, Jeff. It seems Mr. Klept has torn down and rebuilt those reactors before. Thought you might be able to make use of his talents."

Jeff looked straight at the Kaachi crewman. "Is he serious? You can assemble a reactor?"

Gnaga returned an uncomfortable look. "I have. I am not

prepared to do so for your sake."

Mace tapped his hand on the table. "I think you will. And here's why: the Mawga are quickly building up a Human-run fleet. They did it first with us, but have since turned their focus to a newly-crowned Human king named Stark. Stark is eager to go out and fight the Kaachi elsewhere. We only want to defend our planet. So, you can help us to keep power, limiting the Mawga and Stark, or you can remain silent while those two team up against your people."

Gnaga replied, "While all of that may be true. I have no way to verify it is so. I could not in good conscience assist an enemy of my people without proof you are not a true ally of the Mawga."

Mace sat back, crossing his arms. "Understandable. At the moment they have us boxed in. If we do nothing, we're immediately under the rule of a self-appointed king, or under the thumb of the Mawga. Perhaps you can tell me this: by what mechanism did the Mawga take out our power and communications?"

Gnaga returned a sheepish look. "I cannot answer that. "

Mace sat forward. "Why? Is it that you don't know? Or you fear the Mawga? Because if it's the second, you have nothing at all to worry about. We have no intention of turning you over to them."

Johnny put his hands on the low table. "Or maybe it's because of another reason altogether? Maybe the Kaachi are the ones who took out our power and comms? And the Mawga swept in before they were ready to take control?"

Gnaga looked away nervously.

Johnny chuckled. "Wow. You Kaachi are seriously bad at being deceitful. The magnetic and RF interference was your people's doing, wasn't it?"

Gnaga looked down at the floor.

Johnny turned to Mace. "If that's so, the Mawga had to know about it all along. They've been lying to our faces this whole time."

Mace clasped his hands together as he set them on the conference room table. "Is that true?"

Jane stood from her chair, drawing her short sword from its sheath. "I hear there's a spot, just behind your ear on the back of your neck, that is extremely painful when cut. At least that's what the Mawga trainers told us. I've kind of been wanting to try it out. Maybe this is a good time?"

The Kaachi crewman drew in a deep, nervous breath. Jane stepped closer, slowly swinging the tip of the sword behind the alien's head.

She leaned forward. "You know, just a little slip and I can open that little pouch behind your ear wide. I was also told, that besides being painful, it will ruin your sense of taste and smell, making it difficult to eat your food without becoming nauseous. I've heard you would eventually starve yourself to death. Sounds very unpleasant."

Gnaga replied, "The rules of the Galactic Union forbid torture in all forms."

Johnny laughed. "Galactic Union? We aren't members of any union. And we aren't subjects of the Mawga. We only have an alliance, remember? Why do you think we cut loose on your cruisers in that worthless battle you fought? And come to think of it, that's probably why the Mawga are teaming up with Stark. He can go out and fight their battles without having to follow any rules."

Gnaga said, "If the rules are not followed, the Galactic Union will come to this planet. They have done so many times before. You have already attacked one of their members. Under the charter of the Union, they can come here themselves to set things right. You would either submit to their complete rule or be annihilated."

Mace nodded. "First, we don't fear the Galactic Union. We don't want war, but we won't be slaves either."

Gnaga sat straight. "You should fear them. A hundred of these ships would not stand up to a single dreadnought from a founder fleet."

They have wiped whole civilizations from existence over what began as petty disagreements. You should fear the Galactic Union. There is no denial of their power."

Jordan Crawford had been standing in the room against a far wall. "Mr. Hardy, if I may, I think what we have here with Mr. Klept is an opportunity."

"How so?"

Jordan stepped forward. "I think we can assume that Gnaga would be overjoyed at the possibility of going home. What if we offer to make that happen, in exchange for a peaceful meeting with his superiors. I mean, the Galactic Union is supposed to be about negotiations, is it not? And if you have interest in talking to the Kaachi about an alliance, or even as a means to get info on the Mawga, who better to talk to than their command? They've already lost their claim to this territory. What if they were invited back by us?"

Mace began to stroke his beard. "That's an interesting thought. Mr. Klept, Gnaga, if we have a signed agreement with the Mawga, does that not mean we are recognized as the government of our people? Even if they also have an agreement with King Stark? "

Gnaga returned a confused look. "I don't understand what you are asking."

"Would your government, your military, be interested in peace negotiations with us? Would that permit them back into this space as, say... trade partners?"

Gnaga thought for a moment. "I'm not an authority on such matters, but I believe that to be possible."

"Is there any way we can contact your government?"

Gnaga slowly shook his head. "That would require a wormhole generator. And the fuel to run it. Even opening a communications portal is a costly venture."

Jordan sat in a chair beside the alien. "If you had a wormhole open, say to the rift, could a message be sent through to your people?"

Gnaga replied, "It could, but as I said, we lack the wormhole generator."

Jordan smiled. "We do to, but the Mawga don't. If they open a portal, could we send communications through?"

Gnaga shrugged. "I suppose it's possible."

Jordan pressed for more information. "Would the Mawga know if we sent a message?"

Gnaga nodded. "They would, but they lack the decryption gear to make use of that communication. The Galactic Union rules forbid eavesdropping on the comms of others."

Johnny chuckled. "How many insane rules do they have?"

"The rules are intended to deflate conflicts. Negotiations are highly encouraged, even though they seldom work."

Jordan continued: "So, if the Mawga open a comm portal to the rift, we could send a message to your people, inviting them to contact us. And we could also have a new portal opened at some distance so the Mawga won't know we are communicating with their enemy?"

Gnaga nodded. "I suppose."

Johnny asked, "Aren't they going to know it when you send out that first message? "

Jordan replied. "Not necessarily. We could always talk it off as a mistake. Something that happened while we were trying to figure out the Kaachi comm system. Stark's people broke the Mawga comm encryption. That's how they used those comm bracelets to communicate with each other."

Jane sheathed her sword. "You don't think it's a dangerous move, inviting the Kaachi to come back here?"



Jordan shook his head. "We aren't inviting them to come back, yet. All we would be doing is establishing communications. Here's a further thought. We have eleven million Australians who are now on our side. That's a lot of crews if we somehow strike a deal with the Kaachi. Maybe we could get the ships we seek from them? Seeing as how the Mawga have already sold us out."

Johnny tapped his knuckles on the table. "I have to say I kind of like that idea. We could train up enough crews to at least keep Stark at bay for a while."

Coran Daughtry nodded. "I have to agree with that line of reasoning. We only have two ships. Having more only adds to our chance of staying autonomous. Maybe we even talk Stark into allowing us to be Earth's defense while he goes out to do battle with the Mawga's enemies."

Mace turned back to face Gnaga. "Would you be willing to help us craft a message to be sent to your authorities? I would think your people would jump at the chance to get back in this game. Even if we're the very people that kicked the crap out of your fleet."

Gnaga replied, "My people respect power, as do all the members of the Union. Even if your intentions are not honorable, I see no harm in assisting you with a message. Command is capable of determining whether or not they feel such a risk is worthwhile."

Mace looked around the room. "Wasn't Hans in the diplomatic corps? Can someone bring him in here?"

Several minutes later, Hans Mueller walked into the room. "You were asking for me? "

Mace nodded. "Have a seat. You were in the foreign office for your government in D.C., right?"

"Seven years."

Mace asked, "I assume you had some diplomatic training before taking that position?"

Hans nodded. "I did."

Mace smiled. "Mr. Mueller, how would you like a job in our foreign office? We're thinking of opening communications with the Kaachi. Your training might be useful to us in that regard."

Hans replied, "I'd be willing to take on any assignment you have, Mr. Hardy. What exactly are you looking to do?"

"We're thinking of sending a message to the Kaachi, inviting them to contact us for discussions."

"Discussions about what?"

Mace replied, "Discussions about a possible alliance."

Hans looked around the room. "You're serious? We just destroyed their fleet. Why would they want an alliance?"

Johnny took the floor. "The Kaachi are in a perpetual war with the Mawga. And with Stark cozying up to the Mawga, we're thinking a similar alliance with the Kaachi might be beneficial."

Hans replied, "As I said, I will do whatever is asked of me."

Mace stood. "Gentlemen, ladies, let's break into discussion groups for a bit. I want ideas about what we should propose to the Kaachi. Mr. Klept, you'll come with me. I'd like to discuss this with you alone. I need to be convinced that this is not only possible, but that it's the right thing to do. Your job will be to make me a believer in the Kaachi people."

## ▲ Chapter 6 ▼

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Mace sat in a private room with the nervous alien. "You can relax, Mr. Klept. We aren't barbarians."

"Your woman, back there, indicated otherwise."

Mace waved a hand. "Don't worry about that. She was just trying to intimidate you. What I'm doing here is trying to have a private, open discussion with you. Tell me about your people. How do they deal with other species? According to the Mawga, you were coming to Earth either to enslave us or wipe us out."

Gnaga squirmed in his chair. "I don't know why I should trust you, Mr. Hardy, but for some reason I do. The Kaachi are not the savages the Mawga would have you believe. When the rift to this region was discovered, almost seven of your years ago, we were one of the first tier-four species to come through. We discovered Earth and subsequently your civilization. The Union rules are very specific in this regard. No species shall interfere with another who has not reached a certain level of scientific discovery."

Mace sat back. "Scientific discovery? What does that have to do with anything?"

Gnaga sighed. "Until a world has reached the discovery of dark matter, we can do nothing but observe from afar. Your world was found and it was quickly determined that you were not advanced enough for interaction with others. As I said, the Galactic Union rules are extremely strict in this regard.

"Shortly after our arrival to this system, the Mawga showed up. As did two other species, the Prackie and the Jellok. With our initial observations, it was determined that you were likely decades if not hundreds of years away from the dark matter discovery. But with the

arrival of the others, something changed. Your scientists began to excel in areas they should not have. That acceleration continued to build, bringing your scientists to flip the trigger of contact... the discovery of dark matter. We suspected that Jellok spies were responsible. Someday, the Union may have to make a determination of the facts.

"With that discovery, your world was then open to contact. The Mawga were the first to have warships in your system, driving us and the others away and ensuring they would be the first. I cannot say whether the bombardment of your planet with electromagnetic waves was of their doing or not. But it *was* purposefully done."

Mace clenched a fist. "We've suspected that all along. Their arrival just after our collapse was too convenient."

Gnaga nodded. "Had the Kaachi been the first to interact, we would have done so with a single diplomatic vessel, a peaceful invitation to welcome you to the galaxy, followed by the establishment of firm relations. I cannot lie about the fact that we would have tried to bring you into the Kaachi Domain. However, our efforts in that regard would have been peaceful."

Mace stroked his beard. "So the dirty Mawga managed to wipe out three quarters of our population before sweeping in like saviors. And their goal was to use Humans in their armies and fleets? It doesn't make sense as to why they would kill us off like that."

Gnaga Klept sighed. "You are a unique species, Mr. Hardy. The Kaachi are one of the tallest species in the Galactic Union. The Mawga, the Prackie and the Jellok are all about average. The founders are even less in stature. To the Mawga, and admittedly to my species as well, you would be a prized ally. You are giants among the other known members of this galaxy."

Mace again sat back in his chair as he stared at a far wall. "OK, this is all starting to make sense. People broke the rules, triggering the allowable interaction with us. One of you took advantage of the situation, chasing the others away. So, technically, our world was

attacked. And now we're allied with the species who almost destroyed us."

Gnaga held up a finger. "I cannot say the Mawga were responsible for the magnetic storms. It is possible that interference was done as an attempt to keep the Mawga at bay. To my knowledge, the Kaachi had nothing to do with that tragedy."

Mace said, "Well, if it wasn't the Mawga, why didn't they chase off whoever was doing it? The Mawga had their fleet here, why not stop the interference?"

"The magnetic storms were broadcast from several points at a great distance. The Mawga were likely preparing to make their move when the first of those storms struck your planet. Their hesitation to act while they attempted to put a stop to the storms may be the reason they did not make an immediate visit. Had they done so, your military would have made every attempt to fight them off."

Mace shook his head. "Wow. Billions dead because of all this. And now the Mawga are getting exactly what they came for in the first place. A Human army."

Mace stood and paced the room in thought. "Mr. Klept, I believe what you've told me to be true. I also believe that it would be in our best interest to make contact with your command. I can now see why Stark has been so successful at recruiting others. The Mawga have been working with him all along. I'd bet those raids on the community centers were all staged. It's no wonder the Mawga didn't fight back. They were positioning Stark for power."

Mace returned to his chair, sitting on the front edge. "Help us to contact your people, Mr. Klept. We'll turn the Australians into a fighting force the likes of which you've never seen. But we need to do this fast, as Stark and the Mawga are gaining strength. They've already turned four cruisers over to his people and I have to believe that more will come."

Mace and the four-foot-tall alien returned to the conference

room where discussions were ongoing. After a five-minute speech about the magnetic storms and the Mawga, ideas were discussed and a strategy defined. The others returned to their stations as Mace brought Gnaga over to Jeff.

"Mr. Moskowitz, I believe you have an assistant here that can help with that reactor."

Jeff replied, "Excellent. Let's get started, shall we. "

Gnaga asked, "What is it you are doing with the reactor?"

"We're upgrading this ship," Jeff replied as they walked.

Gnaga returned a concerned look. "But you already have four reactors."

Jeff nodded. "And we'll add four more if we can get them installed. We have space for at least a dozen."

Gnaga shook his head. "That is a direct violation of the Union rules, Mr. Moskowitz. No ship shall have more than four reactors. Unless of course you are a founder."

Jeff smiled. "We aren't in your Union, Mr. Klept. Those rules don't apply."

Gnaga frowned. "I beg to differ. When you signed the agreement with the Mawga you became bound by the same rules. If the founders choose to get involved, that would be used against you."

"I looked over that agreement. Nothing in it states that we are bound by any Union rules."

Gnaga sighed. "It doesn't have to state it. In effect, by signing with the Mawga, you signed with the Union. If they choose to come here, you will be forced to do as they say."

Jeff put his hand on Gnaga's shoulder as they entered the old soldiers quarters. "Doesn't much matter, Mr. Klept. The decision to add the reactor has already been made. Just for grins and giggles, let's say we wanted to rescind our alliance with the Mawga. What would

stop us from adding the reactor then? This ship is ours to do with as we please."

Gnaga shook his head. "The Mawga would not let you out of such an agreement. That is their leverage over you going forward. If you violate the rules, and they report you to the Union for doing such, they would likely be rewarded with full custody of your species, mandating compliance. At that point you would fully become their subjects."

Jeff stopped as they walked across the room. "I guess we'll just have to take our chances, then. We have the disassembled parts over here. "

Gnaga stood, looking over the reactor assemblies. "You will need an everspark to light it off."

Jeff smiled. "We have one. Mace has it. It was a gift from the Mawga diplomat."

Gnaga winced. "Oh, that is not allowed. Only members of the Union may possess an everspark. There are only a handful of such devices with each species. If this diplomat provided Mr. Hardy with such a device, they did so without the knowledge of their leadership. I can't fathom a reason why such a valuable and rare device would be given to your people."

Jeff shrugged. "All I know is we have one. So, where do we begin? I had my crew document every piece we took apart. If it was up to me, I'd put it back together in the same order."

Gnaga looked over the parts as he held his chin in his fingers. "Give me a moment, Mr. Moskowitz. I've done this many times. Our first efforts will be to arrange the pieces in standard assembly order."

"And then?"

"And then we put it together."

Four hours later, the Kaachi reactor was complete. Two hours after that feat, the conduits were connected. Mace was called to the

room with the everspark.

Jeff said, "Mr. Hardy. If you'd do the honor, we'll see about bringing this reactor online."

Mace pulled the device from a pouch on his suit.

Gnaga gestured toward an opening on the reactor's side. "You must hold the device in the center of the chamber. Once lit, you will see a bright flash. That would be the ignition. From that point you will have two to three seconds to withdraw your arm from the chamber. Failure to do so will result in its loss."

Mace asked, "Have you ever lit off a reactor?"

"I have not." Gnaga replied. "Every reactor I've encountered has seen ignition at the factory. I have yet to see one fail other than in the course of battle. In that instance, they are generally not re-lit. The assemblies I have done were merely for practice. "

Mace nodded. "Interesting. Well, I guess the job falls to me then."

Mace slowly worked his arm through the small opening in the side of the reactor. The center of the chamber was reached when his elbow was just past the edge of the lighting hole.

Mace took a deep breath. "Here goes."

He pressed a button on the device. A small glow could be seen coming from its end. With a bright flash, the reaction started. Mace jerked his arm back and the elbow pad of his suit caught on the edge of the hole. A second jerk saw him fall backwards onto the floor, his hand empty. The everspark device had fallen to the bottom of the reactor chamber.

Mace stood. "Well, crap. How do we get that out of there?"

Gnaga crossed his arms. "The reactor must be shut down."

Mace said, "OK, then we'll just have to re-light it."



Gnaga looked into the hole on the reactor's side, attempting to see the bottom of the chamber. "There is a real possibility the everspark was damaged or wholly incinerated. The chamber reached several thousand degrees within seconds after the ignition."

Jeff held his hand up to the opening. "I don't feel any heat coming out of there."

Gnaga said, "I can assure you, just on the other side of that opening it is as hot as your sun. A gravity field inside that chamber keeps the walls of the chamber from melting."

Mace sighed. "So we can shut it down, but the everspark might be useless, keeping us from relighting it. Let me ask you this, if the everspark is OK, and we were to leave the reaction running, do we risk damaging it?"

Gnaga thought and replied, "If the device was caught within the containment field, it no longer exists. If by chance it dropped through to a low corner, outside the field, it may have survived. Continued operation of the reactor would have no effect."

Mace nodded. "Good. Then we have a temporary solution. We leave it where it sits. The other reactors can be moved in here and built up. Until we do some testing with this first one, we have no need of lighting off the others."

Jeff said, "I'll get started on full integration, Mr. Hardy."

Jeff walked to the monitor console. "Mr. Klept, let's tune the output and see if we can bring it in-line with the others."

Mace left the room and headed to the dining hall.

Johnny was waiting with a beverage. "Was listening over the comm. Given the current state of affairs, I don't think Bontu is going to give us another one of those lighters."

Mace took the cup and followed with a sip, nearly spitting it out. "That's the shine! Was expecting water!"

Johnny laughed. "Yeah, guess I could have warned you about that. Tres has a still setup in the kitchen. This is his first batch of interstellar shine. At least that's what he's calling it."

Mace took another sip. "Wow. That's powerful stuff. Could probably run one of those reactors with it."

"What can we expect when that new box is online?"

Mace took a seat at a table. "Well, if everything is linear, that would drop a recharge of the well down to just under five seconds from six. Don't think it makes any difference to speed. Supposedly these gravity drives can only do what they'll do right now. It's not a question of having more power."

Johnny sat. "What do you think we can get out of the Kaachi? The way he threw that reactor together tells me he knows his stuff."

Mace took another sip and winced. "Yeah. I know our argument is compelling, but he seemed to come over to our side without much convincing. We'll need to keep a close eye on him. I've asked Hans and his German friends to buddy up to him when Jeff's done with him. I think he might have been a little more than just a diplomat while in D.C. I'm hoping that's the case, anyway."

Johnny briefly set his cup on the table. "How do you propose we go about getting a message to the Kaachi?"

Mace replied, "David has been going over sensor logs. He thinks he's detected a pattern where about once a week the Mawga send out and receive broadcasts for a fifteen-minute period. If we can get up beside the admiral's ship at that time, we should be able to pass our message through. We're going to tell the Kaachi where and when to open a portal for a more direct conversation later."

"When does this broadcast happen next?"

Mace took another sip. "Tomorrow around two. Whatever message we come up with, we should listen to and critique as many times as we can before sending it. We probably only have one shot at

this."

Jane walked into the dining hall, sitting at the table with Mace and Johnny. "Well, I just talked to Vanessa. She's pregnant. Triplets. It seems she underwent a procedure while at the community center that supposedly increased her chances of a pregnancy. She thinks most of the women of child-bearing age had the same procedure done. If that's true, we could be looking at a serious population explosion in six months."

Tres walked into the room.

Johnny turned. "Congratulations! Triplets! Wow!"

"It wasn't planned. At least not so soon anyway. I think that Mawga drug made us delirious enough that we agreed to whatever procedures they wanted to perform."

Mace added, "Yeah, congrats. You might want to think about moving back to the ground, near one of those centers. We don't really know the facilities of this ship well enough to be doing anything more than putting on Band-aids. You're going to want full care if it can be had."

"Really don't want to go back to those centers, Mace. All those people still walking around with those constant grins on their faces... creeps me out. And I don't know that I trust the Mawga."

Jane said, "You're off the drug. And the Mawga aren't involved in those procedures other than watching, are they? Aren't those all automated?"

"Most are," said Tres. "With the fertility exam, they're actively involved. From what I remember, the eggs are extracted and examined, along with my swimmers. The actual fertilization happens in a lab, and then re-implantation happens from there. I bet we see lots of twins and triplets, and identical, as a single egg is used in the procedure. And don't ask me why I remember this stuff so well. I wasn't in control of what I was doing at the time."

Jane shook her head. "This just gets stranger and stranger. Just when I think I have a grasp of what's actually going on here, something completely new comes to light."

Tres shrugged. "If you were ever to want children, the Mawga would be happy to help I'm sure."

"There was a time when I wanted nothing more, but that ship has sailed on for us now. Not to take anything away from you, but even if the Mawga could work their miracles on me, I'm not sure I would want to do that, given the current situation."

Tres replied, "I'm right there with you. Would not have been my free choice. But it is what it is now. So we'll be looking to make the best of it."

Jane smiled. "And you'll have our full support. If anything, it will just give us more to fight for."

Tres nodded thanks, and returned to the dining hall kitchen.

## ▲ Chapter 7 ▲

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**M**ace opened a comm channel. "Mr. Montak, I have a few questions about the community centers. I've just been informed that one of our people, Vanessa, is pregnant with triplets. Tres says a procedure was performed by your people. What can you tell me about it?"

Bontu replied, "I can tell you whatever you like, Mr. Hardy. This was an undertaking requested by your prior President and a number of other international leaders. It was decided the re-population of your world should begin. Our technicians performed the procedure only on those who had a mate with them."

"Vanessa is expecting triplets. Is that going to be common? And how are all these children to be cared for?"

Bontu smiled. "By their parents as is Human custom. And as to the triplet revelation, if an egg is deemed healthy, it is given multiple fertilizations before going through a division stimulus. If the resulting embryos check out as healthy, they are implanted."

"Wait. Mawga doctors are screening for healthy embryos?"

Bontu nodded. "We believe our methodology to be superior, thereby preventing the passage of damaged genes that may lead to birth defects. This first group of Human offspring should be remarkably healthy as compared to your prior birth record. All Mawga are born in birthing centers now, virtually eliminating many of the causes of disease and any developmental issues. We fully understand that our customs are not Human customs, and for that reason the embryos were implanted rather than traditionally grown. Traditionally as in terms of how the Mawga do it."

Jane frowned. "So once a Mawga embryo is valid, it's not placed back in the womb? "

Bontu smiled. "No, it is placed in a living, pseudo-uterus, where all aspects of its development can be easily monitored. The result is a population of citizens without disease or abnormalities. All Mawga are healthy, whether they be the next Emperor or a private in our military. We all have the same healthy start and therefore an equal ability to achieve our goals. As a consequence, when tested for intelligence, the overwhelming majority of Mawga citizens fall within 10 percent of each other."

Jane shook her head. "Wow. How does being grown externally affect the family unit? I mean, carrying a child to term is a big bonding period for Human females and their children."

"The family unit in Mawga society, as with most species in the Galactic Union, is very loosely defined. In our eyes we are all family. We all treat each other with respect and we all endeavor for the common good, under the leadership of the Emperor."

Johnny asked, "Where do your loyalties fall in that scenario?"

Bontu offered a confused look. "To the Emperor of course."

Johnny raised an eyebrow. "You have any brothers or sisters?"

Bontu nodded. "Many."

Jane added. "And you don't feel any special bond or loyalty to them?"

Bontu shrugged. "Should I? How is a sibling of any more value to society than one who is not? We are all equal at birth, are we not? We may have different stations in life, but in Mawga culture one is of no more importance than another."

Johnny laughed. "So you're basically just clones of each other. Nothing to really make you unique or different. We Humans like to celebrate our differences. Makes us more interesting."

Bontu slowly nodded. "I will admit to enjoying my time here among your people. Perhaps that differentiation you speak of does offer value, even if only for entertainment and curiosity purposes. "

Johnny turned and scratched his head. "Not really sure how to take that one."

Bontu smiled. "Take it as it was intended, Mr. Tretcher. Nothing more than an honest reply."

The comm channel was closed.

Jasper walked into the room. "What'd I miss?"

Johnny replied, "The Mawga have been breeding Humans. Vanessa is pregnant with triplets."

Jasper cringed. "From the Mawga?"

Johnny laughed. "No, you idiot. From Tres. The Mawga made it happen though."

Jasper looked at Tres. "Well, congratulations, young man. Triplets. Nice going."

Johnny began to speak, to which Jane covered his mouth, and said, "We'll be seeing an avalanche of Human births in about six months. Apparently the Mawga were running fertility treatments on the women of child-bearing age who had a mate. Which, in the centers, is apparently most of them."

Liam Hobbs said, "More Humans. I would have to believe that to be a good thing. Guesstimates place us at around a billion people. Quite the cut from what we had."

Mace half frowned. "I have to agree with Jane on this one. Is now the best time to start repopulation? When we aren't in control of our own destinies? We're still dependent on the Mawga for almost everything. I see this as only making us more so. We can't feed ourselves. How are we going to feed two to three times as many of us?"

Liam replied, "The Mawga claim to be turning their focus to food production. Groups in the centers are being educated about agriculture. Farms should be coming online this year and next. Within

three years, we will once again be self supporting."

Johnny laughed. "You sound like the Mawga spokesman. You really have faith they will follow through with that pledge? "

Liam nodded. "I do. And please do not take my statements as being an approval of their methods. I still believe they are responsible for this mess to begin with. That hasn't changed."

"Was starting to get a little worried about you, Liam." Johnny turned to face the others. "OK, everyone, look, what's done is done. The question is, where do we go from here? What's our plan? And how do we put that plan into action?"

Mace stood. "Tomorrow the Mawga will be opening a communications portal. We send a message through and hope the Kaachi are listening. If they are, we move to the designated location and wait for a response. Depending on what that response is, we begin our planning from there."

Hans Mueller walked into the room. "We have a message ready for review. I believe it conveys the ideas that were put forth by everyone. I would have no concern with sending it as it currently reads."

The message to the Kaachi was displayed on a holo-wall in the conference room. After several hours of tweaks, a final version emerged.

*" Kaachi Command, we are sending this message with the hope of arranging a contact with you. We are a Human force that is currently in opposition to the seeming Mawga occupation of our planet. We are interested in establishing a relationship with you in an effort to curtail the Mawga influence that we believe is corrupting our people and threatening our freedom. We will be at the following location in precisely twenty-eight of your major time units from the time this message is sent. We are the force that defeated your admiral in battle and took possession of his flagship. Comms over the normal Kaachi channels will be accepted. In addition, we have rescued one*



*of your crewmen from the wreckage of the battle. His name is Gnaga Klept. He is in good health and will be cared for until such time as he can be repatriated to the Kaachi people. We look forward to a response, and hopefully to the establishment of friendly relations with the Humans of Earth. "*

The following day, the *Rogers* lifted from her location at Organ Cave. After a two hour flight, she pulled alongside the flagship of the Mawga fleet .

A comm was opened. "Mr. Hardy, I cannot say that I have a comfortable feeling whenever I see you approaching in a Kaachi cruiser."

Mace laughed. "My apologies, Mr. Geerok. We felt this was the better of the two ships we have. Has there been any word on our request for more? The Australians are eager to train crews and man ships, should our defensive needs call for it."

Fatso Geerok smiled. "The request has been submitted, Mr. Hardy. We await guidance from Command for direction. I'm certain that is not your reason for a visit today. What else may I help you with?"

Mace replied, "I was wondering about the repair facilities. Have they come online yet? And if so, has any progress been made toward the construction of a new facility for us?"

Fatso slowly shook his head. "As you have been told, the timeline for a delivery of such a facility has been pushed back. Our first priority is the repair of our ships that were damaged in the fight with the Kaachi. Two of those have been designated as new ships for King Stark. I know that news may be frustrating to you, Mr. Hardy, but these things are decided at command level and above. I am merely carrying out orders."

Mace crossed his arms. "I thought we had agreements for all this, Fatso. The repair dock, and the extra ships, those were supposed to be done sooner rather than later. What good is an alliance if we

keep getting pushed to the back of the line?"

The admiral turned up his chin. "Do you want out of this agreement, Mr. Hardy?"

Mace shook his head. "If that time comes, I'll let you know, Admiral."

The admiral nodded. "I thank you for the visit, Mr. Hardy. However, as you know, it is time for our weekly comm to Command. If they pass down any decision of consequence concerning your team, I will let you know."

Mace rubbed the beard on his chin. "We'll hang out here for a few minutes if that's OK."

The admiral signaled to close the comm. "As you wish. "

The display over Mace's arm pad closed.

Gnaga said, "Once the Mawga broadcast has begun, we should send through the message."

Coran Daughtry brought a display up on the main wall. "We have portal detection. And comms being sent and received."

Mace nodded. "Send the message, Mr. Daughtry."

"Message away... and we have a hail from the admiral."

Mace smiled. "Pass the comm through, but don't connect us yet. I want to see the admiral's face."

An image appeared on the main wall.

Johnny laughed. "He does not look happy."

Mace said, "Connect us, Mr. Daughtry."

An image of Mace Hardy showed in the lower left corner of the display. "Admiral? You have word?"

Fatso Geerok shook his head. "What was the meaning of that broadcast, Mr. Hardy? Was that intended for the Kaachi?"

Mace offered his best concerned look. "The Kaachi? Have they come back?"

The admiral waved a hand. "No they haven't, but your ship just broadcast a message over their channels. A message that passed through the wormhole portal and was possibly received by Kaachi spy ships near the rift."

"One moment, Admiral."

The comm link was frozen. "We'll give him a minute to stew."

Johnny said, "He looks nervous. Kinda like Jasper getting caught in a crosswalk."

Jasper replied, "Why did the ape-man cross the road?"

Mace held up a hand. "Fatso, I must apologize. My crew was messing with the comm system. It seems a message came through to us. They were attempting to accept it when the wrong button was pressed."

The admiral replied, "We did not intercept any messages coming to you. "

Mace was silent for several seconds. "Again, my apologies, Admiral. I think that was all part of the confusion. The comm console detected your outgoing message. The crewman at that station is still learning the Kaachi instruments. The message that was sent was a rebroadcast of the Kaachi admiral's surrender. If you'd like, we can send it again over your channels."

The Mawga admiral scowled. "I've seen that broadcast enough. Please see to it that your crews know what they are doing before pressing unknown buttons, Mr. Hardy. We cannot afford mishaps this far from the Empire. We don't have the medical facilities to deal with the casualties that result from poorly managed crews."

Mace slowly bowed his head. "Understood, Admiral. I'll see to it personally that it doesn't happen again."

The comm was closed. The order was given to return to the hovering position above the cave.

Coran Daughtry placed his hand on Mace's shoulder as he sat in the captain's chair on the bridge. "I've talked with our mates back home. They've been screening volunteers and have solid candidates for another six crews. The crew of the *Lousy* has begun a training course and expects to have them ready for ships within a month or two."

"Unless the Kaachi come through with those ships, I don't see us having hardware for them to play with anytime soon. I'm actually surprised the Mawga are allowing the continued use of their simulators. If we get Kaachi ships, that support will get pulled. How are we set for supplies, Mr. Daughtry?"

Coran pushed an image up to the holo-wall. "Our storage rooms are full. All systems are fully functional. According to specs provided by Gnaga, with our light crew and normal consumption, we could go five months without resupply. For the Kaachi, most deployments only last two to three months.

"If planned for, those supplies can be pushed out significantly. He said the admiral and the other Kaachi ships have a four year journey back to the rift. They'll receive one supply drop through a wormhole during that run, but they will be in hardship the whole way. I can't imagine being forced to sleep for most of four years."

Mace asked, "Sleep?"

Coran nodded. "The troops and most of the crew, except nav and the maintenance workers, get a heavy dose of sleeping aid for the ride back. Temperatures in the quarters are lowered, effectively slowing their metabolic rates for most of the journey. It's about as close as the Kaachi have come to developing stasis."

"Doesn't sound like a pleasant experience."

Coran shrugged. "Actually, he says most don't remember much. It's just like you fall asleep and wake up, only older."

Mace looked around at the bridge. "Still. Can you imagine being trapped on this ship for four years? I'd have to be drugged. Let's hope it's not something we ever have to do."

Johnny said, "And who's maintaining the people? They have to be cared for in that state."

"We'll have to quiz Gnaga on that."

With thoughts of such a long journey firmly implanted in his head, Mace ordered all but a skeleton crew back down to the cave. All were told to enjoy the sunshine, the outdoors, and their freedom, as one day they might no longer be available. Vanessa and Tres were the first onto the shuttle.

## ▲ Chapter 8 ▼

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**M**oments before departure for the proposed meeting with the Kaachi, a comm came in from Fatso Geerok. "Mr. Hardy, we are conducting war games with the Stark crews. I would like your two teams to join us."

Mace winced. "Sorry, Admiral. We already have an exercise planned. And the *Lousy* is training another crew."

The admiral pulled back. "Mr. Hardy, this is extremely important to the defense of your planet. Your previously scheduled tasks must wait."

Mace shrugged. "Sorry, Admiral. We're tied up. I tell you what. I'll send the *Lousy*. They can report back anything of importance. After all, there's no immediate threat to Earth, is there?"

The admiral sighed. "You put me in a difficult position, Mr. Hardy. I pleaded on your behalf to the King. He is quite determined you know. He had no interest in you or your crews being present. He distrusts you, just as I know you do him. I thought this would be an opportunity for us all to work together for the defense of your world."

Mace shook his head. "Should have filled us in on that sooner, Admiral. Unfortunately, we've been planning this for some time, and I wouldn't feel comfortable putting it off. If you can wait a day or two, we can see about joining in at that time."

The admiral scowled. "You Humans are a stubborn lot, Mr. Hardy. You would benefit from all falling under a single ruler where decisions can be made and then followed."

"We'll keep our freedom if it's all the same to you, Admiral. I'll send the *Lousy* your way."

Johnny offered his own scowl as the comm closed. "That's the first time I've seen him be pushy like that. Usually it's all about cooperation. "

"I think he's still miffed we sent out that transmission. If so, too bad for him. Mr. Hobbs, take us to the rendezvous point along the path we decided upon. And once we're on our way, I'd like to use that fifth reactor. Might help to shake off anybody the admiral designates to follow us."

Liam smiled. "Tapping into the reactor now, sir. Should have additional boost in about three minutes."

"Why so slow on the ramp-up?"

Liam replied, "Just being cautious, sir. Mr. Klept just finished a new round of integration that should allow full use. We were only claiming 80 percent before."

Jane opened a comm. "Monitors are all in the green. Gnaga is here with me. And we've been talking. Apparently, there are upgrades that can be done to increase the power of the reactors, and the engines, and the weapons. All three are held at the level they are due to Galactic Union rules. He suspects the founders are all exploiting these enhancements, although to say so is punishable by death. I convinced him that he was a prisoner of the Earth Alliance, and that anything he said wouldn't leave this ship."

Jasper cut in. "I like the sound of more power. When can we have it?"

Jane laughed. "Sorry, Mr. Collins. We'll have to do some research first. I've asked Jeff and David to join us in any future discussions. I think Jeff's getting a good understanding of how the reactors work. And, Mace, I have some bad news. It looks like Nancy has taken a shine to Jeff."

Mace shook his head. "For future reference, how about saving those revelations for private discussion. Not a topic for half the crew to listen in on. Besides, wouldn't have worked anyway. Bartenders

don't mix well with each other. And if either of them are worried about my feelings, they needn't be. I don't have any investment in that relationship other than being friendly."

Jane replied, "Sorry, didn't realize you had the comm open to more than you, Johnny, and Jasper."

Liam said, "We've left the atmosphere. And we have a follower. Fifth reactor will be fully online any moment. "

Johnny turned from the sensor station. "I have a suggestion. How about we cut close to the Moon and use it as a slingshot. We could claim the extra speed was due to its gravity. If we leave them in the dust without explanation, Fatso will want to know why."

Mace turned toward the nav station. "Mr. Hobbs. Can you work that into our waypoints?"

"Setting them now. We should be on the opposite side from the Mawga ship when we get there. We could claim we took the ship down to a hundred meters or so to get maximum gravitational effect."

Mace nodded. "Sounds like a plan."

The bridge was mostly quiet as they approached the Moon. An image was pushed up to the main wall holo-display. Liam Hobbs fine-tuned his waypoints as they closed.

Johnny leaned back in his chair, looking toward the display wall. "Wow, that is a stunning view. And ominous."

Liam replied, "Well be taking her in close. Half a kilometer. We're at full-rated speed already. Having to ease back on the throttle until we're out of visual. Coming up in twenty-two seconds."

Johnny looked back at his console. "We're getting a hail from that other ship."

"Ignore it." Mace said.

As the *Rogers* closed, the gravitational pull of the moon offered acceleration beyond the normal limits. As the former Kaachi cruiser



slipped out of sight, Liam Hobbs applied the full energy of the five reactors to the drive system.

Liam said, "Reaching minimum altitude in three... two... one."

The unreal image slipped by, covering the entire holo-wall for a fraction of a second. The ship rolled over, its underside facing away from the lunar surface.

Jane came over the comm. "All reactors remain green."

Johnny looked over at Mace. "I know that image and the instruments say otherwise, but it doesn't feel like we're even moving."  
"

"Thank those inertial dampeners. Which I still don't understand. How is it the Moon's gravity has effect on the hull while we feel nothing?"

Jeff walked onto the bridge. "There are two dampening fields. One's inside the hull, the other outside. Liam can correct me if I'm wrong, but the outer field is probably switched off right now."

Liam nodded. "I have the extra energy from the reactors going to the drives. We're approaching 18 percent over rated speed. Should come out of this at around twenty-five."

Jeff sat in an open bridge chair, spinning it around to face the Brit. "Mr. Hobbs, you did take into consideration that the dampening field is a major part of our shielding when traveling at speed, did you not?"

Liam was silent for several seconds. "Well, no, sir I didn't. Re-engaging external dampener."

Johnny asked, "For future reference, what was the danger?"

Jeff replied, "The external dampener offers a reduced impact effect should we collide with any space debris. We're traveling at a quarter light speed. This hull is solid, but not solid enough to overcome the physics of, let's say, the impact from something the size

of a marble. A strike of that size at this speed would be catastrophic."

As the *Rogers* emerged from the slingshot maneuver, it was traveling at more than 32 percent the speed of light.

Liam adjusted the nav waypoints. "We have another slingshot coming up. This one around Mars in approximately eighteen minutes. With that we should be out of Mawga sensor range."

Mace nodded. "Thank you, Mr. Hobbs. Keep us informed."

Johnny walked over and sat in a chair next to Mace. Seconds later, his Dachshund came trotting onto the bridge.

Johnny reached down, scratching the dog's head. "I'd like to present you with this award this morning, Der Der. You and Miss Molly are the first canines in outer space. I'm of course excluding the ruskies with their low-Earth orbit dogs. Those weren't real space dogs at all. So tell me, how does that feel? "

The Dachshund took a step back and barked.

Mace laughed. "I think that was an acceptance. He seems to have adjusted well to the crew. One of the two most popular dogs on the ship."

Jasper walked over. "Two dogs and an ape. This ship is full of animals. Might as well be an ark."

The banter continued until Mars filled the holo-wall display.

Jasper shook his head. "Between seeing this and the Earth, never knew planets were so beautiful. I could stare at that all day."

Johnny nodded as he stood to return to his station. "Almost makes you want to keep going, doesn't it. Just go out and explore other worlds. Discover new civilizations."

Mace shook his head. "More likely to discover more hostiles. From the sound of it, the members of the Galactic Union are all out to expand. The Mawga have gone out of their way to look like they're helping us, but they might be the ones who caused our situation in the

first place."

Liam said, "We're entering the gravitational field of Mars. Only going down to five kilometers this time. Not certain how the atmosphere will affect us."

Gnaga Klept walked onto the bridge. "The inertial dampening field should provide adequate protection at that altitude."

Liam glanced back. "What if we hit a dust storm? Mars can kick up the dust from what I understand. And traveling at the speeds we are, I would think that might cause problems."

Jasper said, "Well, why take us so low then?"

Liam replied, "We need that to gain the speed advantage we want. Not that we can't get away from the Mawga ship anyway, but it would take us that much longer."

Gnaga said, "The dampening and surface armor are designed to handle upper atmospheric conditions at full speed."

Liam smiled. "Who said anything about doing full speed? This is a second slingshot maneuver. We're already over the rated speed of this ship. "

As the *Rogers* approached the atmosphere of the red planet, the cruiser began to shake.

Johnny asked, "Is it supposed to do that?"

Gnaga showed concern. "I don't believe so. The external dampening field is on?"

Liam replied, "And showing green. We're really picking up speed now."

The shaking turned to rumbles, followed by extreme buffeting.

Gnaga grabbed an arm of Mace's chair to steady himself. "I don't understand. I've been on a ship just like this at full speed and all was smooth and calm."

Johnny looked over his displays. "Hull temperature is showing in the yellow band."

In a fraction of a second the red planet slipped by. The ride smoothed out.

Gnaga asked, "How is this possible? I don't understand. And you say we are at full speed?"

Liam replied, "We're at 37 percent light speed now."

Gnaga's beady eyes grew wide. "What?"

Liam repeated, "I said 37 percent SOL... and climbing."

Gnaga hurried across the floor to the nav station. "Slow us down immediately! The dampeners are not designed for these speeds!"

Liam shook his head. "We slow down and the Mawga ship will follow us."

Johnny said, "Hull temp is falling."

Mace asked, "If the external dampener was on, how is it the gravity was affecting us?"

Gnaga took a deep breath. "The dampening field on this vessel is only designed to shield at rated speed or less. We are probably lucky to be alive right now."

Mace turned to Johnny. "Hull temp still falling?"

"Another twenty-five degrees. We're almost in the green. "

"Liam, how long at this speed before we're out of Mawga sensor range?"

Liam looked over his shoulder. "We should be passing that point now."

Mace sighed. "OK. We got our teeth rattled and we're in danger now, but we need that distance. Mr. Hobbs, keep us at this speed for another twenty minutes. If we can't lose that Mawga ship, we might

as well turn around and go home. And, Jeff, where would you place our chances of hitting that marble-sized object like you spoke of?"

Jeff shrugged. "Couldn't say for certain. Space is a big place. We'll be passing the asteroid belt on our way to Jupiter. Liam, how long before we close on the belt?"

"Fifty-two minutes. We'll be angling toward Jupiter. That will take another two hours. Rendezvous point is just on the other side. Current ETA is three hours, four minutes. That will lengthen if we drop our speed."

Mace looked down at his arm pad. "We have six and a half hours to reach that location. That should give us plenty of time to spare."

Jane came onto the bridge with the three Germans.

Mace turned. "Jasper, Johnny, Liam... shift change."

Jane said, "Tres and Vanessa are manning the reactors. They've been working flawlessly. I suppose we should thank Jeff and Gnaga for that."

Mace stood and gestured to Coran. "Mr. Daughtry, the ship is yours for a while."

Coran replied, "I see. You only pilot during the fun parts?"

Mace chuckled. "I'd say you'll have to make your own fun, but that doesn't leave me with a good feeling, so just keep us going to where we're going."

Coran saluted. "Aye-aye, sir."

Johnny slapped Mace on the back. "Let's get some vittles, Cap'n. "

Mace replied as they walked. "Vittles. Maybe that's what we should start calling the nutrient bars, since that's all we'll be eating while we're out here."

They entered the dining hall, grabbed a handful of the alien food sticks, stocked up on beverages, and sat at a table.

Johnny took a generous sip from his plastic cup, setting it back on the metal table. With a magnetic bottom, the cup snapped into place.

Jasper said, "You do realize that you're drinking recycled pee water, right?"

Johnny sighed. "I know what I'm drinking. I went through the same training as you. Or is that something your feeble old brain has already forgotten?"

"My memory is just fine," Jasper snapped back. "If anything, it's better than ever."

Johnny raised his cup and then set it down. "Wait, you aren't wearing the exosuit. When did that happen?"

Jasper grinned. "I had it off about a week ago. Got up to use the restroom one night and found I was walking normally. I've only been wearing it half-days since then. Inflammation from the arthritis is gone and my joints and muscles feel better than they have in years."

"That's fantastic." Johnny smiled. "Welcome back to the real world, old man."

"Eh. Still need it. I can feel my joints starting to swell by the end of the day."

Johnny took another sip, followed by a bite of a nutrient bar. "Well congrats. All I can say is a half a Jasper is better than a full Jasper."

"Shut your monkey puke hole, ape-man."

Johnny chuckled as he took another bite.

Jane looked at Mace. "With the latest love-life developments, looks like I have to get started on finding you a new woman when we get back. "

Mace held up a hand. "Don't hurry yourself. My brain is so strained right now, don't know if I could handle a relationship. Besides, where am I gonna find the time?"

Jane slowly shook her head. "You make time."

She looked up to smile at Johnny. "You'll find it's worth your effort."

Liam took a deep breath. "Should be falling back to normal speed any second."

a reverberation rattled the *Rogers* as it slowed.

Liam looked around before slamming his hand hard on the table, startling the others. "Safe at last!"

Jasper slowly shook his head. "You Brits are warped."

Johnny laughed. "Skipped a beat, did you?"

Jasper replied, "I did. What's it to you? You even have a heart in there?"

Johnny leaned forward. "I do. And it's big and it's beating."

Jasper waved his hand as he took a bite from a nutrient bar. "Meh."

Hans Mueller came over the comm. "Just wanted to pass on that we're back to normal speed. Adjusted ETA is now four hours, forty-seven minutes. Should give us just over an hour of wait before the comm from the Kaachi is expected."

Johnny turned to face Gnaga. "Hear that? Another six hours and you might be talking to your people."

"I am thankful for the opportunity, Mr. Hardy. Am I to be allowed to speak to them directly?"

"I think this first comm you should remain silent. Other than acknowledging that you are alive, I think it best we do the talking."

"I find that to be fair."

Jane asked, "How are the designs for updates coming?"

Gnaga sat forward. "Mr. Moskowitz is a pleasure to work with. At times he is explaining the functionality of the systems to me instead of I to him. He has an excellent teaching manner to him. His responses to my inquiries would make for an excellent simulated instructor."

Johnny said, "Wait? You're asking him questions?"

Jane laughed. "From what I saw, they were kind of feeding off each other. If anything, they make a good team."

Mace asked, "What's David been up to?"

Jeff replied, "The Kaachi have a nav training simulator. He's been in it non-stop since just before we left. I would guess given his astronomy background, he's in heaven."

After several hours of rest, the captain and his crew returned to the bridge. The remainder of the ride out to the far side of Jupiter was uneventful.



## ▲ Chapter 9 ▼

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Johnny shifted in his chair. "Five minutes overdue now."

Jane replied, "Patience. Unless you have somewhere better to be?"

Johnny returned a fake scowl.

Hans Mueller held up a hand. "I'm detecting an interference with the comms. We have a signal!"

Mace nodded. "Patch them through."

A Kaachi voice could be heard coming from the opened comm channel.

Mace said, "Mr. Mueller? Can we enable a translation of that?"

"One moment please. These controls are different than on the Mawga ships."

Johnny said, "Just drag the flashing yellow dot over to the green box and drop it."

Hans nodded. "Thank you."

"...are pleased that you would consider diplomatic relations with the Kaachi."

Mace replied, "I must apologize. We missed the first few seconds of your broadcast. I am Mace Hardy. The captain of the Earth Alliance ship, the *Rogers* . With whom are we speaking?"

An image of an older, highly-decorated Kaachi military man appeared on the holo-wall. "I am Daavis Houka, First Director of the Kaachi Diplomatic Corps. Mr. Hardy, we found your invitation to be intriguing. As you know, given the outcome of the prior skirmish, we

have no claim to your system. This invitation is most unexpected."

Mace nodded. "Well, as you know, the Mawga have a fleet in our system. They have been a help to us since after the electromagnetic storms hit, but at a price. We have another Human force that has taken up a close alliance with them. We find that unsettling and would be interested in adding some balance to the current situation."

Daavis raised his eyebrows. "I see. And this other force of Humans. Have they given them ships? Weapons?"

Mace nodded. "They have. Let me cut to the chase here, Mr. Houka. I would like your opinion on the whole Earth situation. I realize it may come with some bias, but I'd like it just the same. If you would be willing to indulge us with some of your knowledge of the Mawga, it would go a long way toward establishing a base of trust between us."

Daavis returned an interested grin. His beady eyes glistened with excitement.

Mace asked, "Let's start with the electromagnetic storms. What do you know of them? Where did they come from? And before you answer, just let me say, if they originated from the Kaachi, we are willing to put that fact aside for the moment."

Daavis leaned forward, placing his chin on his small, balled-up fists. "The storms, as you call them, originated from four points in deep space. It was not the Kaachi, but we did have a scout ship nearby. You mentioned your awareness of the dark matter discovery being a trigger for interaction with your species?"

"We believe the Mawga to have hastened that development through the use of planted information. Two of your scientists had seemingly spectacular breakthroughs. We believe the knowledge given... told both what to look for and how to find it."

Mace stroked his beard. "We're aware of those rumors."

Daavis said, "And are you aware of the fact that the Mawga desperately wanted control of your planet for your people? You are more than twice the size of the next biggest species in the known galaxy. You have shown yourselves to be intelligent, and adaptable. The Mawga intent from the beginning has been to enlist you to fight in their armies and fleets. Had the founders known of your planet, you would likely be under their control instead."

Mace replied, "Well, that's why we are here. The Mawga are getting what they want. Our newly self-declared king, Malcolm Stark, has allied with the Mawga and declared that we Humans will be going off into space to conquer other empires."

"And I believe their first target to be yours, Director. And one thing I can say about Stark, it appears he will stop at nothing to get what he wants. If you thought we violated customs and skirted the rules in our little skirmish, you will be shocked when Stark attacks."

Daavis returned a nervous look. "The Mawga have declared war on us then?"

Mace sat back in his chair. "From what the Mawga told me, they were already at war with the Kaachi."

The Kaachi director slowly shook his head. "It is set then. War was not official. Prior to now, it had only been a handful of minor battles. Most of which the Kaachi had won."

Mace crossed his arms. "Well, you better get ready for some losses, Director. Stark and his crews will bring new meaning to the word *vicious*. Rumor has it he's already been putting those who disagree with him to death. Probably why so many are falling in line behind him so quickly. He has almost monopolized all the people of our planet."

Daavis asked, "Then what is it you bring to the table, Mr. Hardy? It sounds as though Earth is already lost."

Mace sat forward. "Not yet. We have the Australians with us. That's about eleven million Humans. Of those, only a third would be

able to fight. However, you give us the ships and weapons we need and we can keep Stark at bay. And with that force, we might be able to bring some, if not most, of the other Humans back to our side."

Daavis rubbed his chin. "And why should I trust you, Mr. Hardy? If we arm you, what's to keep you from attacking us?"

"Among your people, I'm sure you have some that are hotheads, others that are more reasonable. We are the reasonable Humans. We don't wish to attack anyone. We just want our freedom. We want the freedom to govern ourselves."

An admiral stepped up behind the Kaachi diplomat. "Mr. Hardy. My name is Admiral Alfoss Bole. I am the commander of the Kaachi fleet in the Dimean sector. What exactly are you asking of us?"

Mace said, "I need ships. I can have a hundred or more crews fully trained in three months. Give me the ships for them to crew and I can knock Malcolm Stark from his position of power and bring the Mawga to heel. As I've said, Mr. Bole, my goal is to defend Earth. Firstly, that will be from the Mawga. Secondly, from the other Humans. And you ask, what is it the Kaachi get out of the deal? Well, you get a strong ally and trade partner, and you take away the warriors the Mawga would use against you."

Mace sat back. "And ... we want repair docks. We need to be able to make repairs as necessary. We need enough docks to support the number of ships you give us."

Daavis took the conversation back. "Mr. Hardy, should we provide these ships and weapons to you, you do realize they would have a price attached to them. Perhaps some future goods or service, something of equivalent value?"

"We will make good on any debts we incur, Mr. Houka. Just let us know what you believe to be fair and we'll go from there. And, gentlemen, the sooner we act on this, the better chance we have of controlling Stark. He already has four ships to our two, and the Mawga seem eager to get him more."

Alfoss Bole took center camera. "Mr. Hardy, you mentioned a hundred crews. With that many being trained, would your king not see that as a threat? What's to stop him from attacking you to put an end to his competition?"

"I believe we have an advantage with our crews at the moment. We've been in a fight. And we know the vulnerabilities of the Mawga ships. We're already taking steps to better protect ourselves. I believe we have the upper hand at this time. "

Bole pursed his thin lips. "And if I was to tell you the Mawga just delivered another six ships into his possession?"

Mace took a deep breath. "Then I would say the time to act is now."

Bole leaned in. "Instead of us sending ships to you, would you be willing to send your crews to us? We have the facilities to house, feed and train them. Imagine sending through a hundred ships and their crews all at once, without the threat of an attack by your king."

Mace thought for a moment. "That's an interesting concept, Admiral. That hadn't crossed our minds. I suppose that would allow us the element of surprise. If we train back on Earth, we are vulnerable to Stark and his spies. I'll have to run that by my people."

Daavis took back the camera. "Mr. Hardy, there was mention of a rescue of one of our crew. May we see him?"

Mace turned. "Bring in Mr. Klept."

Seconds later, the Kaachi crewman stood beside Mace. "Mr. Bole, this is Gnaga Klept. He was found in one of the ship remnants your people left behind. He's in good health and we'd like to send him home the first chance we get. He has been of great help to us, and is a major reason we are having this conversation. I had asked him to not speak during this initial conversation, but I see no harm in that now."

Gnaga bowed his head. "Director, Admiral, it is good to see a familiar looking face. The Humans have treated me well. I realize it is

not my place for an opinion, but I think an alliance with these Humans would be wise. They appear to be fair-minded and capable."

The admiral replied, "Duly noted, Mr. Klept. I must apologize for having left you behind. The loss of our flagship to Mr. Hardy was a surprise to us all. As was the outcome of that battle."

Mace said, "Admiral, I'm certain you would like some time to discuss things with your people, as I would with mine. Perhaps we meet back here in two hours to continue this conversation?"

The admiral nodded. "Very well, Mr. Hardy. Two hours from now. "

The comm closed, followed by the portal. Mace let out a breath.

Johnny said, "I'm floored by how you handled all that. Calm and cool. I don't think I would have come across that way. You might have only been a sergeant in the Army, but sitting in that chair now is right where you should be."

Mace shook his head. "Don't let the smooth talk fool you. My guts are in knots. I know what it is we want. The rest of this I'm just winging."

Johnny laughed. "Well, keep flapping is all I can say."

Jane asked, "What are your thoughts on sending crews to them for training?"

Mace turned to face her. "On one hand it would certainly solve our problem of Stark knowing what we're planning. I have to believe his spies would find out that people have left, but he wouldn't know to where or for what reason. If we train them here, he will know. Mr. Daughtry, what do you think of the idea of sending your countrymen through a wormhole? It will be a lot to ask of them, but I believe it to be our best option."

Coran nodded. "I think they could be convinced. I would say 90 percent of our military came through this event. From that pool alone, we should have no problem fielding our hundred crews."

The discussion continued for the allotted two hours. A comm portal opened and an image stream appeared on the holo-wall.

Mace said, "Director, Admiral, what decisions were made on your end?"

Bole replied, "We believe the alliance with you to be of benefit to the Kaachi. Therefore, we will provide weapons and ships, the details of which will be worked out over the coming days. What is the decision on your end?"

Mace smiled. "I think we're both going to benefit from this, Admiral. We will make every effort to assemble a hundred crews for training. We believe your option of training them there to better suit our needs. That begs the question, how do we transfer these crews to you? "

Bole clasped his hands together. "We have already discussed this, Mr. Hardy. We will provide a transport at the time of your choosing. This will be a ship capable of moving twelve thousand troops at once."

Mace nodded. "That should cover it. When could you have this transport ready? I'd like to start rounding up crews today if possible."

Bole held up a hand. "Before we go further, please understand the expense we must go through to provide this ship, Mr. Hardy. Opening a portal, even to pass through a single ship, costs us extremely valuable resources. The ship will be delivered to you there and will not be picked up again until it is full."

"Understood. Can you have a transport here in three days' time?"

The admiral nodded. "I will make that happen, Mr. Hardy. A representative of Mr. Houka's will be on hand when the transport is delivered, for the formal signing of an alliance."

Mace stood. "Admiral, I realize the level of trust we are both bestowing on each other with this agreement. I assure you I will do

my best to see that it is honored."

The admiral smiled. "As will I, Mr. Hardy. I look forward to the expansion of an alliance with the Human species."

The comm was closed, and with it, the portal. The six-hour ride back to Earth was filled with discussion and excitement. A Human fleet was forming. A fleet to counter the will of Malcolm Stark.



## ▲ Chapter 10 ▲

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**M**ace turned to Coran Daughtry. "Coran, I'm already hating myself for doing this, but I believe it to be our best option. I'm promoting you to admiral, and I want you to be in charge of the recruitment and training of your Australian brothers and sisters. I think we'll get better cooperation if they feel they are reporting to one of their own."

Coran crossed his arms. "I don't see where I really have a choice, Mr. Hardy. We're about to ask men to travel through a wormhole to who knows where. That word coming from me will be much better received than if it came from an American."

Mace nodded. "That's what I'm counting on. I think you have the best shot at pulling this off. I hate to lose you as my second, but I can't see a hundred Australian crews passing much loyalty on to me, at least not at first. And we need full cooperation from everyone."

The *Rogers* came to a stop a kilometer above Sydney. Shuttles made their way to the surface and back as volunteers joined the ranks of the Earth Alliance. They were told of a special mission to save mankind from enslavement, a mission to defend the Earth from invaders. No mention of the Kaachi, or of an alliance with them was made. On the third day, the first two thousand of the planned ten thousand volunteers were shuttled up to the *Rogers* .

A six hour ride, once again losing a Mawga tail, had the volunteers aboard a Kaachi transport. Five additional trips over the week that followed saw the ten-thousand-strong Human force aboard the transport. A portal was opened and the ship began to pass through. The crew of the *Rogers* anxiously watched on their displays and monitors.

Johnny said, "Sure hope we're doing the right thing here."

Mace replied, "We'll know in about six weeks. I had doubts we would pull this off given the stance the two Australian leaders were taking, demanding to know all the details of the mission."

Johnny said, "I think we did the exact right thing. Both could easily be feeding information to Stark."

Mace nodded. "That's the impression they left me with as well. I still have to wonder what made so many decide to take up with him."

Liam said, "While on the ground, I got wind of one of his speeches. He's very convincing. He talks of Human pride, of how we could be the dominant species in the galaxy, how it's time for man to spread to the stars and push our values. He knows how to get a crowd worked up, that's for sure. After what our civilization has just gone through, he makes you once again proud to be Human."

Jeff stood with his hands clasped behind his back. "If you study history, you'll find that the leaders who could motivate their people were the ones who established great empires. A handful of the pharaohs, Alexander the Great, Roman emperors—even Hitler, for all his evils, was an impressive motivator. I also think that's what we're seeing in Stark. His words have passion and determination. He's making things happen."

Mace frowned. "Well, let's hope we've set enough in motion to bring him down. He's a dictator, and I have no desire to answer to such."

The transport disappeared as the wormhole closed. The *Rogers* was soon at a hover back above the cave.

A comm came in from Malcolm Stark. His face remained obscured on the display. "Mr. Hardy, it would seem that you've convinced a few thousand Australian citizens to take up sides with you."

Mace shrugged. "What's it to you?"

Stark replied, "What it is to me, and to the Australian

leadership, is that they are returned. There has been a change in allegiance, Mr. Hardy. One that I'm certain you will find troubling."

Mace gestured toward the screen. "Spit it out, Stark. I don't have all day. "

Malcolm Stark moved into a shadow where only his mouth was dimly visible. Bright white teeth gleamed in the darkness that surrounded his silhouette.

"Mr. Hardy, it seems the Australians have decided to move over to the Stark team."

Mace sat forward. "They what?"

Stark grinned. "Yes, a vote was taken. The Australians, including the crew of the *Lousy* , are now members of my military."

Johnny clenched a fist. "I knew we should have kept that ship close by."

Stark continued: "It is unfortunate that you did not participate in the war games over the past week or two. I believe you would have seen the light, joining our organization as one united force. With the addition of the *Lousy* , our fleet has grown to eleven. And with news from the Mawga this morning, I was easily able to convince the Australians that joining with us was the right thing to do."

Mace waved his fingers in a give it to me gesture. "What's the news, Stark."

The silhouette again went completely black. "Ah. I would have thought you already knew. You really must get to work on an information network, Mr. Hardy. It's a necessity that you'll find you can't live without.

"The Mawga have not only promised more ships, but this morning they delivered. Another twenty cruisers will be under my command by this afternoon. That makes a thirty-one ship fleet, Mr. Hardy. With the addition of your ship, that would be thirty-two."

Mace took a deep breath, letting it out slowly. "Good for you, Stark. I hope you're satisfied with them. If it's all the same though, I'll hold on to the *Rogers* and my crew. I think we're happy just where we are."

The silhouette leaned forward. It is only a matter of time, Mr. Hardy. Your joining with us is inevitable. One ship cannot possibly stand alone. "

Mace crossed his arms. "We still have the support of the *Mawga* as well. We have a signed alliance with them, Stark. It puts us on equal footing with you."

Malcolm Stark held up a silhouetted finger. "I believe that over the coming weeks you'll find that standing with them has become ever more slippery. They have chosen sides. Perhaps it's time for you to do the same."

Jasper Collins stepped into the camera. "We aren't joining up with any coward who won't even show his face. Your followers will see through your schemes soon enough. You're nothing more than a puppet to those little rat-faced aliens."

Johnny put his arm around Jasper's shoulder, escorting him out of the camera image.

Stark laughed. "I take it that's one of your senior staffers? Maybe your chief advisor? Anyway, my identity remains hidden for my own reasons. There are those who would want me dead, and they would use whatever leverage they could to make that happen. With my identity concealed, those who know me are kept from danger. Besides, who doesn't love a little mystery?"

Mace replied, "If you're worried about us, don't be. Not the way we roll."

The silhouette of Malcolm Stark again leaned forward. "I know all about how you roll, Sergeant. I have several of your former army-mates who have given me all I need to know about you. I have nothing to fear from a failed soldier, even if you were special ops."

Your decision making failed you then, as it will fail you now."

The image of Malcolm Stark went black as the back-lighting was turned off. "Take your time with your decision, Mr. Hardy. There's no rush."

The comm channel closed.

Johnny looked at Jasper. "What's wrong with you, old man?"

Jasper snorted. "You idiot, it's called psychology. I was trying to get him to show himself. The way he holds himself tells me he ain't gonna be rattled by somebody spouting off to him. He didn't answer in a hurry, which tells us the type of person we're dealing with.

"Frankly, that tells me he's nuts. That's the type of person who will do whatever he wants, whenever he wants. The loyalty of the people following him is mostly based on their fear of what he might do."

Jeff Moskowitz chimed in. "Mr. Collins is right. This is not someone we can negotiate with. He has his agenda and he'll stick to it. Our time as free citizens is limited. He knows it. And he knows we know it."

Jane said, "So what do we do with ourselves now? We can't leave the ship or we risk losing it. We're fully stocked on food, but I have to question whether what we have is enough. What happens when the Mawga decide it's time to cut us off?"

Liam replied, "Montak and the admiral both said we have a binding, ironclad agreement. If they violate that agreement, we could take it up with the Galactic Union."

Mace returned a sarcastic smile. "Who here thinks they submitted that agreement to the Union like they said? They have the original, we have a copy. All they have to do is say it was forged. I think what we have to do is to stay on the move. Can someone bring Gnaga in here?"

Gnaga Klept was escorted onto the bridge. "You asked for me?"

Mace nodded. "We have three more reactors sitting in the docking bay. What are the chances we can get those connected to our power grid?"

Gnaga thought for a moment. "We only lack the conduits to make that happen. We could salvage them from other parts of the ship, but that would be at the cost of other systems."

Mace pointed up. "What about those other ship parts left over from the battle?"

Gnaga shook his head. "I fear you may have removed the ones that would have been useful to us when you destroyed the ship remnants. "

Johnny said, "We didn't destroy them all. Only the ones where we salvaged the reactors. Could be the parts we need are up there waiting for us to collect."

Mace turned. "Mr. Hobbs. We have the locations of those remnants in the nav computer, do we not?"

Liam replied, "We do. Would you like waypoints to those locations activated?"

Mace nodded. "Take us away, Mr. Hobbs. And, Mr. Klept, go with Johnny. Get yourself fitted with an exosuit. You'll be assisting us on this parts run."

Johnny walked with Gnaga as the *Rogers* lifted up through the atmosphere. "So, why didn't you go back to your people on the transport?"

Gnaga replied, "I was ordered to stay, to facilitate the relationship and to assist you where I could. And I have to say, I am both excited and terrified about the prospect of a cruiser running with eight reactors. It is something that has only been possible in my dreams. The Galactic Union would have us dead if they knew we had connected a fifth. That marker has already been passed. Adding three more would not make us more dead than we already are."

Johnny laughed. "Those rules you are all forced to live by, they're ridiculous. You all answer to dictators, nothing more."

Gnaga sighed. "It is a fate we were born to, Mr. Tretcher. We have neither the power nor the means to change our circumstances. The founders have spies within all our empires. We cannot group together lest we be found out and crushed. Should we attempt to build up our fleets, again the spies within our own ranks would see to it that we were dealt with swiftly. Our choice as to how we live is limited, but it is still a choice."

Johnny asked, "When we get our hundred ships back, what's the chance your people will sell us more reactors?"

Gnaga stopped. "They wouldn't dare, and you should not ask. If they knew of the fifth reactor on this ship, they would be obligated to tell the founders. Withholding information about a violation is a serious offense. An offense for which the founders can and would confiscate territory. "

Johnny shook his head as they turned the corner into the room that held the exosuits. "Sounds like you have your heads stuck in a vise."

Gnaga nodded. "Indeed we do."

Two sets of ship remnants were scanned. Neither had the conduits being sought.

Jasper turned from the sensor console. "We have visitors. Two Mawga cruisers, sitting just at sensor range. And they have to know we see them."

"Just Stark having his goons keep an eye on us. I would do the same."

Jasper said, "They're gonna know what we're after."

Mace pulled an image of the next target up on the main display. "Not necessarily. So long as they keep their distance, we can go in and take what we want. When we have it, we destroy the remaining

remnant. They won't know what was taken."

Jasper asked, "And if they come in closer?"

Mace smiled. "If they come closer, we fire off a few warning shots. My guess is they were told to observe and to not interfere. If that's the case, they'll leave us alone. For all they know, we're just out here collecting spare parts. We don't have a repair dock to fall back on, so we're just being prudent."

Johnny came over the comm. "We're suited up and ready here whenever you are."

Liam replied, "Closing on the next target now. Scan says you might have two of your conduits on there."

Mace said, "As soon as they're back aboard I want the work to begin on connecting the next reactor."

Jeff stood from his chair. "I'll go get started on that right now. We can dismantle those reactors as they sit. Should only take a few hours and we can start the reassembly. You do realize we don't have a way to light them off, right? The everspark is still inside reactor five's housing, if it exists at all."

"Any way to cut through the base to get to it? "

Jeff replied, "I don't see how. If we do that, we risk losing it. Could be its leaning against the wall in there. The heat of our torches could damage it, or we could knock it into that containment field. Worse, we could upset the containment field. Sorry, but I think our only safe way to retrieve it is by shutting the reactor down."

Liam said, "We could always ask Montak if we could borrow his."

Mace shook his head. "No, he would want to know what we needed it for. If we manage to get these other reactors set up. And if Gnaga thinks those reactors are in good enough condition to run, we'll shut down number five to retrieve it."



Jasper turned. "If we can pull this off, what will it do for our firepower?"

Jeff replied, "It's not just the weapons, Mr. Collins. We'll be able to travel faster. And our dampening fields will gain power, too."

Jasper asked, "How much faster?"

Jeff typed away on his arm pad, pushing the data to a corner of the main screen. "Reactor five brought with it a 36 percent reduction in recharge time. However, until we test it we can't be sure of what eight reactors total will bring."

Jane asked, "Have we given any thought to adding more armor to our weak points? We could make use of those remnants in that way rather than destroying them. I know we've already taken a few steps in this regard. More armor wouldn't hurt, would it?"

Mace replied, "Jeff, can you work with Jane to evaluate the usefulness of more armor?"

Jeff nodded. "Actually, I think I already have use for it. If we cover the front facing surfaces with extra layers, it might help us when we're pushing our speed. I've also had conversations with Gnaga about the dampening fields. With more reactors, we could divert more power to them, although he wasn't sure it would make much of a difference. The hardware can only do what it can do. "

Jane asked, "This dampening field hardware, is that something we can salvage as well? Maybe wiring in more of it would yield a stronger field?"

Jeff raised an eyebrow. "I suppose we should evaluate all the systems on this ship. I'll pull David away from his star map studies to help."

Johnny came over the comm. "Hey, looks like we have two complete conduits down here. Gnaga thinks we might be able to salvage a third."

Mace replied, "Excellent. Bring them back as soon as possible."

We might be sending you back for more parts."

Johnny patched through a video stream. "These two we have out are good to go. The casing for this third is damaged, but the cables inside might still be in good shape. If so, we have the three we need. What other parts should I look for?"

Mace pulled up an image of a dampener field transducer, passing it to the stream going back. "Crawl around the exterior and tell me if any of these look intact, and if they can be removed. From this diagram, it looks like they are molded into the hull."

Johnny looked over the image. "I could cut a chunk of the hull out with it. Gives us something to look at when I get back."

Mace nodded. "Do that when you have the conduit out. How's Gnaga doing out there?"

Johnny laughed. "I don't think you have to worry about him. He's loving that exosuit. He said the ones the Kaachi use are light-years behind that one."

"Good. Might be something we can trade off some of our impending debt for. If it's that much better than the Kaachi's, I'd think they'd be eager to have one."

The salvage operation ran for five hours. Once back aboard, Johnny made his way to the bridge as Gnaga took the conduits to the reactor room.

## ▲ Chapter 11 ▲

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Johnny walked onto the bridge with Derwood at his heels. "I dropped the dampener sample off with David. He seemed more interested in that than the chunk of armor it was attached to."

Mace replied, "Jeff was coming to the same conclusion. Thicker armor on the nose wouldn't do much for us. A more powerful dampener field... now, that he thinks would be worthwhile. That field offers most of the protection we have from those plasma cannons."

"Without it, they would rip right through that hull like it was made of cardboard. The fix-ups we did to better cover our weak points? Probably useless. On the other hand, if we can ramp up the dampener field, he thinks it would be like gold in a recession."

Johnny laughed. "Gold in a recession? Where'd you get that from?"

Mace shrugged. "David used it in a conversation the other day. For some reason it stuck with me."

Johnny said, "Well, I think that bit of economic theory has gone the way of the dodo. We have the parts we came for. Time for some target practice?"

Mace shook his head. "Not yet. Jeff and the others are evaluating all the parts hanging on that remnant. Some we might be able to use as spares. Others, enhancements. If they determine the remains are useless, we'll open up on it with the cannons."

Johnny grinned. "I can't wait to see what those guns will do with the new reactors charging them."

"We can't use them like that. Stark's ships are still sitting out there. We'll have to wait until we're on our own." Mace stood. "Come

on, let's go down and see how the reactors are coming. "

After a short walk, Mace, Johnny and Derwood entered the reactor room. "Mr. Klept, how we looking?"

Gnaga replied, "The first two reactors have been assembled and adjusted. The conduits we salvaged fit perfectly. Give me another ten minutes and I should have the third reactor ready."

Mace took a deep breath. "I guess it's time we shut down reactor five, then. Anything special I should do first? Or do I just follow the instructions on the control panel?"

Gnaga gestured toward the panel. "Everything can be handled from there. When the reaction ends, you will have fifteen minutes before the containment field can be shut down. Any earlier and you risk the reactor melting through the floor until it reaches the hull."

Johnny asked, "What happens then?"

Gnaga smiled. "We die."

"OK. Good to know."

Mace sat at the control panel for reactor five. "Shutting off the hydrogen feed and... wait. That's it?"

Gnaga replied, "When the reaction stops, turn off the lasers. In fifteen minutes we can check to see if the everspark remains."

As they waited, the third conduit was snapped into place. A breaker was thrown and feedback from the main lines tested. If the reactors could be lit, they would add to the power of the *Rogers* .

Mace leaned back in the console chair. "What temperature are we waiting for?"

Gnaga replied, "Fifteen minutes."

Mace laughed. "OK. It's been twelve. Temperature is only about twenty degrees above room temp."

Gnaga nodded. "That would be the temperature of the

thermometer probes. There are other hotspots still inside that housing. Fifteen minutes gives them sufficient time to cool. Unless you are willing to risk life-threatening burns."

Mace held up his hand. "I can wait the extra few minutes. "

Gnaga smiled. "Strangely, I find the responses to many of my statements refreshing. A part of me thinks I should be offended. Another part wants to burst out laughing."

Johnny crossed his arms. "Yeah, what's up with that? I don't think I've heard you laugh at all."

Gnaga replied, "It is a cultural difference. We are encouraged to keep our reactions subdued. As a consequence, there is not much laughter in Kaachi society."

Johnny winced. "No jokes, nothing?"

Gnaga shook his head. "On the contrary, we very much enjoy humor. We just refrain from open laughter."

Mace stood. "Fifteen minutes is up."

Gnaga reached for the access door. "Let's hope the everspark is not kaput."

Johnny pointed. "Ah. You do have a humorous side to you. We'll have to work on that."

Mace sighed. "Let it be, Johnny. We have enough comedians in the crew already."

"Fine. Just trying to give him a talent that he could take back to his people."

Gnaga said, "I can assure you, Mr. Tretcher, Human humor would only serve to make me an outcast among my people. I would prefer to remain untrained if that is possible."

Johnny shook his head. "Now, see there? You spooked him."

Mace peered into the access doorway. "I can't quite see down

into the corner. Johnny? You still carry that little mirror in your wallet?"

Johnny laughed. "How'd you know about that?"

Gnaga walked over to a storage area, pulling a drawer from a wall. "I have one."

Mace held the mirror just inside the access. "Grr. Nothing... oh, wait... wrong corner. Ahhh... there it is! Looks intact! How do we get it out? "

Gnaga reached over, pressing a button on the outside of the reactor housing. The frame split in half, opening like a clam shell. Johnny reached down, picking up the everspark with a grin.

Mace asked, "Why didn't we do that in the first place, instead of going through that whole mirror biz?"

Gnaga pressed the button a second time. "Because we now have to realign the reaction arms. Had the everspark not been there, it would only have created more work for us."

Mace replied, "How long for an alignment?"

Gnaga snapped the reactor frame shut. "Five minutes."

Johnny laughed.

Gnaga turned. "I'm curious. What do you find so humorous?"

Johnny chuckled. "Sorry, it's just a reaction from the translator. Your little mouth is moving like me, me, me, me, me, but it's not synced up with what I'm hearing. It's like watching an old Chinese karate movie. The moment you start talking with a cowboy accent, I'm gonna be rolling on the floor."

Gnaga replied, "The translation software can be personalized to yield any accent you desire."

Mace held up his hand. "No, please don't explain that to him. We'll never get any work done."

Johnny grinned. "Too late. I'm thinking Jasper needs a heavy Indian accent. And you... definitely hillbilly."

Gnaga made the necessary adjustments. With the reactor ready, the startup procedure was run. This time, Gnaga, with his smaller arms and hands, was allowed to light the reactor. The everspark glowed and Gnaga withdrew cleanly.

Mace nodded as the reaction grew to full scale. Gnaga moved to the next reactor. Again the startup procedure was followed and the fusion reaction sparked to life. When the procedure for the fourth and final new reactor was complete, the three moved back to the control consoles.

Mace flipped a switch and pressed a button. Gnaga followed, with Johnny connecting the third .

Mace looked at the others as the last reactor joined the power stream. "How long before we know if it's successful?"

"We already know," replied Gnaga.

Mace opened a comm to the bridge. "What do we see on the power panel?"

Jasper replied, "We have green across the board."

Mace clapped his hands together. "Gentlemen. Shall we pay a visit to Mr. Moskowitz? If he doesn't have any other parts needs, we can head home."

Jeff stood as the others came into the room. "We should gather as many of those dampener transducers as we can. They are additive when ganged together. We have twice as many and we get twice the protection. Two of these added to the nose and we can run at the speeds we did earlier without issue."

Johnny said, "That was the only intact one on that remnant."

Mace asked, "We have three more reactors now. How many do we need to handle the speeds we can get from those?"

Jeff shrugged. "Four maybe? I don't have the design specifications, so anything I throw out is 100 percent guess."

Mace opened a comm to the bridge. "We're done with this ship remnant. Please use the plasma cannons to destroy it. And remember, wait the full six seconds before firing. The recharge will be faster, but we can't risk showing that off to the Stark ships that are watching us. Actually, belay that order."

Mace turned to Johnny. "I've decided on a new first officer."

Johnny raised an eyebrow and held back a grin. "And?"

Mace replied as they walked toward the bridge. "And it's Jasper."

Gnaga let out a single laugh. "Ha!"

Johnny returned a puzzled look. "Wait. What? Why on Earth—"

Mace stopped and laughed. "Relax. It's not Jasper. I just wanted to see your reaction. It's Jordan Crawford. He's showed himself to be an equal to you, but without having the appearance of me playing favorites."

Johnny shook his head. "I have no problem with Jordan. Jasper... you almost made my heart stop with that one."

Mace shrugged as they again began to walk. "I don't know. Jasper's come a long way since we first met him. Getting his mobility back has completely changed his outlook on things. His decisions and ideas have all worked out for us."

Johnny scowled. "Well, just try not to tell him that while I'm around. I wouldn't want his big head to swell and explode."

Five seconds later, Gnaga let out another single laugh. "Ha!"

Johnny chuckled. "What was that for?"

Gnaga smiled. "Practice."

Johnny laughed as they walked onto the bridge. "Well, just keep



practicing. You're not quite there yet."

Mace opened a general comm. "Mr. Crawford, please come to the bridge."

Seconds later the major trotted into the room. "Yes, sir?"

Mace smiled. "OK. Didn't mean for you to run here. I just wanted to let you and everyone else aboard know I'd like to have you as my second in command. If you're agreeable with that."

Jordan nodded. "Would consider it an honor, sir."

Mace pointed at the first officer's chair. "The position is yours, but you have to stop calling me sir."

Jordan smiled. "I think I can manage that, Mr. Hardy."

"You don't even have to go that far if you don't want to. I answer to Mace as well."

Jordan sat in the command chair. "If it's all the same, Mr. Hardy, I'd prefer to keep some formality there. That presents respect when we're dealing with others who are not normally on the bridge. Such as the Kaachi admiral or director."

Mace sat in the captain's chair. "Good call, Major, or Commander. "

Jordan replied, "Jordan is fine, Mr. Hardy."

Mace nodded. "OK, Jordan. As your first command, I'd like to see that remnant out there destroyed."

Jordan stood and walked to the weapons station. "Mr. Mallot, I'd like a half dozen cannon shots into that remnant. Spaced six seconds apart. No, make that eight, just for good measure."

Six plasma rounds saw to it that no part larger than a marble remained of the Kaachi wreckage. Liam Hobbs guided the *Rogers* to the next remnant. Four dampener transducers were collected before the section of Kaachi ship was mostly vaporized. Another seven stops

saw fourteen transducers collected. Jordan Crawford followed with the order for the ship to return home.

The crew took turns in their exosuits, attaching the new dampener transducers to the hull. The duty was seen as a perk, given the bright fall sun of the West Virginia sky. As an added bonus for the rest of the members, twenty at a time were taken down to the surface for two hour "sun breaks."

Mace sat on the front steps of the gift shop as Jasper rocked back and forth in his chair. "Mr. Collins, did you ever in your wildest dreams picture us doing anything like what we just did?"

Jasper shook his head. "I've got a vivid imagination, Mr. Hardy. Growing up around here, it came with the territory. I can't tell you how many Civil War battles I've fought in my head. Or how many young ladies I dreamed about sneaking into the cave. But all this? It's beyond my limits."

Mace looked down, rubbing the hard wood of the steps with his palm. "I did those tours in the Middle East. That often seemed like I was in another world, living another life. But this? Every morning I wake up and wonder how we got to where we are. I mean, I was a bartender. How does that translate into trying to save the world from dictators and alien invasions?"

Jasper laughed. "Well, you were in the Middle East. I would think that already qualifies you for saving the world from dictators. As to this other mumbo jumbo? That has me rattled as well. I'm eighty plus years old. I'm not supposed to be out there fighting for our freedom. I'm supposed to be sitting here in this rocker, making funny faces at the kids coming into the gift shop while their parents are looking the other way."

Johnny and Jane walked up holding hands. "Coming down here was a great idea," said Johnny. "I know we've only been up there a few days, but I haven't been on the ground for several weeks now. Walking out there in that field, feeling the sunshine on my shoulders, smelling the fresh autumn air. It all puts what we're fighting for into

perspective. Or what we're willing to fight for, that is.

"This right here. Jane, you, even Jasper. All this that surrounds us. Home. It's our foundation. It's what we believe in. It's everything I could ever want, really. You ever have any moments like this when you were overseas?"

"I did." Mace nodded. "Reminds you of what life's about. Can't tell you how many times I sat back and closed my eyes after a long day of clearing houses. Just sat back and dreamed of home. This is exactly what I dreamed about. Peace, calm, friends... I'd say family, but I've got none of that left."

Johnny said, "Well, in case you didn't know, Jane and I consider you family. I know you took the news about your mother hard, but there was nothing you could have done. We didn't have the means to get out there. At least you got word of her passing. Not that it was a good thing. But it was quick and likely painless, unlike Tres' family. They uh, just... well, I'll shut up now."

Mace reached over, patting Johnny on the shoulder. "I know what you meant, brother. And just so you know, I consider you and Jane, and Jasper, and everyone on that ship my family now. Even Gnaga, although he'd be a very, very distant cousin... twice removed."

Jane gestured toward her husband. "What foot in mouth here said. You all are our family now. We're one big Hardy family."

Mace laughed. "Well, I don't know that you want to all be Hardys. Probably too many branches in that tree that folded back in. "

Jasper spoke up. "My parents were cousins."

Johnny chuckled. "Now that explains a lot. Although I envisioned them being more like siblings."

The comment drew a slap from Jane.

Jasper scowled. "That's disgusting, Johnny Tretcher. You take that back!"

Johnny laughed. "Take it back? What are we, five years old?"

Jane threw a hard punch into his ribs.

"Ow! OK! I take it back. Guy can't make joke around here?"

Jasper covered his mouth as he let out an uncontrollable snicker.

## ▲ Chapter 12 ▲

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A comm came in from Bontu Montak. "Mr. Hardy, I just wanted to touch base with you. How are you and your people doing?"

"We're getting by. And thanks for that last food drop. That should keep us fully stocked for several months."

Bontu hesitated. "Yes, I would like to meet with you personally, Mr. Hardy. Perhaps down by your cave, where we could take a walk."

Mace nodded. "Just say when."

Bontu glanced over his shoulder. "Twenty minutes?"

Mace replied. "I'll be waiting."

The comm closed as Mace stood.

Johnny spun around in his chair. "You need an escort?"

Mace shook his head. "No."

Johnny asked, "What was that about? He seemed apprehensive."

Mace shrugged. "Not sure. The only thing I know that would make him nervous would be the people above him. To my knowledge, he's always been on equal footing with Fatso. Their superiors are not in this system. At least they haven't been so far."

Johnny put his open palms on his knees as if to stand. "I can go with, if you want."

Mace held up a hand. "No. Hang tight. He seemed nervous, not suspicious. I'll be fine."

Fifteen minutes later a second shuttle landed in the field near the cave. Bontu Montak walked down the ramp into the grass of the

field as Mace met up with him .

Mace gestured. "We'll go up here on the road. The field is wet from the rain this morning."

As they walked up the drive to the main roadway, Bontu opened up. "I fear things have changed, Mr. Hardy. The admiral has gotten the green light to push forward with building a Human army. Another thirty cruisers are on the way here. And I heard rumors that Military Command is preparing to send personnel transports."

Mace asked, "Transports? What for?"

Bontu stopped. "I do not have all the information, Mr. Hardy. I'm forced to speculate. But I believe the military has been given the go-ahead to build a ground army. If the numbers are true, they are preparing to field an assault force of a quarter million soldiers. Human soldiers. And that can only mean one thing. They are preparing to assault a well-defended planet."

"Ground assault? I knew they wanted to send Stark's people out to fight in ships. Didn't know they wanted boots on the ground."

Bontu took a deep breath. "As I said, things have changed. Your King Stark is pushing all of this forward at a rapid pace."

Mace placed his hand on Bontu's shoulder. "Look, we know your original intent when you Mawga came here was to recruit Humans as warriors for your armies. Your use of the drugs in the community centers only reinforced that notion. But I wasn't expecting this. At least not this soon. Stark has most of the Earth under his control. He's obviously changing his focus toward conquest elsewhere."

Bontu nodded. "I actually came here to talk to you about Malcolm Stark. I believe it is his intent to take the *Rogers* from you. You have become a symbol of rebellion among the Humans. There are rumors of many who want to join your force because they do not like the direction Stark is going. He is a smart man, and his spies have no doubt picked up on the grumblings. I believe my fears were

confirmed while in a conversation with Admiral Geerok, two days ago. He mentioned an end to the split Human force was coming, and coming soon .

"For these reasons, I've taken precautions. You see, Mr. Hardy, you showed me that Humans could make valuable allies. Not just as warriors, but in all aspects of the empire. Yes, you are correct, our original intent was to come here and enlist your people into our armies. King Stark has accomplished that goal for us. But I see much greater things for us. I see Humans as a catalyst that can take us above tier three, easily seating us at the table of the tier two species. However, not because of the armies we could muster."

Mace returned a half but confused smile. "You aren't making much sense, Mr. Montak."

Bontu bowed. "I must apologize, Mr. Hardy. This is quite difficult for me and my loyalties are torn. I believe Stark will be coming for you soon. As I've said, I've taken precautions."

Bontu handed over a piece of paper. "On there you will find coordinates that fall on Saturn's moon Enceladus. You will find storage containers there with nutrient bars. Enough to last you and your crew for several years."

Mace held up a hand. "Wait. Are you suggesting we leave this planet? Our own planet?"

Bontu sighed. "Yes. Your lives are in danger. And you cannot hide out in your cave."

Mace asked, "Why would you risk your own neck to help us?"

Bontu replied, "Because I believe you to be the reasonable Humans. The sane Humans. A species that the Mawga could ally with as partners. You are intelligent, highly resourceful, hard working, adaptable, and big. You are like the crown jewel of species. I fear that Geerok will take Stark's forces into battle and win spectacular victories. And with that success will come the attention of the founders. Should one of the founders decide they want Humans for

their own, it would surely mean the end of the Mawga species."

Mace nodded. "So now we're getting somewhere. You think Stark's Human forces will win so decisively the founders will want us for their own armies. And that this will lead to the demise of the Mawga. "

Bontu lowered his head. "I do. And I believe our Emperor to now be blind with ambition, his mind corrupted by the whispers of our Military Command."

Mace crossed his arms. "OK, so we run and hide. We're one ship. What are we supposed to do after that? Where will we go? And these supplies you've stashed, someone had to do that work for you. What if you or they get found out?"

Bontu replied, "I would suggest you move the supplies to another location as soon as possible."

Mace looked up at the *Rogers* , hovering just above them. "If we up and leave now, won't that throw suspicion on you?"

Bontu Montak glanced up and then over at his ship. "It will. It has. And for that reason I am asking that you take me and my most loyal companions with you. There are twelve of us aboard the shuttle."

Mace raised his eyebrows. "You're defecting?"

Bontu slowly nodded. "I've argued the merits of my plan before every committee I could. I've had others, friends that I trust, tell me Military Command may be preparing to move against me—trumped-up charges followed by a quick trial and execution. The planning of these can only happen with knowledge of the Emperor. Therefore, my fate has already been sealed."

Mace walked over, seating himself on a bench at the building by the roadway. "This is quite the surprise, Bontu. I've felt like you always dealt with me in a fair manner. And now this? You realize there is no turning back from this once we start, right?"



Bontu nodded. "Yes. We have each chosen different paths than those directed by our leaders."

Mace scowled. "Well, I don't consider Stark my leader... but I get what you're saying."

Mace opened a comm from his arm pad. "Johnny? How are the updates going?"

"Last two are going on now. Give me an hour and we'll be all spic and span."

Bontu asked, "Updates? "

Mace replied, "Just a few minor mods we're making to the ship."

Mace propped his left elbow on his knee, stroking his beard with his fingers. "What's our long-term plan, Bontu? How do we survive when our food runs out?"

Bontu slowly shook his head. "I do not know. I took great risk while acquiring those supplies. I would have stockpiled more if it was at all possible."

"The refined hydrogen the ship fuses in those reactors, how do we replace it?"

Bontu replied, "Among the supplies you will find two refiners. They only require water as a resource. Two refiners, if we manage our resources, should supply the ship with fuel on a continuous basis."

Mace frowned. "Manage our resources? What does that mean exactly?"

Bontu looked up. "Conserve."

Mace asked, "And what if we get into a firefight with Stark?"

Bontu took a deep breath. "We will need to avoid that."

Mace glanced up. "Any way for us to get more of those

refiners? Where'd you get the two from?"

Bontu pursed his thin lips. "I had them smuggled in with a food shipment, marked as miscellaneous diplomatic supplies. There are only a dozen such refiners on this planet. They are heavily guarded. However, a cargo shipment of fifty is expected to arrive within the next two days. The Stark ships will need refueling."

Mace laughed. "Wow. A raid? Now we are really talking about 'no return'."

Mace shifted on the bench. "I do have a question that I've been wanting to ask. "Stark's ships, are your people able to control them?"

Bontu replied, "How do you mean?"

"I mean, if Stark turns on the Mawga, can they take control of his ships? "

Bontu nodded. "Yes. To not prepare otherwise would be foolish. The cruiser command consoles can be overridden."

"How confident are you those overrides are still intact? Didn't he override your comm system to take control in the first place?"

Bontu shook his head. "That was allowed."

"You called us intelligent and resourceful. Do you not think Stark would take steps to eliminate any overrides? I would have suggested a test if I was in charge. But it looks like we're too late for that. You're here and ready to go."

Bontu asked, "You haven't answered my question. Will you take us aboard?"

Mace turned to face Bontu. "How do I know this isn't a trap, designed to show that we intend to go against Stark? How do I know you aren't working as an agent for your Military Command?"

Bontu clasped his hands together, rubbing them nervously. "You don't. I only offer this reason: once we board that shuttle, my life will be in your hands. Should I betray you, I would expect to die."

Mr. Hardy, I am not a martyr for the Emperor's cause. For my people? Maybe. For our leadership? Given their direction of late? No."

Mace replied, "OK. First though, I want the truth. If I determine that you have held anything back, or tried to twist your answers to try to portray events differently than they unfolded, I'll walk you to the airlock myself. You ever seen a person get sent out of one without a suit?"

Bontu nodded. "I have. It is the preferred method of execution by our military. Typically done from orbit so the body will burn up during its descent."

Mace stood. "Fine, then. I'll leave you in the airlock for a few minutes with half oxygen."

Mace began to walk toward the shuttles. "You coming or what?"

Bontu stood. "I thank you on behalf of myself and my crew. "

Mace said, "Let's start from the beginning. When did the Mawga first arrive in this system? And what did you do from that point on? And then I want to know all about the Kaachi. And when that's done, explain to me the electromagnetic storms and the EMP blasts. After that, we'll get into the community centers."

Bontu took a deep breath as they walked. "We first arrived almost three years ago. A Kaachi scout was detected leaving the system. We didn't know if it was here already, or if it arrived after us and then left. We had been observing your planet for almost two years when the discovery of dark matter was made. From all indications, that should not have happened for several hundred years. Your technology, computers, and theories were not advanced enough to warrant such a discovery.

"As you know, the discovery of dark matter opened the Earth up to contact by members of the Galactic Union. Having detected the Kaachi, we ordered a fleet to your system. Just before its arrival, the

EM storms began to bombard your planet. At first we believed them to be natural. That belief stopped when they were detected coming in from four directions.

"Scouts were sent to seek out the origins of those signals. They had already been traveling for months before our scouts detected the signal ends. No ships were found to exist at those endpoints. They had moved on."

Mace interrupted. "So someone broadcast those signals from several light-months out?"

Bontu nodded. "Yes. And they were gone before we could find out who was sending them."

Mace said, "The EMP blasts, I know that was you."

Bontu nodded. "It was. Our scientists argued against it, but Military Command insisted. You see, the heavily ionized atmosphere was allowing deadly solar radiation through. Not something that would cause immediate harm, but over the course of five years, most of your animals, and most of your vegetation would have been heavily damaged or destroyed .

"Our scientists were working on another method to bleed off the ionization. They were overruled for the expedient fix, the result of which left you without most of your electronics and transportation."

Mace stopped at the ramp to the shuttle. "Why did your people wait so long to act?"

"We sent word of the dark matter discovery to the Union, along with the belief that it should not have been found. We were waiting on approval from them before making contact. Once the approval arrived, our scientists, my diplomats, and the military, argued with each other over the course of action to be taken. Meanwhile, your people starved and attacked one another. The decision to intervene was made just before you saw the arrival of our ships.

"The food and power drops were by order of my diplomatic

corps. The scientists followed with the community centers, including the drugged nutrient bars. In the end, the military seized control of both of those operations, which turned out to be fortuitous."

Mace said, "Wait. What? How was that beneficial to anyone?"

"The military, Admiral Geerok, enlisted your help to crew a ship with Humans. I was against the move. Our science teams were against it as well. Geerok used his connections back home to override our concerns. You proved yourselves to be fierce and capable warriors by crushing the Kaachi, thus sealing your own fates. From that point on, Geerok was given full control.

"Out of that, Malcolm Stark rose to power. His original attack on the D.C. community center drew the admiral's attention. From there, he has been steered into his command of all Human forces, excluding you and the crew of the *Rogers* ."

Bontu looked into Mace's blank stare. "Is that skepticism I'm seeing?"

Mace shook his head. "No. Just disbelief. I mean, your story fits perfectly with what's happened. I'm just floored at what has taken place. The decisions, everything that's happened, it just seems so haphazard. And you have no idea if the dark matter information was planted or not? "

"I do not. Only speculation."

"And you are certain it was not planted there by your own people?"

Bontu rubbed his forehead as the whiskers around his nose twitched. "I have asked many questions with regards to that, Mr. Hardy. Nothing I heard leads me to believe it was from the Mawga. Suspicion has continuously been cast at the Kaachi."

Mace chuckled. "Funny, the Kaachi think it was you."

Bontu pulled back. "You've had contact with the Kaachi?"

Mace took a deep breath. "Call your people over, Mr. Montak. We have more talking to do."

## ▲ Chapter 13 ▲

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**T**welve Mawga, all loyal to the diplomatic corps, slowly walked up the ramp of the shuttle. Mace gestured for them to take seats as the small craft lifted from the ground. Two minutes later, they were walking onto the captured Kaachi cruiser.

Mace opened the door to a conference room. "You can all wait in here. I'll be back in a few minutes. Hey, wait. I recognize you two. You helped us add reactor power to my Jeep and the RV."

The two scientists nodded and smiled.

As the otherwise nervous Mawga crew sat around the conference table, Mace made his way toward the bridge and opened a comm. "Jasper and Jane, I need you to report to conference room C. You'll find Bontu and a few of his crewmen there. Search them for weapons or comm devices, and please be diplomatic."

Mace walked onto the bridge. "Where's Johnny?"

Liam pointed up. "He's out on the hull, welding in the last of those dampener transducers. Should be back inside anytime now."

Mace opened a comm channel. "Johnny? What's your status?"

"Collecting tools. I'll be back inside in a couple minutes."

Mace turned back toward Liam. "Nav display showing any ships coming in this direction?"

Liam replied, "As a matter of fact it does. We have three, no, ... four of those Mawga cruisers en route!"

Mace returned to his comm. "Johnny, unless you have something critical going on, you need to get your ass back in here pronto. We have four Mawga cruisers coming this way! I think Stark

has had his fill of us. "

Johnny replied, "On my way. Give me thirty seconds!"

Liam yelled over his shoulder. "He's got fifteen!"

Another comm was opened. "Jane, you and Jasper secure the Mawga for the time being. I think we're about to have our first fight with Stark's men!"

Jane replied, "Got it. Mr. Montak, you and your friends, I want to see all hands laying flat on the table!"

Hans Mueller yelled, "I'm detecting charged cannons!"

Mace asked, "Johnny? You wearing your suit and helmet?"

Johnny yelled back as he ran across the long top of the hull. "I am!"

Mace sat in the captain's chair. "You're gonna hate me. But find a spot on that hull that you can hang on to. We have to move."

Hans yelled. "We have weapons fire!"

Mace countered. "Mr. Hobbs! Get us out of here! And, Mueller, do not return fire! Those ships may be following Stark's orders, but they are Humans, our people!"

Two cannon shots impacted the ground near the cave as a rush of air signaled the *Rogers* rocketing away from its hovering position. The ship rumbled as two more plasma rounds made contact with the outer dampener system.

"Mr. Mallot! What's our damage?"

Humphrey replied, "Those were direct hits on our engine nozzles! No damage! All systems showing green!"

Mace looked over at Liam. "Mr. Hobbs, give us all the speed you've got! They have to know we have modifications now!"

Seconds later, the view on the holo-wall went from bright sky-



blue to the starlit blackness of space.

"Mr. Hobbs, angle us toward the moon for a slingshot!"

Two more plasma rounds impacted the nozzles. "Don't think it's necessary, Mr. Hardy," Liam replied. "Those cannon shots aren't doing damage. And we're pulling away at gargantuan speeds. Already passed through one quarter light-speed. "

Two new rounds impacted.

Humphrey Mallot reported, "Not showing any damage, Mr. Hardy,"

Mace turned toward Hans. "Mr. Mueller, can you give me one blast back toward those ships. Maybe off by two degrees? I'd like to discourage the chase."

Hans typed away at his console, slapping a button when he was complete. "Plasma away."

Liam said, "Ships are turning. Nice, Hans! Half a degree!"

Hans grinned. "Close enough to make them think twice!"

Hans pushed the weapons data to the main display. "We are officially out of range and pulling away."

Liam added, "Cruising at 34 percent light speed."

Johnny came over the comm. "Anytime you want to slow so I can come inside would be fine with me. The view out here is spectacular. And the light show from those rounds... wow. But I think I'd prefer to be in there. You know, sharing life with everyone else."

Mace replied, "Mr. Hobbs. All stop."

As the *Rogers* slowed, Johnny moved into the airlock. When the room pressurized, the inner door opened.

Johnny flipped up his visor. "Before you apologize, I'd just like to say I forgive you."

Mace laughed. "Apologize? For what? Your being too slow to get back inside?"

"Apology accepted."

Mace gestured with his head. "Come on, follow me to the conference room. I want you to meet the new crew members."

Johnny returned a confused look. "New crew? What happened while I was outside?"

Mace opened the door to the room. "Johnny Tretcher... new crew. New crew... Johnny Tretcher."

Jane scowled. "Tell me you didn't just now come inside."

Johnny chuckled. "OK, I won't. "

Jane looked at Mace. "You took off with him still out there?"

"Relax, I was still inside the dampener field. And it's not like he had a choice. The life of the one is not worth the life of the few, no wait... how does that go again?"

Mace sat at the table. "The only thing that matters now is that we all made it out alive. Unfortunately, we're now without a planet."

Johnny said, "We just took those plasma hits from close range with no damage. I say we go back and kick the crap out of them. We could take out all of Stark's ships with one fight. They can't outrun us. And apparently they can't hurt us either."

Mace slowly shook his head. "We can't do that."

"Why not?"

Mace stared off at the wall. "Because those are our people. If it was just Stark and a crew of his thugs on there, we'd be back in a heartbeat. But those are innocent Humans on those ships, caught up in his web of lies and plots and plans of the Mawga military. Some day we may not have a choice in that fight, but we do today."

Johnny gestured at Bontu. "What's he doing here?"

"Mr. Montak and his friends are now members of this crew. They defected. He found out Stark was coming for us, and that Fatso Geerok had rolled over on him."

"Why would they do that?"

Mace shrugged. "He argued against the use of Humans to beef up their military. And against Stark, claiming he was too dangerous. His military higher-ups decided he was making too much noise. They were preparing to silence him. And with him, those who were closest to him, these eleven crew members."

Jane said, "We checked them all out. No comms, no devices, and no weapons."

Mace looked around the table. "Any of you familiar with comms? How they work? How to detect their use?"

The two scientists raised their hands. "We have a good understanding. "

Mace looked back at Johnny. "Pick one, take him to the comm console. I want you to make your way through every message that's come on or off this ship in the last three weeks. If it can be identified as legit, scratch it from your list. The rest, I want to know who originated or received them and why. Consider this our first attempt at counter-intelligence. I want to know that we don't have any Stark sympathizers on this ship."

Johnny lifted his chin in question. "You think someone on here tipped off Stark to Bontu's defection?"

Mace shook his head. "I don't have any reason to believe that, no. But I think we should start doing periodic sweeps of all comms for anything suspicious. One dirty rat on here and we're sunk."

Jasper snickered.

Mace asked, "What was funny about that?"

Jasper replied, "Dirty rat."

Mace returned a confused look. "So?"

Jasper sighed. "If I have to explain it to you, kind of takes the fun out of it."

Johnny closed his eyes, planting his forehead in the palm of his hand. "You just have no couth, do you, old man?"

Jane shook her head. "Really, Mr. Collins?"

Jasper waved his hand. "So what? You two the politically correct police now? The rats don't care. Why should you?"

Bontu held up a hand. "It's OK, we aren't offended. Mr. Collins explained the rat reference to me some time ago. It is in fact nothing more than a descriptive reference. No harm was done. We do not have the sensitive egos of many of you Humans."

Mace said, "Just the same. I'd like us all to get along and show respect for each other. We might be on this ship together for a very long time."

"Noted," said Jasper. "I'll try to restrict my barbs to the ape-man here."

Johnny held up his hands as Mace nodded approval .

Bontu said, "Would you like to continue our prior conversation?"

Mace sat. "I still have a few questions. Like the fertility treatments. Whose idea was that?"

Bontu replied, "Our scientists thought it best to get your population back on the upswing. It was a completely voluntary program, though with one major flaw. The drug made each of the community center inhabitants euphoric. All of them came in as volunteers. By the time we had recognized what was happening, Geerok had taken control and pushed the procedures forward. Approximately five months from now, your population, Earth's population, will increase by nearly a billion people."

Johnny raised his eyebrows. "Wow, that's a lot of babies coming all at once."

"They will be well cared for. However, as a consequence, the admiral has decided to keep your people on the drug indefinitely—the people who reside in the centers that is. Your warriors of course are not affected."

Johnny asked, "The warriors, are they on some other drug? Something else to keep them in line?"

Bontu shrugged. "I suspect so, but of that I am not certain. The food supply for the crews was coming through a different source. My attempts to find that source were turned away."

Jane frowned. "So that's it, then. We really are without a planet. What do we do now?"

Bontu asked, "How is it you were able to outrun the Stark ships? And without damage?"

Johnny looked at Mace.

Mace nodded. "Go ahead and tell him."

Johnny leaned back in his chair. "We salvaged four reactors from the destroyed Kaachi ships. We have them wired into this ship. And we managed to round up fourteen of the inertial dampener transducers from the wreckage. I just finished installing the last of those on our hull when those ships attacked. "

Bontu frowned. "You are in violation of the Union rules?"

Johnny laughed. "Tell me you're not still hung up on those stupid rules? Look, we are outcasts from our peoples. They catch us, we're dead. I could give a flip about any stupid made-up rules from some dictatorial founders. Now tell me, Mr. Montak, how set are you on following Galactic Union rules?"

Bontu thought for a moment. "I suppose we are no longer even citizens. You are right, Mr. Tretcher, the stupid rules no longer

apply."

Johnny grinned. "Now we have an understanding. So, Mr. Montak—and this goes for the rest of you Mawga too—start spinning those little wheels in your brains about how we can take advantage of not having rules. Faster engines, more powerful weapons, those are the things that will keep us alive now. Forget about any compliance with any rule-sets other than those of physics itself."

Johnny pointed. "Heeb, wasn't it? Maala?"

The Mawga scientist replied, "Yes."

Johnny stood. "Heeb comes with me. We'll get started checking comms."

Jasper snickered. Jane groaned.

Mace turned to Bontu. "Are your crewmen trained on all of the ship's systems?"

Bontu nodded. "They are."

Mace said, "Bontu, you come with me. The rest of you split into teams of two. I'll have someone come in for each of you. Might as well get started on familiarizing yourselves with our stations. You'll each be spending many hours at them as part of your new duties."

Bontu looked around the room. "You will have their full cooperation."

Mace walked with Bontu toward the bridge. "Mr. Hardy, you mentioned additional reactors. What kind of speed differential have you obtained?"

"We managed 38 percent light-speed before adding the final three. "

Bontu's eyes widened. "That is approaching the theoretical speeds of the founder ships."

Mace laughed. "Theoretical? You mean you don't know what

they're capable of?"

Bontu replied, "We are discouraged from speculating about such. If caught doing so, imprisonment or even death are certain. Those are rules the Union has little flexibility with."

"So you couldn't even talk about it?"

Bontu shook his head. "Only in the most private of surroundings. From time to time you would hear rumors, all based on speculation. The rumor I once overheard at a diplomatic party told of tracking a founder ship at 42 percent light-speed."

They walked onto the bridge. "I have to think we can beat that now. And from what you said, you thought founder ships had sixteen reactors. We only have eight, although from what you described, this ship is much smaller."

Bontu nodded. "Yes, well, in the void of space, with inertial dampening, size doesn't matter."

Mace tilted his head. "I suppose that would be true, but I'm not much of a physics guy either. This would be an interesting discussion for Jeff."

Mace looked around the bridge. "Anyone seen Jeff?"

No one replied.

A general comm was opened. "Jeff Moskowitz, please come to the bridge."

Several minutes passed. "David Yancy, pick up your comm."

"Mr. Hardy? What you need?"

"Do you know where Jeff is?"

David replied, "I think he might be in his bunk. Let me check."

Bontu said, "Can you track his suit ID? "

David came over the comm. "Not in his bunk or the showers,

Mr. Hardy. He had mentioned heading down to the cave earlier. He might be down there."

Mace said, "You do realize we've left Earth, right?"

David shrugged. "Didn't realize. I've had the headphones on while sorting through starmaps."

Mace sat back. "Mr. Hobbs, we may be heading back. It seems Mr. Moskowitz may have been off-ship when we left."

Liam asked, "We risk us all for one man?"

"He's important. Smartest guy we have. And besides, he knows everything we've done to this ship."

Jordan Crawford held up his hand. "How about we circle around and come in at full speed from behind the Moon? Would only give them minutes to react. You set this ship right down on the dirt with a doorway aiming toward that cave mouth and we might have as much as a minute or two to extract him. Once we're in comm range, yell at him to meet us at the cave door."

A circle maneuver was made, lining the *Rogers* up behind the Moon. The eight reactors pushed the long slender Kaachi cruiser to 48 percent the speed of light. A full deceleration was calculated and entered in as a waypoint. At four minutes out, the *Rogers* began to slow.

Liam said, "No turning back now, fellas."

Jordan came over the comm from airlock five. "Johnny and I are in position, Mr. Hardy."

Mace took a deep breath.

Humphrey Mallot said, "Comm range in three... two... one... go."

"Jeff! This is Mace. Are you there?"

The comm was silent for several seconds. "... I'm here. Up at the



Davidson house."

Liam said, "Adjusting coordinates!"

Mace pushed the image to the main display. "Hold that adjustment, Mr. Hobbs! Jeff, we're coming in hot! I would not be inside that house. Get your ass back in the cave! We'll be hitting the ground fast and you're gonna be in the middle of one heckuva windstorm when that happens. Get inside that cave mouth and lay your ass on the ground! And move it now or lose it!"

Jeff replied, "Already on my way! And thanks for coming back!"

"You just be ready. If Stark's ships show, and you aren't aboard, we're gonna have to leave you!"

"Understood."

Liam gave status: "One minute. We'll pass into the open at twenty-seven seconds."

Humphrey Mallot turned. "Mr. Hardy. The Mawga cruisers are moving our way. They picked up our comms."

Mace yelled at the display. "Jeff! They've got us coming in! Tell me you're in that cave!"

"In position!"

Liam yelled, "Twenty seconds. The cruisers are turning to intercept."

Mace pleaded under his breath. "Come on, let this work ... we need this to work."

Liam yelled, "Eight seconds... six... three..."

A rumble could be heard. "On the ground."

Mace yelled over the comm to Jordan. "Go! Go! Go!"

Jordan replied, "Airlock 5 is open... we're on the ground. I see

him. Crap! Cave entrance has him pinned in! Must have blown in from the wind!"

Johnny pulled on the twisted lumber. "Can't budge it! Graahhh! It won't move!"

Jasper entered the image in his exosuit. "Out of the way, monkey boy!"

Liam yelled, "You've got probably twenty seconds before they start pounding us! "

Jasper pulled hard on the lumber. The two-by-eight pinning Jeff Moskowitz to the cave floor snapped. Jasper fell back, cracking his helmetless head on a rock.

Jordan yelled, "I have Jeff!"

Johnny swung around, scooping an unconscious Jasper Collins from the ground.

Seconds later, Jordan again yelled: "Five seconds and you hit the gas... airlock is... closed!"

Five plasma rounds impacted the top of the *Rogers* as she lifted from the dirt.

Hans Mueller fired off three plasma bolts at the closest of the ships. Two broke off their pursuit. Three new plasma rounds pounded the inertial dampener fields of the *Rogers* as she shot up through the pale blue sky. Another three rounds from Hans had the other ships backing away.

Mace let out a sigh. "That was intense. Mueller? I thought I said no firing on our people!"

Hans nodded. "Each of those was only a quarter charge. Would have done minimal damage at best. Just enough to spook them."

Jordan entered the bridge with Jeff in tow. "Jasper's regained consciousness. Gonna have a nasty knot on his head, but he should be fine."

Mace asked, "Why wasn't he in his battle suit?"

Jordan laughed. "He was in the showers when we turned. Only had time for his skivvies and the exosuit."

Johnny walked onto the bridge. "Can't believe we were pulled out of a jam by a wrinkly old man in his undies. How embarrassing is that?"

Mace shook his head. "I don't know. I'm starting to think it's classic Jasper. Where were your exosuits?"

Jordan replied, "Weren't sure we had time to get them and put them on. Thought it would be an in and out run. Guess we lived and learned today. "

Jane hugged her husband and smiled. "You're all heroes to me."

Jeff nodded. "Hear, hear!"

## ▲ Chapter 14 ▲

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**M**ace glanced over at Liam. "Mr. Hobbs, please take us to the coordinates I'm sending you. We have foodstocks and other supplies to move."

Jane stood behind Johnny with her hand on his shoulder. "You ever think we'd not only be homeless but without a home world?"

Johnny turned. "You know, you put the tragedy of the events that have transpired aside, and I don't think I could have lived as much as we have in the last year. We could have spent the rest of our lives happily going to gun shows and tagging up with Mace at the bar, but look at all we've done, what we've accomplished. Look at the fantastic people we have surrounding us. Frankly, I don't know that I'd want to go back. Of course, I have yet to face starvation in space, so my idea of what constitutes living might change."

Mace said, "We do have a few options before us. First, in a couple days, Mr. Montak says there should be a Mawga supply ship coming in that's loaded with hydrogen refiners. We capture that ship and we're set for fuel from here on out."

Johnny grinned. "So we be pirates? Arrgghh!"

"And when the Kaachi make contact with us again, if the Australians, with Mr. Daughtry, are ready, we will have the manpower to take back Earth. It would involve making war on our own people though, something I'm not yet convinced is right. After that Kaachi meeting, I don't have a clue yet as to what path we choose. Montak claims the supplies we're about to move should last us for over two years. So ... at least that gives us time."

An hour later, the *Rogers* floated just above the surface of Enceladus where a supply ship was waiting. Two hydrogen refiners

were brought aboard, along with as much food as could be moved in a single flight. Proteus, the second largest moon orbiting Neptune, was selected as their new base.

Johnny stood on the surface of Enceladus, looking up at the bright, massive, mother planet and her rings. Jasper came over to stand by his side. "What a fantastic sight. I've got goose bumps all over right now."

Jasper nodded. "I couldn't have dreamed of standing in a place like this. See that tiny speck up there, to the left of the sun? Shield the sun with your hand. That's Earth. Thinking about that from this distance is what gives me chills. We're out here doing what a million scientists before us have only dreamed of."

Jane came to stand beside them, the gravity boots on her battlesuit barely keeping her on the surface. "The last of the containers we can fit is aboard. Breathtaking, isn't it?"

Johnny looked around at the ice-covered, rocky surface surrounding them. "I expected David to be out here. Astronomy is his thing and this is definitely astronomical."

Jane laughed. "Yeah, poor David. He stepped out onto the surface, looked up at Saturn, and fainted. He was too overcome. Had to take him back aboard to let him calm down. You spend your whole life dreaming about something, then one day, *bam!* it's a reality right there in front of you. Too much of a shock for his psyche, I guess."

Johnny reached down and pried loose an icy rock from the moon's surface with his boot. "I bet I can throw this over the horizon."

A quick jerk of his arm sent the rock forward and Johnny flipping backward.

Jasper let out a howl as the three hundred pound Human clumsily reached out for the surface during each rotation. "Hahaha! Mrs. Tretcher? Does your trained space monkey know any other tricks?"

Jane shook her head as she laughed along. "Like that's not entertaining enough? "

Mace came over the comm. "Let's button it up down there. We have an sixteen hour ride to Proteus and back for a drop. Gonna take three trips."

Jane replied, "Give us a sec to collect Johnny."

Jasper slowly turned toward the *Rogers* . "Race you back? Loser buys lunch!"

Jane smiled. "Help me collect my husband first. Then you're on."

Jasper scowled. "We could just leave him. He'd still be here when we got back."

Johnny crossed his arms as he continued to flip. "Just give me a hand, old man. You've had your fun."

Hours later, the view of Neptune from Proteus was equally as stunning. The soft blue hue of frozen methane filled the peripheral view of a rising Neptune. An hour was taken so each of the crew could spend a few minutes down on the surface.

Mace stood within a gravity field on a short balcony, looking down at the others as Jeff stood beside him. "Not sure I could ever get tired of that view."

Jeff nodded. "I can already see our travels out here becoming a difficult thing."

Mace asked, "What makes you say that?"

Jeff laughed. "Look at them down there, all just staring. Will we be doing this every time we see something spectacular? I'm sure the Milky Way alone has millions if not billions of views just like this. Will man survive and spread to the stars? Or will it take us too long because we're stopping to gawk at everything?"

Mace chuckled. "I guess I can take that as we should get back to

the business of moving our supplies?"

Jeff nodded. "After that, I imagine we'll have nothing but time to gawk. Have you given any thought to what we might do when we go after the other refiners?"

Mace took a deep breath. "I have. We need more supplies than just food and fuel. We'll have to board the ship and force the crew into a shuttle. We'll want that whole cargo ship intact. We can park it down there on the surface as a sort of base."

Jeff scrunched up a skeptical smile. "Mmm. Don't know if that's such a good idea. We take a ship, they'll come looking for it. Even though space out here is vast, a big ship would be a lot easier to find than a handful of refiners. Those are small enough that we could actually keep them all here on the *Rogers* with us."

Mace crossed his arms. "I would only want the cargo ship as a temporary place. Maybe we park it, drill into Proteus and make ourselves an underground lair. Once that's done we strip what we want from the ship and discard the rest."

Jeff half frowned. "We're talking about a lot of work to carve us a base out of that frozen rock."

Mace nodded. "It would be. But I think we need a place to call home that's at least semi-permanent. Would take years of dedicated searching to find something like that. And as far as that goes, when it's complete we go build another one somewhere else. If a hideout gets discovered, wouldn't hurt to have a couple more lined up. And if we get the Australians back from the Kaachi portal, we're gonna want multiple bases. Besides, this will give everyone goals to achieve rather than just contemplating our dilemma."

"Keep their minds busy?" Jeff asked.

Mace rested his forearms on the balcony rail. "Exactly. I finally understand our commanders during my tours of duty in the Middle East, why they were so set on keeping us busy with menial tasks during our off hours. I hated it at the time. Now I see its wisdom."

Johnny called up from the surface. "Last container is on the ground. Taking a headcount now. And... oh look, Jasper is outside and the airlock door is closed."

Jasper pounded on the see-through portal. "Open the door, ape-man!"

Johnny laughed. "Now, you're gonna have to ask a lot nicer than that."

Jasper scowled. "OK. Please open the door, ape-man! "

He nodded as he pressed the release. "Was that so hard?" He turned to look at the airlock camera as the outer door sealed shut. "All heads accounted for."

Mace walked onto the bridge. "Mr. Hobbs, take us back to Enceladus."

Liam Hobbs replied, "Yes sir, Mr. Hardy. We have an ETA of eight hours, four minutes."

The second run was uneventful, with the food cargo deposited in the bottom of a small crater on Proteus. As the *Rogers* approached Enceladus for the third time, alarms went off on the sensor display.

Mace sat forward. "What do we have, Mr. Mallot?"

Humphrey replied. "Twenty Mawga cruisers are parked just above our remaining supplies. And if we've seen them, they've seen us."

Mace scowled. "Crap. Mr. Hobbs, take us back to Proteus. We'll have to grab whatever we can carry. If they've seen us, they know the direction we've come from."

Liam replied, "I think the Proteus drop is safe, Mr. Hardy. I plotted a course that brings us in from a different angle. If they head for where we've just come from, they'll be going toward Jupiter."

Mace eased back in his chair. "Bring us to a stop, Mr. Hobbs."



Liam nodded. "Already slowing."

Johnny said, "They're hailing us."

Mace stood and paced in front of his chair. "Patch them through. Might as well see who it is they have commanding."

A darkened silhouette came on the main wall display. "Mr. Hardy, I hope you weren't planning on having lunch with any of this?"

Mace replied, "We've got a hundred such stashes placed all over this system. We can dine wherever we please."

The silhouette replied, "Good, then you won't mind our confiscation of this stolen property. "

Mace crossed his arms. "Who are you and what do you want?"

The silhouette leaned forward, still in the dark shadow. "The king has seen to it that his commanders no longer go by their names. Our identities have been concealed to protect our families from our enemies. This goes for you, Mr. Hardy, as well as for the Mawga, or any spies that either may have in our camps. My name is Admiral 4. This vessel is piloted by Captain 27. Lieutenant 1016 is currently operating this comm channel."

Mace shook his head. "Sounds like a big waste of time, Mr. 4. I prefer to call my officers by the names given to them by their parents, not designations by some two-bit wannabe dictator who's proclaimed himself king."

Admiral 4 replied, "Such a shame, Mr. Hardy. A man of your obvious leadership skills, a crew who appears to be both confident and motivated... the King would have done well to have you in his fleets. Instead, you are hunted by your own kind. And soon to be hungry I might add. We already know the names of everyone on your ship. And we know who back on Earth are members of their families."

Mace sat forward. "Is that a threat?"

The admiral was silent for several seconds. "More of a warning, Mr. Hardy. All that we wish is for you to stay out of our business. Leave this system or stay, we really don't care, so long as you do not interfere with either us or our allies."

Mace said, "The way I see it, it's you who have interfered in our business. Twice now you've fired on us first, without so much as an attempt to talk."

"You were given your opportunity to talk, Mr. Hardy. An opportunity given by the King himself. You chose the path you've taken. And I hope you now realize that we can find you whenever we want. Perhaps it is best that you leave this system altogether."

"Others have suggested we give you a ship full of nutrient bars and then send you on your way. The Mawga say there is a planet that may be habitable in the Epsilon system. It's a ten light year journey, meaning you could probably make it there in about thirty years, given your apparent speed advantage. However, the King thought otherwise. He believes you present a continued threat wherever you are."

Mace replied, "I'd say the King knows what he's talking about in this instance. And you can tell him from me personally, that if it's war he wants, we will give him war. I'll give you this warning right now, Admiral. If any of your ships come within range of us, at best they'll be limping home."

The admiral sighed. "Very well, Mr. Hardy. I had hoped to speak with a man of reason and not a radical. Lieutenant 1442, initiate the destruction of the containers."

"Yes, sir."

The admiral's image faded to complete black. "You and your crew have chosen your fates, Mr. Hardy. Stay away from Earth if you wish to live."

The comm closed.

Humphrey Mallot pushed his sensor data to the main display. "I show fifteen plasma rounds impacting the remaining containers. They've been vaporized, Mr. Hardy."

Mace asked, "Where does that leave us? How much was left?"

Johnny replied, "We managed to take 86 percent on those two runs. That gives us about twenty-one months of supply. I'm sure we can stretch that if needed. I do have a question though. What's this do to our run on the refiner ship tomorrow?"

"Oh, you can count on that raid happening. Have Mr. Montak assemble in the conference room with the other Mawga. I have a few questions for his team."

Mace stood. "Mr Hobbs, set us on a course for somewhere other than Proteus."

The shadow of Mars was selected and the waypoints entered. The *Rogers* was soon out of range of the Human fleet's sensors.

## ▲ Chapter 15 ▲

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**M**ace walked into the room. "Mr. Montak, I need some info."

Bontu replied, "Please ask."

"We'll be hitting the refiner cargo tomorrow. I'm sure you know your people, or Stark's crews, will be defending that shipment. They would have to realize it's importance to us."

Bontu nodded. "It would seem apparent."

Mace tapped his fingers on the table. "What vulnerabilities of those cruisers might we take advantage of? And I'm not talking about destroying them, just disabling them if possible. How can we knock out their drives, or maybe their weapons? Even taking out their dampener transducers might do the trick. Basically, how do we take them out of the fight without killing them?"

One of the Mawga crewmen timidly raised his hand.

Mace said, "Say what you like. We're all equals here."

"It might be possible to disable the ships without firing a shot."

Mace nodded. "OK. First your name, then how would we do this?"

"Jelog Hooba, sir. I was a maintenance technician on our ship. The dampeners run on a feedback loop. The feedback happens at a specific frequency. We could broadcast a signal at that frequency, interfering with that feedback. An in-phase signal would cause the transducers to overload, causing a shutdown. An out-of-phase signal would cancel the feedback, rendering the transducers useless."

Mace sat forward. "Do we have the ability to broadcast such a signal with enough power to make either of those scenarios happen? "

Maala Heeb answered. "Our comm system should be capable of doing that, given the frequency is within its broadcast range."

Mace tapped his knuckles on the table. "Excellent suggestion, Mr. Hooba. Is this something you've done before?"

The Mawga crewman cowered in his chair. "No, Mr. Hardy. That would be against the rules to even speak of. I'm hesitant to speak of it here."

Mace laughed. "You can safely speak your mind here, Mr. Hooba. There are no rules other than to be respectful of each other. OK, that's one possibility. We can test out Mr. Hooba's idea on one of our shuttles. Now I'd like a backup plan. We have an out from this fight given our speed capability, so I'd like to ensure mission success. What other bending or breaking of the rules could be done in this regard?"

Maala Heeb held up his hand.

Mace said, "Go ahead, Mr. Heeb."

"We may have a similar method we could use against the cannons on those cruisers. Each has a sensor that prevents the cannon from firing if an object is so close that the blast might cause damage to the weapon or the ship firing the weapon. I believe that distance to be three meters. If we intercept the emitter frequency for that sensor, we might be able to send a return that tells the weapon not to fire."

Hooba asked, "Wouldn't each cannon have one of those sensors, Mr. Heeb?"

The scientist smiled. "They would. But each would also have a slightly different frequency in use, so that no one would interfere with another."

The crewman nodded in approval.

Mace said, "Any way we can test this theory?"

Maala Heeb scratched his head in thought. "This is a Kaachi

vessel. I would see no way of testing that theory out."

Bontu spoke up. "I may have a solution. What was once my diplomatic vessel has cannons, as does the shuttlecraft aboard it. I have the comm and control codes for both. If you can get us within comm range of Earth, we could send directions to one of the shuttles to leave and rendezvous with us."

Mace thought for a moment. "The other ships would give chase."

Bontu added. "If we could reach the atmosphere, we could bring it aboard. Perhaps using the transducer feedback to stop any pursuit."

Mace stroked his beard. "And what if the Mawga figure out how we did it? If we find out the transducer feedback works, I don't want to risk losing that advantage. We would want to save that for the biggest of events."

Jasper walked into the conference room. "Sorry, was listening in on the comm. Mr. Montak? The codes you have, were they only good for your ship or for any of the Mawga ships?"

Bontu replied, "With my position, I was granted fleet access. Why?"

Jasper pointed. "We just left a fleet of Mawga cruisers out there at Enceladus. I would imagine they're en route back to Earth now. What if we got back within comm range, hacked in using your codes, and told every shuttle on them to launch, each with a set of waypoints for it to follow? Those cruisers have four shuttles each, right? They could only chase twenty of them."

Mace pointed and nodded. "I like that. Mr. Montak, does that sound doable?"

Bontu rubbed his chin. "I suppose. And a single, prepackaged command message would send them on their way."

Mace said, "Wouldn't your people have changed codes by now?"

Bontu shook his head. "For what purpose? It is unlawful to eavesdrop or to interfere with another's comm system. And your Human counterparts would probably know nothing of such a vulnerability."

Jasper grinned. "I'm starting to think these rules are like a gold mine. "

Mace nodded. "Mr. Montak, could you have a brief discussion with Liam Hobbs? I'll have David Yancy come up there with you to help select waypoints for the shuttles. Jasper, stay here with Heeb and Hooba. Work out the details of what we'll need to do to make the broadcasts work, and then work with Johnny to see that it's ready and tested before today is done."

Jasper stood. "Fine. Ratboys, over here."

Mace looked back with a horrified face.

Jasper shrugged. "What? They don't care. And if it makes them feel any better they can call me whatever they want."

Maala Heeb stood. "Come, Jellog, let us assist the decrepit old man."

Jasper grinned. "See. No offense intended. None taken."

Mace walked with Bontu Montak toward the bridge.

Bontu asked, "You appear to be deep in thought. What about, may I ask?"

"Just wondering what we might do with sixty shuttles, that's all. Any possible way to shove one of those full-size reactors in a shuttle with a cannon?"

Bontu thought for several seconds. "Interesting concept. However, those ships lack adequate shielding, I also believe we might be short on crewmen."

Mace asked, "How many does it take to pilot one of those?"

Bontu replied, "I suppose two would suffice. One to pilot and one for maintenance."

Mace stopped. "Maintenance? You don't need anyone for that if you're just flying as a gunship."

Bontu nodded. "I suppose. Perhaps as a gunner then."

Mace laughed as he began to walk. "You people seriously need to learn how to multitask. Although, that still leaves us way short on personnel."

Once on the bridge, Mace dropped Bontu off with Liam before opening a comm to Jane. "Could you come up to the bridge? And bring Mr. Klept with you. I have some technical questions for him about this ship. "

Jane replied, "Be there in a couple."

Mace plopped himself down in his chair and began to look over sensor displays as the *Rogers* was turned toward another meeting with the Mawga cruisers. Chaos erupted as the Kaachi crewman walked onto the bridge.

Bontu Montak turned and growled, small talons protruding from his otherwise friendly fingers. Gnaga Klept raised his hands above his head, fingers clasped together and turned down. The taller, more slender Gnaga emitted a sinister hiss as a growling Bontu took a step forward.

Johnny stood. "Oh Lord."

Mace hopped from his chair, stepping between the two enemies. "OK. I guess I should have informed each of you about the other."

Bontu scowled. "A Kaachi? And he walks about freely?"

Mace replied, "Well..."

Gnaga returned a stare of hatred. "The Mawga are on this ship? You have rekindled your alliance? What sort of traitorous species are you?"



Johnny laughed at the sight of the two fifty-five pound enemies as they circled, growled and hissed.

Mace glanced his way. "You're not helping."

Johnny stepped forward. "OK. Mr. Montak, that's enough. Reel in those claws and we'll explain to you both what's going on."

Johnny leaned in with his best mean stare. Bontu took a step back.

Mace lowered his hands. "Mr. Klept, may I have a moment of your attention? The Mawga will be here when I'm done if you still feel the need to fight."

Gnaga slowly lowered his pinch-fingered hands. "Why was I not told of this incursion?"

Mace shook his head. "It's not an incursion. These Mawga are our friends. They are on the run from the other Humans and are now fugitives from their own Emperor. They are fully committed to us now. Right, Mr. Montak?"

Bontu snarled his teeth. "Is this a Kaachi ship? Are we prisoners of the Kaachi scourge?"

Mace shook his head with a smile. "No. Sorry. Look, both of you ... we are all three on the run from the Humans... and the Mawga. And next week, we'll find out if we're on the run from the Kaachi as well."

Bontu growled. "So you did make a deal with our enemies. Had I known, I would have turned you over to Stark!"

Mace nodded. "An understandable thought. Now, let me explain where we are. We sent a hundred crews through to the Kaachi to be trained and equipped with their ships and weapons. They were to be used as a counterbalance to your choice of Stark over us. Had Geerok delivered on his promises, we wouldn't have contacted the Kaachi."

Bontu pointed with an angry finger. "Who is this foul being that

stands among us?"

"This is Gnagarian Klept. He is a survivor from the Kaachi attack. We picked him up from one of the Kaachi ship remnants that was left after the battle. And, Gnaga, this is Bontu Montak, previously the High Chancellor for our region of Earth. For a brief period of weeks following the battle with your ships, Bontu had the favor of his emperor. Now he's hunted by him and on the run.

"Bontu helped us to get where we are. His trust in us got us a Mawga ship, and from that this one. On Earth he stuck his neck out for us and almost lost his head for it. I trust Bontu and I call him a friend. As to that same designation for you, we'll have to see how the meeting next week goes."

Bontu scowled. "What meeting?"

Mace replied, "As I said, we sent a hundred crews through to be trained and equipped with Kaachi ships. Not to make war with the Mawga, but to add balance to an out of control situation with Stark and his goons. And you should be thanking Mr. Klept. His help was instrumental in us being able to add four reactors and fourteen extra transducers to this ship, which is the only reason any of us are alive right now.

"At the time of our meeting with his people, Gnaga may have had other intentions for the Mawga, but we did not. The moment Gnaga decided to help us, he became a part of this crew, just as you did when you decided to defect."

Gnaga said, "A Mawga? Defecting? I've never heard of such. These things are not permitted."

Johnny laughed. "Those rules just keep getting better and better."

Mace sighed. "Look. What I'm trying to tell each of you here is that you're no longer enemies. You're all members of this crew. And as such, you're equally valuable members of a team. And right now that's a team that needs both of you to help if we're to stay alive. We

need those refiners or we'll be out of fuel well before we starve to death."

Gnaga said, "The Kaachi will give you all the fuel you need."

Mace nodded. "If the time comes for that, great. But the last thing I want is to go into any further negotiations with the Kaachi or anyone else from a needful position."

Bontu growled. "The Kaachi will stab you in the back!"

Mace glanced his way. "Just like Geerok did with both of us?"

Bontu rubbed his quivering chin in thought as his whiskers twitched in the air.

Mace looked back at Gnaga. "Mr. Klept, aside from Bontu being a Mawga, what do you have against him personally?"

Gnaga glared at having to answer. "Well, nothing I suppose. I've never had interaction with him before."

Mace turned back. "And, Mr. Montak, other than being a Kaachi, what grievance do you have against Mr. Klept?"

"How is this relevant? He's a *Kaachi* !"

Mace reiterated his question. "You have always listened to reason, Mr. Montak. Please listen to it now. Other than his being a Kaachi, admittedly a former enemy of the Mawga, a species to which you no longer belong by the way, how has he wronged you?"

Bontu scowled. "He hasn't ... I suppose."

Mace took a deep breath. "Good. Finally getting somewhere."

Jasper walked onto the bridge with Heeb and Hooba. Gnaga turned, raising his hands high in the air with his fingers pinched and curled downward. Another round of hissing and growling began.

Mace held up his hands. "Enough! Look, Gnaga, these Mawga are not your enemy. Bontu, please inform your cohorts that this Kaachi is on our side!"

Bontu crossed his arms with a scowl.

Mace took a step toward him with an angry expression.

Bontu stepped back. "Fine. Mr. Heeb, Mr. Hooba, this filthy Kaachi is not our enemy. We are not at war with this individual. He is assisting our friends, and therefore us. Please put aside all emotional responses and give the Kaachi at least the minimum of respect. We are not on this ship to fight with its crew."

Mace nodded. "Good enough. Mr. Klept, please address the Mawga that stand before you. Assure them that you are here as a member of this crew, and that no actions will be taken by you against them. We all have to be one team here. Survival will be hard enough on its own without having to deal with petty squabbles. None of you have direct issues with each other. Let's keep it that way."

Gnaga was silent for several seconds. "I will make an effort to treat them as I would any other crew member. As you have pointed out, they are not direct enemies of mine."

Mace clasped his hands together. "Great. And, Mr. Montak, when you return to the others, please pass this same message along."

Gnaga glared. "There are more?"

Mace nodded. "A dozen total. And again, you've got no beef with them, they have none with you. "

Mace gestured toward Johnny and the comm station. "Mr. Montak, if you would like to continue, Johnny will be there to help you."

Montak nodded as Heeb and Hooba joined him behind the three-hundred-pound Human's chair.

Mace turned to Gnaga. "Let's take a walk."

As soon as they had left the bridge, Gnaga opened up: "You do realize this will greatly complicate a relationship with my people, right?"

"The Mawga are here to stay. And they won't interfere with whatever we're doing. If anything, they should be an asset if we end up taking action against the their people."

Gnaga said, "I hope you realize their loyalties will lie with their people."

Mace shook his head. "I think their people put an end to that. This group made their decisions. They know there's no going back. Their choice was to come with us or to stay and die in prison... if they were lucky. Seems an easy choice."

"Yes. I suppose given the circumstance, we all might be a bit less patriotic."

## ▲ Chapter 16 ▲

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**T**wo hours later, the twenty Human-operated Mawga cruisers came into sensor and then comm range. The fleet commander opened a comm channel.

Mace nodded at Johnny for a connection. "Commander, it seems we forgot something during our last meet."

The silhouetted commander replied, "And what might that be?"

Mace smiled and gestured for Johnny to broadcast the message. "We've decided we would like all of your shuttles. You can think of it as compensation for the food you destroyed. I hope you don't mind."

Seconds later, another darkened figure stepped into camera view and whispered to the silhouetted Human.

Johnny said, "I show bay doors opening on all ships and shuttles powering up. Also, Mr. Montak was kind enough to put a stop to all of their engines for twenty minutes. And to keep them busy, the life support will be cycling on and off along with the reactors. Should be a fun time for all their techs trying to figure out what's going on and how to fix it."

Mace looked directly into the camera. "Commander, it looks as though you're having troubles. We'll let you go so you can deal with them promptly."

The comm closed.

Humphrey Mallot reported from the sensor console. "I'm showing eighty-two shuttles en route away from the Human ships. It looks as though Mr. Montak's codes were still active."

Mace nodded. "I just hope we didn't waste a valuable tool on

stealing shuttlecraft. That could have come in handy had we gotten into a fight. "

Johnny turned. "According to Mr. Montak, we might still be able to use it. Heeb and Hooba added a few routines that should allow us a backdoor into their systems. They'll definitely block the main access code, but he's hoping Stark's crew won't find the hacks."

Mace asked, "Will the hacks allow us into any Mawga cruiser?"

Johnny shook his head. "Only those twenty. The universal code Bontu had would have worked on any of the ships in Geerok's fleet, but we won't have that kind of access anymore."

Mace glanced back over at Humphrey. "Mr. Mallot, everything still according to plan?"

Humphrey replied, "The cruisers are offline, shuttles proceeding away, and all trajectories appear to be as programmed. I'd say we have a complete success on our hands."

Mace stood. "Keep me abreast. I'm heading down to give Bontu the good news."

After a short walk, Mace entered conference room C. Gnaga Klept was standing in a corner hissing as Bontu Montak snarled and growled.

Mace rushed in. "Ho! OK. Let's calm down!"

The Kaachi and the Mawga each straightened up.

Gnaga bowed as he said, "I must apologize, Mr. Hardy. Bontu and I were merely explaining our confrontation to the others. We have each made our peace."

Mace stepped back, leaning up against the conference room table. "So that's it? All that show up on the bridge and you're now instant friends?"

Bontu replied with a horrified look. "I can assure you, Mr. Hardy, we are anything but friends. However, we are both from

pragmatic species. If there is a time for animosity... that time is not today."

Mace crossed his arms. "Hmm. I find it interesting that you can both just set aside such strong feelings that fast. You know, we all share common traits, similarities in how we deal with others, and I'm a bit of a pragmatist myself, but you won't find many Humans doing what you're doing here. Two hours ago you two were mortal enemies."

Gnaga replied, "We still are. We just don't see a need to act out at this time."

Mace asked, "So you're willing to work beside each other so long as there's no information about your species warring with each other? If the Kaachi come next week with news of a planned attack on the Mawga, the peace between you comes to an end?"

Gnaga looked at Bontu. Both returned a nod.

Mace unfurled his arms. "Mr. Montak, I came down to let you know the coded message worked. We have eighty-two shuttles heading off in the directions we programmed them for."

Bontu pulled back. "Eighty-two? Each of those cruisers carries a compliment of four such craft. Where did the extra two come from?"

Mace opened a comm to Humphrey. "Mr. Mallot, are you certain there were eighty-two shuttles?"

Humphrey replied, "Yes, sir. Just a moment. Data shows four from each cruiser, except one. Hmm. Those bays will only fit a single shuttle. Hold on... hmm. We have two vessels that don't match a shuttle signature. Maybe half the size?"

Mace switched the comm to Liam. "Mr. Hobbs, can I assume we've left the cruisers behind?"

Liam replied, "We have. We'll be outside sensor range in about four minutes."



Mace stroked his beard in thought. "Mr. Hobbs, once outside range, put us on a heading toward one of those smaller ships."

Liam nodded. "Setting the waypoints now."

Mace turned to face Bontu. "Mr. Montak, you have any idea what ships of that size would be for? Smaller shuttles maybe?"

Bontu shook his head. "Vessels are expensive, Mr. Hardy. I'm not aware of anything smaller than a shuttle. There are private craft back within the empire that might be of such size, nothing that would be brought to potentially hostile territory. "

"Johnny?"

"Yes?"

"Get coordinates from Liam for a potential meet-up point between us and the closest one of those small ships. Let's bring it aboard and see what it's all about."

"You got it."

Seconds later, Liam replied, "Mr. Hardy, we should be pulling alongside the closest small craft in eleven minutes. Any special instructions?"

Mace shook his head. "No. Just have Jeff and David meet me in bay three. We should have room for it in there."

Mace turned. "Mr. Klept, Mr. Montak, would you care to join me in bay three? And bring Mr. Heeb and Mr. Hooba with you. I get the feeling we'll all find this interesting. I'll meet you down there in a few minutes."

As Mace turned into the hallway, Jasper was waiting. "I think you might want to proceed with more caution, Mr. Hardy. What if there are people on there?"

Mace shrugged. "We'll disarm them. Where are they going to go?"

Jasper said, "Can we at least do a full scan before bringing them aboard? As your defensive safety officer, I would recommend that at a minimum."

Mace chuckled. "Defensive safety officer? Where'd you get that from?"

Jasper pointed his chin as they walked forward. "I decided I was in need of a title. Except for Mr. Hobbs, we keep jumping stations. I discussed it with Mr. Crawford. He thought it might be a good idea."

Mace replied, "You know, we keep switching stations so that everyone is cross-trained on what we do here, right? If Johnny has to leave the comms, I want to know we can put just about anybody in that slot and count on them to perform."

Jasper raised his hands. "Not saying that's a bad thing. I just think we might be better served with a few specialists rather than a hundred crewmen who are all at a general level. "

Mace nodded. "OK. I suppose we've pushed the cross-training about as far as it can go. After our raid tomorrow, we'll have a group discussion and start assigning titles. Just out of curiosity, Mr. Collins, why'd you pick defensive officer, and what's it supposed to mean exactly?"

"It means I get to snoop into all things concerning the defense of this ship. People, weapons, shields. I want access to them all. I have a good eye for people who are up to no good. I think it stems from all those years at the cave giving tours. I could always tell which kids, or adults, were gonna be troublemakers. One of my long-time staffers, Gina, used to tell me I would have made a good detective. I'm suspicious by nature, she used to say."

Mace patted Jasper on the shoulder as they turned into the reactor room. "Congratulations, Mr. Collins, you are our newest, first, and only DSO."

"DSO. I like it."

Mace said, "Jane, we have a ship we're bringing aboard in a few minutes. I thought you might want a break to come check it out with us."

Jane turned. "Sweeney! I'll be back in a bit!"

Crewman Sweeney nodded in response.

Jane walked with Jasper and Mace. "Was listening on the comms. You sure it's safe to bring that ship aboard?"

Jasper pointed. "See? She's suspicious, too."

Mace held up his hand. "Fine, we'll do a full scan before bringing it in. I just don't want to be messing around until the other ships show up. When the scan's done, we bring it aboard and haul out of here."

Jasper nodded. "Use a little caution, that's all I ask."

The *Rogers* pulled to a stop just under a kilometer from the small craft. Humphrey Mallot put the sensors to work, gathering all the data the *Rogers* was capable of. Several minutes later, results were available.

Humphrey said, "The interior is dense, like it's full of something. "

Montak and Klept joined the others in the bay.

Bontu looked over the image being shown on a wall display. "I don't recognize that as being a Mawga ship."

Gnaga replied, "It appears to be nothing more than a shipping container with a gravity drive attached. If you pull up the energy data, I can tell you the size of the reactor they have aboard. The drive appears to be the same drive used on the Mawga shuttles."

Bontu nodded. "I would concur with that assessment."

Gnaga commented as the energy readouts were pushed to the display. "Ah, yes, a C26 reactor."

Bontu nodded, "Yes. Slightly larger than the model we added to your vehicle, Mr. Hardy. It's a standard reactor used throughout the galaxy, although this is the first time I've seen it used to power a craft."

Humphrey came over the comm. "I have ten Mawga cruisers now on the sensors, Mr. Hardy. We'll be wanting to move soon unless you're looking for a fight."

Mace asked, "Anyone have any ideas about what it's carrying? Mr. Klept? Bontu? Any way to tell?"

Bontu replied, "The scan tells us the density. Without sending over a team, we really have no way of knowing."

Jane said, "Sure would be nice to have a drone about now. Something we could send over to snoop around with."

Johnny opened a channel. "They should be within comm range any moment."

A hail came in.

Johnny asked, "Should I patch it through?"

Mace replied, "Sure. And, Mr. Hobbs, prepare to slide us over to that ship for a pick-up. We'll be bringing it into bay three."

"Roger that."

The comm channel opened to the dark silhouette of the Human fleet commander. "Mr. Hardy. I see you have corralled one of our ships. I must insist you return it. The cargo is quite valuable to us. "

Mace laughed. "I don't think so, B12, or whatever your name is. The ship, along with the other shuttles, are now property of the Earth Alliance for Freedom."

The commander chuckled. "EAFF? You are naming your single- ship insurrection EAFF? Sounds terrifying, Mr. Hardy, like the noise an angry titmouse might make. And my designation is A4. The fourth Admiral of the fleet."

Mace returned an angry but embarrassed stare. "Well, A4, exactly what are you calling yourselves?"

"We are the Stark Force. Outwardly, we call ourselves the Star Force."

Mace shook his head. "How original. Maybe you should call yourselves the SRM... for Stark Raving Mad."

The silhouette was silent for several seconds. "I will make your suggestion to the King when I return. Now, please move away from our ship. The King will want his resources back."

Liam said, "Mr. Hardy, all set to bring her aboard."

Jasper reached out, taking Mace by the arm and whispering. "Before you give that order, give me a minute to talk to him. We have the time."

Mace drew an impatient breath before nodding.

"A4, this is DSO Collins. Why don't you tell us exactly what that valuable cargo is? After all, we can have it aboard to inspect in a few seconds' time."

The admiral replied, "I must protest. The ship is ours, the cargo... ours. Taking it aboard is only a further provocative act which you will come to regret."

Jasper asked, "Johnny, can you tell me if there have been any broadcasts directed at that small ship?"

Johnny replied, "I have any number of communications that have happened, but I can't say if they are between those ships or from there to here."

Jasper turned to face Mace. "This doesn't feel right. The tone of his voice is all wrong for someone who's about to lose something of value. And those comms, we're within range, but they would be using directional comms between ships. We wouldn't even detect them from full range unless they're directed toward us. I say we just blast that

little ship from here and be done with it. I don't like the fact that he has possibly made contact with it. Keep in mind, we have another one of those ships out there we can always dig into later."

Jane stepped up. "I have to agree with him. This setup makes me nervous. We don't know what's on there, which means we don't need it. I say scratch this one and we'll take our time to study the other one."

Hobbs came over the comm. "Mr. Hardy, if we're bringing her aboard we need to make our move now."

Mace stroked his beard as he looked at the silhouetted image. "Admiral, I think we'll pass on this one. Mr. Hobbs, take us clear. Mr. Mueller, hit it with a plasma round once we're on the move."

The silhouette turned to a side profile. "Do it."

A voice replied, "Do it? The button?"

An irritated admiral screamed. "Press the button, you idiot!"

The small craft exploded with a fury. The *Rogers* shook violently for several seconds, lifting the crew into the air and then slamming them hard to the deck before settling down.

Mace rolled over and yelled. "Hobbs, get us out of here!"

Liam replied, "Brace yourselves! We'll be passing back through the shockwave that just hit us!"

The *Rogers* again rocked and bounced.

When the shaking settled, Liam said, "We're through! Lost three transducers in that initial blast!"

Mace pushed himself to his feet, helping up Jane.

Jane looked over her arms. "Glad I had on the suit. Thought that was going to rattle my teeth out for a minute."

Gnaga Klept asked, "Mr. Hardy, may I see the data from the radiation sensors?"

"Humphrey? Post up the radiation data if you could."

The display wall in the bay lit up with figures and graphs .

Gnaga stepped closer. "Nuclear. Definitely nuclear."

Jeff Moskowitz walked into the bay. "That was more than just nuclear. There was blast and a shockwave. You don't get that from nukes in space."

Gnaga nodded. "Indeed. Look at the hydrogen curve. I believe the cargo of that vessel was liquid hydrogen. The radiation is from a fission reaction, the blast and shockwave from fusion. The reactor must have gone supercritical during the blast having that much fuel available to it. Mr. Collins, I must thank you for warning us off. Had we been any closer, and if we had been on a lesser ship, we would not have survived."

Jeff stared at the data. "Remarkable. Mr. Montak, is this a weapon the Mawga have or make use of?"

Bontu replied, "Absolutely not. The rules explicitly say that fission weapons shall not be used. This has to be a weapon put together by your Humans, Mr. Hardy."

Gnaga nodded. "And a very effective weapon I might add. And the materials used to do this are relatively inexpensive and easily had."

"And look at this," said Jeff. "Linear. They could scale this up to be a thousand times more powerful. Imagine being near a small supernova when it went off."

Jasper stood, flexing the joint of his elbow. "Any chance we took a fatal dose of radiation?"

Gnaga studied the data. "Here, this is the graph showing the internal level. We had a small spike, but not enough to cause any damage while in these suits. As a precaution, I would like to do a few scans on each of us that were here in this bay. We were on the blast side and the least protected."

Jasper scowled. "Those transducers are what kept us from frying, are they not?"

Gnaga nodded. "They are."

"And losing three of them, on this side of the ship, that didn't give us a higher dose? "

Gnaga shook his head. "The radiation reached the ship almost instantly, the transducers provided full protection for us during that part of the event. The shockwave that followed from the reactor explosion took out the transducers. That wave travels at a much slower speed. See here, approximately forty thousand kilometers per hour as compared to light speed."

Jasper again scowled. "We aren't gonna pass back through that radiation again, are we?"

Jeff replied, "Not unless we can pass light speed."

"Guess that makes sense."

Mace placed his hand on Jasper's shoulder. "Looks like our new DSO saved our hides."

Jane frowned. "What, no love for me backing him?"

Mace laughed. "Fine. As a reward, I'll let you pick out the acronym for your new title."

Jane offered a confused look. "New title?"

Mace replied as they walked toward the bridge. "Tomorrow, after our raid of the Mawga cargo ship, I thought we'd vote on titles for each other, and give more permanent assignments. No more constantly changing station rotations."

Jane smiled. "I could get behind that."

Mace made his way onto the bridge. "What's the systems damage, Mr. Crawford?"

Jordan replied, "As you know, we lost three transducers. We



also just took one of the reactors offline. I redirected Mr. Moskowitz and Mr. Klept to investigate. The reaction parameters appeared to be losing stability, still at safe levels, but unusual. I have teams checking for any physical damage to equipment."

Mace sat in his chair. "Anyone get tossed around up here?"

Jordan shook his head. "No sir. Mr. Hobbs suggested we all strap ourselves in as soon as we got close. By the way, thank you for that, Mr. Hobbs."

Liam pointed. "That was a previous suggestion by Mr. Hardy. If credit is due, it's to him. "

Mace asked, "Where we headed?"

Liam replied, "I took us out at about eighty degrees from our target area for tomorrow. We'll be turning toward that destination in about a half hour. Should be there in about twelve hours, well ahead of the designated arrival time for the Mawga."

Mace stood from his chair. "Mr. Crawford, when you feel the situation to be fully stable, start rotating the crews for a rest. I want this crew back on the bridge when we reach our destination. I'll be in my cabin if anyone needs me."

"Consider it done, Mr. Hardy."

## ▲ Chapter 17 ▲

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*T*he *Rogers* arrived with just over four hours left on the clock. Crews were sent out to move two of the remaining transducers to provide a more balanced dampening field around her hull. Mace returned to the captain's chair from a long rest.

Johnny was at the comm station. "I could sure use a big ol' cup of coffee about now. Those nutrient bars aren't bad, but they don't quite give the boost of a sixteen ounce double-dark latte."

Mace laughed, "A what? Double-dark? Let me guess, you chase that with one of those monstrous caffeine drinks?"

Johnny shrugged. "I weigh in at three hundred pounds. It takes a lot of fuel to get this much mass going."

Jane walked onto the bridge, cutting into the conversation. "Two eighty-five."

Mace asked, "What's that?"

"Two hundred eighty-five pounds. He's dropped twenty-two pounds on the nutrient bars."

Jasper snickered from a corner chair. "He ain't quite the man he used to be. I might have to start calling him monkey boy instead of ape-man. He loses any more I'll have to reduce that again to just plain ol' chimp."

Johnny pointed. "Just don't start calling me Bubbles. You do that and I'll come down on you so hard you'll squeeze through the holes in that deck plating."

Jasper casually waved the threat off. "I ain't scared of no monkey."

Jane snapped. "You're both monkeys. Now please shut up. Mace, I just came up to report on the transducers. They've been moved, and the adjusted fields look good. We're down about 15 percent on that side of the ship, but still well above any others out there.

"And this got me thinking. We possibly have eighty shuttles out there waiting for us. Each one has a single transducer on it. Bontu says all transducers are the same. They all come from one of the Galactic Union founders— another market they've cornered it seems.

"Anyway, Jeff, David, and Gnaga ran some numbers. They think adding that many transducers could increase our total shielding by as much as 400 percent. Those twenty cruisers could pound away at us from as close as a kilometer and not do damage."

Johnny nodded. "I like the sound of that."

"And we have the power from the reactors to easily handle those. In fact, Gnaga suggested we scavenge reactors from the shuttles as well, setting up the dampener fields with their own reactors. He thinks two dozen of those smaller units could be used to protect our hull, leaving the main reactors for the gravity drives and plasma cannons."

Mace asked, "Would we have enough hydrogen storage to support that? We're already using it at twice the normal rate."

Jane replied, "We would. Each of those is a quarter size compared to what we currently have. Adding twenty-four would be like adding six full reactors. Our original six months supply of hydrogen would only be lasting us six weeks. But I would take that burden in trade for being immune to the plasma guns. And Jeff says we wouldn't even have felt a shimmer from that ship bomb they tried to get us with. I'd say it would be well worth the cost."

Mace took a deep breath. "Worth it if these raids go OK. Otherwise, we'll be spending a couple months refining enough hydrogen to refill our tanks with the refiners we have. I'd rather not

sit in one place for that length of time."

After the short break, the order was given to proceed to the final target area. The cargo ship was expected to come through a wormhole in the same location as had previously been used. As the *Rogers* approached, sensor scans were performed .

Humphrey Mallot said, "We're now within range of the prior opening and sensors are showing all clear. I would have expected escort ships."

"That's a big tactical mistake on their part," Mace replied.

Jane called up from the reactor room. "We have the eighth reactor back online. Gnaga performed an adjustment to the containment field and all monitors are showing stable."

Hans Mueller said, "Good. If we get into a firefight, that extra reactor will be a big help. We should have a half second full recharge time when all eight are online. That's a whole—"

Humphrey interrupted. "We have a wormhole opening at fifteen hundred kilometers."

Bontu Montak came on the bridge. "Mr. Mallot, are those figures correct?"

Mace asked, "What's the issue?"

Bontu replied, "Wormholes are expensive, Mr. Hardy. You would normally only open one to the size of your largest ship. That is much larger than a standard deep space cargo hauler."

"Do your people have cargo ships that size?"

Bontu nodded. "We do, but they typically only travel short distances, such as fast interplanetary hops. Deep haulers tend to purposefully be long and slender. The cost is much greater for a wider wormhole as compared to keeping a smaller one open longer."

Humphrey said, "We have a ship coming through. Long and thin as Mr. Montak suggested."

Mace gestured to Liam. "Mr. Hobbs, take us in. Mueller, give her a couple warning shots. Let's bring her to a stop. Mr. Crawford, this is Mace. Are your boarding teams ready? I want at least a dozen refiners brought back once that ship is secure. After that we'll worry about dumping that crew on a shuttle."

Jordan replied, "We're ready, Mr. Hardy."

As the *Rogers* closed on the cargo vessel, Hans Mueller let fly four plasma rounds as warning shots.

Humphrey said, "She's slowing. "

Mace stroked his beard. "This is too easy. Mr. Crawford, I—"

Humphrey yelled, "Sir! We have another ship coming through! And it's big!"

Bontu Montak stepped back. "It's... it's a founder ship! A dreadnought!"

Mace stood. "Mr. Hobbs, get us out of here!"

The first round from the enormous ship slipped through the void, passing the location the *Rogers* had only moments before occupied."

Hans buckled himself into his chair. "That was twice the power of our cannons, Mr. Hardy. I suggest we leave the area!"

Mace nodded. "I agree! Liam, keep us on a zigzag. And Mr. Mueller, target the drives of that hauler. See if we can at least immobilize her!"

Two plasma rounds left the cannons of the *Rogers* , striking the Mawga cargo hauler just in front of the drive systems. Secondary explosions saw the long ship lose propulsion.

Another plasma bolt slipped past the *Rogers* as a hail came over the comm.

Mace gestured to Johnny. "Patch it through."

A highly-decorated alien in obvious military garb filled the comm display. "I am Admiral Hatuk Gar of the Galactic Union Dellus Force. You are ordered to halt immediately. Your ship and your crew are in violation of Galactic Union space!"

Bontu pleaded. "You must stop, Mr. Hardy. You cannot defy a founder. They are too powerful."

Mace turned, "Mr. Hobbs, give her everything we've got. Get us out of here. Mr. Mueller, target those gun turrets."

Bontu moved next to Mace. "Mr. Hardy, you mustn't."

Mace looked down at the cowering, meter-tall alien. "Mr. Montak, we're Humans. We either live free or we die trying. We turn ourselves over, we're as good as dead already. I'd rather go out in a blaze of glory than rot in some cell awaiting execution. You've said before, they have zero tolerance for rule breakers. You think they've changed their minds? "

Bontu slowly sat in the lower chair beside Mace. "I suppose not. I apologize, Mr. Hardy. We've lived in fear of the Union for our entire lives."

Hans Mueller reported. "Targeting all cannons this side of the Dellus warship. Firing! We have only minor damage, Mr. Hardy."

Mace turned to face Liam Hobbs. "Get us out of here, Mr. Hobbs!"

Liam replied, "Building speed."

Hans added, "We'll be out of range of those cannons in five seconds. They don't seem to be pursuing us, Mr. Hardy."

Mace took a deep breath, letting it out slowly. "You see, Mr. Montak, we live another day."

A single round left the dreadnought, catching the *Rogers* dead center back. The ship shook violently for most of a second.

Humphrey yelled, "We have hull breach! Rear transducers are

offline! Section forty-eight has sealed itself off!"

Mace stood. "How many do we have back there?"

Humphrey replied, "Six! All working on drive maintenance!"

Mace yelled into his comm. "Mr. Crawford! Take your teams to the back! We have people trapped! Make every effort to get them out of there!"

Mace turned. "Mr Hobbs, add some random to our direction. And monitor those incoming rounds for evasive action."

Liam nodded. "Will do, Mr. Hardy."

Seconds later, Jordan Crawford reported in. "Bulkheads are all sealed, Mr. Hardy. We have no way in."

A voice came over the general comm. "This is Ray Zeal. We have three dead and two injured. "I've moved Jenny Taub and Don Foster up to room 48-7. I've closed off the room, but we're still leaking air. We all have our helmets on."

Mace replied, "Hang in there, Mr. Zeal. We're gonna do all we can to get you out! "

Jeff said, "Mr. Hardy, I'm here with Mr. Crawford. As he said, the bulkhead doors are all sealed. Until that breach is fixed, they won't be opening."

Mace asked, "What can we do, Mr. Moskowitz? Can you cut us a new door?"

Jeff replied, "Not without having this section seal off as well. Hold on. I have an idea."

Several seconds passed as Jeff could be seen talking to the Mawga, Heeb and Hooba.

Jeff turned back to face the comm. "Mr. Hardy, I think we might have a solution. Will take us about twenty minutes and we'll have air going into that room."

Raymond Zeal said, "It's not a question of air. We have injured here. Both are out cold and I don't know the extent of the injuries they've taken. Jenny looks to have had a severe blow to the chest. And Don was caught between a beam and a wall. I managed to get him free but he's not looking good either."

Maala Heeb stepped forward. "Mr. Moskowitz, what if we construct a pass-through chamber? Weld in a box with two chambers and sealed doors, then cut a hole in that bulkhead."

Jeff looked back at the wall. "Do we have the parts?"

Heeb nodded. "I believe we have most if not all of what we need available, yes. I can have our crewmen begin on it immediately."

Jeff said, "Mr. Hardy, we're getting started on a pass-through. Not sure how long it will take until we get going."

The crew rushed to a nearby maintenance room. Welders were pulled, as well as two small hatch-style doors and enough plating for a two-chamber box.

Jeff attempted to help, but was pushed aside by the scrambling Mawga crewman. Twenty-two minutes later, the hastily welded structure was complete. A crewman crawled through the hatchway, closing it behind himself. Five minutes later a bulkhead plate fell into the room with the injured crew. Jenny Taub was moved into the chamber and the back-facing hatch was closed. Seconds later, she was pulled from the box into the active part of the ship. Several minutes after, the remaining two were through.

Gnaga Klept opened a comm. "Mr. Hardy, I would like to lead a team into forty-eight in an attempt to seal off the breach. That strike has damaged modulating gear for those drives. Efficiency is showing as down 15 percent."

Mace asked, "OK. Who do you need with you?"

Gnaga replied, "The team here will be sufficient."



Mace tilted his head. "Those are Mawga. You're OK with that?"

Gnaga nodded. "I have no issue with the Mawga, Mr. Hardy. This is in their best interest as well."

Bontu said, "He will have no problem with my people."

Mace gestured. "Get at it, Mr. Klept. And don't hesitate to ask for whatever you need."

Liam reported. "Mr. Hardy, we're out of sensor range. The dreadnought showed no sign of a desire to follow us."

Mace frowned. "They're staying to protect that ship. Mr. Hobbs, take us to the nearest of those shuttles we stole. We need transducers."

Humphrey said, "Our hydrogen store is starting to get low, Mr. Hardy. We'll be needing to find a water source before long."

Liam entered waypoints toward the first shuttle. "We can park on the Martian icecap, or Enceladus, or Europa, when we need water."

Mace nodded. "What about the fuel from the shuttles? They should have some aboard. Can we tap into that?"

Humphrey typed away on his console. "Even if we hit all eighty of those shuttles, and if they were full, wouldn't give us more than 10 percent over what we have now."

Mace asked, "How difficult is the transfer?"

Humphrey said, "Relatively easy. I expect we'll have each of those shuttles in bay three for the transducer removal anyway. We can siphon from right there. "

Jeff came over the comm. "Jenny Taub is conscious. Three broken ribs and a punctured lung. She'll live. Mr. Foster may not. Scans show a severely damaged kidney and spleen. Both will have to come out. There's massive internal bleeding as well. We're working to get that under control."

Mace replied, "Do what you can, Mr. Moskowitz. I don't see us getting any more crewmen. Every one of us is critical to the continued operation of this ship."

Jeff nodded. "Preaching to the choir, Mr. Hardy."

Mace leaned back in his chair with a heavy sigh.

Johnny asked, "You OK?"

"I think we just made a new enemy today. Not what we needed."

## ▲ Chapter 18 ▲

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Six shuttles were scavenged, their transducers collected, their hydrogen fuel siphoned. Section forty-eight had been sealed by Gnaga and the Mawga, the drive modulators repaired.

Jane stood on the bridge deck between Johnny and Mace. "You two sad sacks aren't doing us any good. Come on, we're still alive. Be happy!"

Mace slumped in his chair. "I can't help but think sometimes that we made a mistake. We could have been back at the cave, just hanging out and being oblivious to all this."

Jane said, "You don't think they would have eventually come for us? Forced us into those community centers?"

Johnny shrugged. "Would life in those centers really have been that bad? I mean, everything was provided for you."

Jeff walked onto the bridge. "Mr. Foster didn't make it. Jenny will be out of commission for at least a month."

Jane shook her head. "That right there. That's why we're doing this."

Johnny turned. "So we can get people killed?"

Jane rolled her eyes. "No, you idiot. So we can choose our own path. It's called freedom. If we gave into the Mawga we'd be little more than zombies now."

Mace replied, "We know that, Jane. We're just sulking right now. We've lost some good people. The odds against us just doubled or tripled."

Jane slapped Mace on the chest plate of his battlesuit. "Well, get

over your little pity party. We've got too much to do. Let's get on with the business of getting all those transducers. "

Johnny said, "We're waiting for an analysis by Mr. Mueller as to whether or not more transducers would have stopped that dreadnought strike."

Jane turned. "And?"

Hans Mueller looked up from his console. "I should have results in about a half hour. The field equations are quite complex. David Yancy is helping with those. I'm waiting for several numbers from him right now."

Jane turned back to face Mace. "It's time you two got over yourselves and got back in the game. We have too much to do, too much to accomplish for our officers to be sitting around feeling sorry about what's passed. Get your sad asses back into the saddle."

Mace chuckled as he held up a hand. "Johnny, you sure we can't clone her? I'm sorry, Jane. I guess we've been doing a little too much thinking and not enough acting. Mr. Hobbs, what's our ETA on that next shuttle?"

Jane smiled. "Good, get interested. We need both of you driving the bus again."

Jane left the bridge.

Jasper spun around in his chair. "Ha ha! Looks like the trainer had to come down on the monkey boy again."

Johnny pointed. "Don't make me throw feces at you, old man."

Mace stood. "I should go check on the Mawga. I've asked them to build one of those chamber boxes for each section. We take another hit like that, we're gonna want access. Had that box been in place, we might have been able to save Mr. Foster."

Johnny replied, "I don't understand why all these ships don't have a setup like that."

Liam turned from his console. "Every one of those holes you make weakens the structural integrity of those bulkheads. Those hatches they are installing, they aren't blast rated."

Mace stopped at the doorway to the bridge. "We took that into consideration, Mr. Hobbs. We aren't cutting through the bulkheads yet, just setting up the mechanism that will allow us to in the future if needed."

Liam replied, "I stand corrected. Excellent planning, Mr. Hardy."

"It wasn't me, Mr. Hobbs. That one came from Mr. Klept."

After a short walk, Mace stopped at the chamber under construction. "How we looking, Gnaga?"

The thin alien swished his mouth back and forth in thought. "Coming along. We have three more to go."

Mace ran his hand down along a welded seam. "Any way to make these more rigid? Liam brought up a good point. Those hatches aren't blast rated. Has me wondering what we do if we're in the middle of a firefight. I don't want to be cutting holes in bulkheads while we still might have people shooting at us."

Gnaga looked intently at the external hatch. "What would you suggest, Mr. Hardy? We only have these materials to work with."

Mace stroked his beard in thought. "Anything we can strip off those shuttles we're bringing in?"

Gnaga shook his head. "The shuttles have no bulkheads, Mr. Hardy. The interior doors are no better than the hatches we are already making use of."

Mace shrugged, "What about the exterior door? I know the main door is that ramp, but isn't there a door coming off the cockpit to the outside?"

Gnaga thought. "I suppose that would be a much better

alternative. Not quite blast rated, but very close."

Mace went further. "If we made use of those shuttle doors, do you think we could get by with a thinner welded plate covering the cutout in the bulkhead? Would that then be just as strong as a blast door?"

Gnaga nodded. "I suppose it would. You do realize that every blast door is itself a weak point in those bulkheads. Each door we add weakens our integrity. "

"Could we build deflection walls around those openings to alleviate some of that?"

Gnaga smiled. "We could. You must have some engineering in your background."

Mace laughed. "Nope. Construction. Mostly commercial. And out of wood, nothing like this. Think about using the shuttle doors, Mr. Klept. I'll leave you to your business now."

Mace turned away, smiling as he congratulated himself on coming up with a solution. Next up was a visit to the infirmary. Jenny Taub, with her freckled face and sandy brown hair, sat up in bed as Mace entered the room.

"Miss Taub, how you feeling today?"

"Hurts to breathe."

Mace smiled and nodded. "You'll have that for a few weeks. It does slowly get better though. You'll definitely want to take it easy between now and then."

"How are my gravity drives, Mr. Hardy? I can't seem to get a satisfying answer out of anyone."

Mace sat on the end of the bed. "The hole's been patched but needs work. We've replaced the transducers on the outside. And the modulators are all fully functioning. Mr. Montak's crewmen know their stuff. When you're up and about, you can quiz them on what

they did."

Jenny smiled. "Finally, a simple straight answer." She winced as she eased herself up higher in the bed.

Mace held up a hand. "Don't move on account of me."

"Don't worry, I'm not moving on account of anyone for a while. If I don't at least move some, I get incredibly uncomfortable."

Another painful motion had Jenny Taub settled. "Mr. Hardy, I know we don't really know each other and have hardly spoken a word to one another, but I just want to say that I am grateful for all you've done."

"Sometimes I have to wonder if dragging everyone else into this was a good thing or not. "

Jenny scowled. "How could you even think that? We are free, Mr. Hardy. I know the hours suck, and the work can be ultra boring when everything is working properly. But where else could I be fighting for my freedom as well as the freedom of all humanity? Where else would I have seen Saturn and her rings filling the black sky of Enceladus?

"This has been the most fantastic adventure I've ever been on. We're fighting the good fight. I'm sorry, Mr. Hardy, but if I was back on Earth I'd just be another one of those bleary-eyed drones squeezing out triplets.

"I tracked my brother to one of those shelters. He's now got six children on the way from two girlfriends, and he's oblivious to the responsibilities they will tax him with. He spends almost all his waking hours in those entertainment simulators. Sorry, but I'll keep my freedom."

Mace laughed. "Funny, I just got chewed out for asking that same question of Jane Tretcher. She essentially said the same thing."

Jenny smiled. "Sounds like a smart lady."

"I might be the captain calling the shots, but her and others like you are the rudder that keeps us moving in the right direction."

"What are our plans, Mr. Hardy? I know we needed those refiners. Can't we build our own?"

"We don't have the resources or the know-how. The refiners, the reactors, the gravity drives, the plasma cannons, those are all made by the Union founders. They sell them at a fair price to all the members of the Union. It's against the rules for others to even study what they do or how they work."

Jenny laughed as she shook her head. "The *rules*, that's the craziest governmental system I've ever heard of."

"It is, isn't it? I believe it's also the reason we're alive today. If you don't mind my asking, what'd you do before all this happened?"

Jenny looked up at the ceiling. "I flew an Apache helicopter. Until I got out, that is. "

Mace pulled back. "I wouldn't have guessed that. Who for?"

"Seventeenth Cav out of Hunter in Georgia."

"I was at Hunter. See any action?"

Jenny nodded. "Middle East theater. Was part of the second stability force."

Mace scowled. "I was part of the first. It got political, I got out. Tended bar and worked construction up until this all started."

Mace continued: "Let me ask you ... our military aircraft: why didn't we see anything flying after this all started?"

"We were grounded. Not that we needed Apaches in the air anyway, but the President sent out orders to keep everything on the ground. We weren't to use anything when dealing with civilians."

"What that really meant was we couldn't use anything *for* civilians, either. That event, with communications taken out, too,



threw everybody into a wait-and-see mode. I can't tell you how insanely mad it made most of us. All that sitting back and hoarding while our people starved.

"I heard President Canon had the generals who spoke out reprimanded. Thing is, we could have used those choppers and planes for communications. We could have saved half those people with just a little coordination of resources."

Mace frowned. "I don't think it really would have mattered. I believe it was the Mawga who caused this. If not them, then the Kaachi or someone else. I don't think the Mawga showed up until they felt we were sufficiently subdued. The Russians and Chinese tried to fight, and both had their populations decimated. We're talking 90 to 95 percent. We lost seventy. Even if you had managed to coordinate, I think they would have found a way to disable that. They had their own plans for us."

Jenny sighed. "I guess. We were all grounded anyway when those EMP blasts went off."

Mace raised his eyebrows. "Really? I would have thought the shielding on those would have been enough. "

Jenny shook her head. "Not even close. Whatever that was, it was powerful enough to take out everything. Planes, tanks, trucks... nothing was left moving or running."

Mace thought for a moment. "How is it we still had our hand-held missiles? I've witnessed a number of those still in operation."

Jenny tilted her head. "Stored in underground, shielded bunkers, inside shielded shipping containers, inside individually-shielded packing containers. We had some other electronic gear like that which survived, but not much. And nothing we could really make use of. The whole thing was like the perfect storm of calamity and poor decision making. An almost complete lack of competent leadership coming from the White House."

Mace shook his head. "And we have the likes of Stark rising

from the ashes."

Jenny shrugged. "And you."

Mace returned a confused look. "Me what?"

Jenny said, "You rose from the ashes, just like Stark. And here we are because of that."

Mace offered a skeptical gaze. "I had help. If not for the great people surrounding me, I'd have gone nowhere."

Jenny smiled. "Great leaders are those who surround themselves with great people. You might have fallen into this gig, but you've shown time and again that you're well suited to it. I'm sure when you were serving you had commanders that brought out the best in everyone, and at least a few that brought out the worst."

"The great ones usually rise up through the ranks while the incompetents fall to the wayside. We both know that's not entirely true, but over time it's the definite trend. One of the reasons our all-volunteer military was so kickass."

Mace sat back. "I wish I had the confidence in myself that you have in me."

Jenny reached out, patting Mace on the hand as she grimaced in pain. "You'll catch on, sir. And being humble is another of those traits that make for a great leader. I'd say you have all of what it takes. And it shows."

Mace laughed. "I think it's time I got out of here before my head swells up from all the accolades. Thank you, Miss Taub. I was in need of that talk."

"Anytime, Mr. Hardy." Jenny Taub smiled. "You know where to find me."

The following day saw the remainder of the shuttles brought aboard and stripped of needed items. The salvaged transducers were added to the *Rogers'* hull, the new reactors installed and connected to

the transducers. Exterior doors and frames were cut away, and the hydrogen tanks drained.

Mace sat in his chair on the bridge. "Anyone have any further suggestions for preparing for the meeting with the Kaachi?"

Jeff said, "Fresh out of ideas over here. David, Mr. Heeb, Mr. Hooba and I, along with Mr. Klept, are looking into the possibilities of increasing the efficiency of our gravity drives, increasing the power of our weapons or the capability of our shields. We're thinking our best opportunity lies with those cannons. But we'll need a space dock and a month's time to make anything happen on that front. And we're only talking about the possibility of a 10 percent increase in power output."

Johnny said, "In four days, we'll have another hundred ships in our fleet. We might want to start thinking about a command and control structure. And about what we'll do once they've joined us. That Dellus dreadnought throws a big wrench in the works."

Hans Mueller replied, "I have an idea about that. We have the small bomb ship in our possession. We could possibly use that to take it out. They might take it aboard just as we were going to. I doubt Stark's people told any of the Mawga about those two ships. Especially if they were against the GU rules."

Liam spun around in his chair. "I think we risk heavy involvement by the GU if we attack that ship. Our previous targeting of their weapons was an obviously defensive move."

Mace said, "I'm leaning toward what Liam just said. I wish we had a way to get intel on the dreadnought and what the Dellus are doing here. Unfortunately, we can't get a signal to or from Earth without everyone knowing where we are. And it's not like we have any contacts there anymore."

Bontu held up his hand. "I may have had sympathizers within the ranks of the Mawga command. However, with a dreadnought here, they wouldn't venture to go against the Union in any way. It

would be virtual suicide."

Jane walked onto the bridge. "I know most of you didn't know the crewmen killed by the dreadnought strike. We're having a funeral of sorts for them down in bay three."

Johnny asked, "Still have the same plans as what you told me before?"

Jane nodded. "Yep. They'll be set to drift in the gravitational pull of Jupiter. Will take about two years for them to fall into it."

Mace stood. "Mr. Crawford, you have command of the bridge."

Johnny raised a hand. "Anyone foresee an immediate need for comms? If not, I'd like to attend."

Jane, Johnny and Mace made their way to bay three. Words were said over the four fallen crewmen with Mace reading a prepared statement. Derwood and Molly sat in silent attendance. One by one the makeshift caskets were moved into an airlock before their release into the cold void beyond. With the press of a button, the four drifted away.

Johnny whispered. "We're a tight crew. I'm sure everyone wanted to be here."

Mace replied, "They gave their lives so the rest of us could live. If not for them, we wouldn't have made it as far as we have."

Johnny placed his hand on Mace's shoulder. "Come on, Chief, let's get back to holding up our end of the bargain."

## ▲ Chapter 19 ▲

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*T*he Rogers sat at the ready at the designated location, awaiting the arrival of the Australians and their ships. Everyone was anxious to see the beginnings of a wormhole opening.

Johnny said, "Three minutes and counting."

Liam added, "I hope they are punctual. The suspense is a bit much."

Jasper pulled the belt on his seat tighter.

Mace asked, "You expecting someone other than our Australian friends?"

Jasper took a deep breath. "I fear the unknown, Mr. Hardy. Last time one of those opened, a dreadnought came through. Who's to say that won't happen again? The Kaachi are members of the Union. Could be they caved and reported the Australians. Might be why the Union got involved in the first place."

Mace nodded. "I considered that. That's why Liam has a sequence of escape maneuvers sitting at the ready. It's also the reason we moved three additional transducers to the back of the hull. If anything but Kaachi cruisers full of Australians comes through that portal, we won't be sticking around."

The bridge was silent for the final remaining minute. On schedule, the beginnings of a wormhole showed on the sensor readouts. The wormhole opened to a size proportioned for a Kaachi cruiser.

Mace let out the breath he had been holding. "Johnny, hail that first ship."

Johnny replied, "General hail going out."

"Mr. Hobbs, what's our distance?"

Liam replied, "Eight thousand kilometers."

Mace gestured. "Take us out to twelve. "

Jasper said, "Nervous?"

Mace shook his head. "Cautious."

Johnny reported, "No acceptance of the hail yet."

As the fourth Kaachi ship came through, the general hail was accepted. "This is Admiral Koukara. I am here on behalf of the Kaachi Military Council to ask for your complete and total surrender under the order of the Galactic Union."

Mace pointed to Liam Hobbs. "Mr. Hobbs, get us out of here."

Liam nodded. "On our way."

The first of four plasma cannon rounds impacted the rear dampening field of the *Rogers* .

Humphrey Mallot reported: "No damage, Mr. Hardy."

Mace nodded. "They want to play. Mr. Hobbs, bring us back around. Mr. Mueller, I want targeting on all four in the critical zones."

As the *Rogers* slowed and turned, Jasper said, "They ain't running, Mr. Hardy. And that portal's still open."

Mace replied. "Mr. Mallot, will your scan give us the size of the bios on that ship?"

Humphrey replied, "It will. One moment ... I have it. No one over four foot two, Mr. Hardy. That's across all four ships."

Mace scowled. "All Kaachi. Mr. Mueller, fire when you have a lock."

Hans replied, "Firing four rounds, half second spread."

Humphrey yelled, "Four hits! Three are breaking in half! The fourth is turning toward the wormhole!"

"Mr. Mueller, stop that ship. I want the generators and transducers from those vessels."

Seconds later Hans replied, "Plasma away."

Humphrey followed. "Fourth Kaachi ship is disabled. Sir! I have sixteen shuttles heading this way!"

Mace said, "Hail the admiral!"

Johnny replied, "Hail is being refused. "

Mace opened a comm. "Jane? Is Gnaga there with you?"

Jane nodded. "He is. Looks kind of stunned at the moment."

Mace said, "Bring him to the bridge if you would. And bring him with another escort. We are now at war with his people."

Jane frowned. "We've been watching on the display. Be up there in a minute."

Mace turned to face Liam. "Mr. Hobbs, keep us moving at just out of reach of those shuttles. My guess is they intend to board us."

Jasper said, "We could just take the little backstabbers out."

Mace nodded. "I'm aware of that, Mr. Collins. However, we might want parts from those shuttles."

Humphrey Mallot said, "Mr. Hardy, I count six reactors still functioning between those three ships. And fifty-four transducers if you count the ones on those shuttles."

Jane escorted Gnaga onto the bridge.

Mace turned. "Mr. Klept, it appears your people have decided on war."

Gnaga lowered his head. "Yes. If the Galactic Union is involved, they had no choice."

Mace gestured toward the display. "I don't see any GU ships out there, Mr. Klept."

Jasper said, "Anyone else bothered that the portal is still open?"

Liam replied, "Could be they are just trying to get home."

Jasper laughed, "Home? They have a funny way of showing it with all their shuttles heading our way."

Liam nodded. "Good point."

"Gnaga, these are your people. We're open to ideas of how to save them. If they keep coming at us, it won't end well."

Gnaga lowered his head. "If they are in pursuit with shuttles, they have no intention of stopping. The Galactic Union has to be driving them, Mr. Hardy. A typical response would have been capitulation and surrender. "

Hans Mueller said, "If you'd like, I can target the drives of those shuttles with a low power plasma charge. I can't guarantee there won't be excess damage."

Mace asked, "Still no hail response, Johnny?"

Johnny replied, "All channels are being refused."

"Mr. Mueller, target the nearest shuttle only. Set the charge level at minimal. We'll see if we can convince them to stop."

Hans replied, "Plasma round away... no response. They're still coming."

Mace looked at Gnaga. "You sure about the response we're seeing?"

Gnaga nodded. "I have never been witness to or heard of a similar action by our forces, Mr. Hardy. They do not intend to stop."



"Hans, increase the power level and try again. If they don't respond, increase it again."

Several seconds later, a half dozen plasma rounds passed before Humphrey came into the conversation. "I'm showing minor hull breach on that shuttle, Mr. Hardy. Another hit and she's likely to break apart."

Mace asked, "Mr. Mueller? Are we targeting their drive systems only?"

"We are. However, those shuttles are small. The level of charge we're sending over affects most of that ship."

Liam said, "No letup by the other shuttles, Mr. Hardy."

Jane put her hand on his arm. "They aren't leaving you a choice."

Jasper said, "Let the little ass-hats have it then. The longer we dabble around here, the more likely we are to have something else come through that wormhole. Just get it over with!"

Mace nodded toward the weapons console. Hans Mueller let fly another plasma round. The targeted shuttle split in half and exploded as the reactor lost containment .

Mace took a deep breath, shaking his head. "Target the next shuttle, Mr. Mueller."

The empty space in front of the wormhole was soon full of debris from the sixteen shuttles, the occupants now dead and scattered.

Johnny said, "The four cruisers are still refusing our hails."

Mace opened a comm. "Mr. Crawford? Are your teams ready?"

Jordan replied, "We are. We have a dozen soldiers and a pilot aboard shuttles one and three. Give the word and we'll be on our way."

Mace turned to Liam. "Mr. Hobbs, take us in close to the left half of that first cruiser."

Liam replied, "Thirty seconds."

"Mr. Crawford, there are two reactors in that remnant. Clean it out and bring them back."

Jordan replied, "Launching in fifteen, Mr. Hardy."

Jasper shook his head. "I can't say I like sending our people out with that wormhole still open."

"Mr. Mallot, what are we seeing through that portal?"

Humphrey replied, "Sensors are only picking up background radiation noise, Mr. Hardy. All graphs are flat."

Mace said, "Tell us the second that changes, Mr. Mallot."

Jasper unbuckled his belt. He stood and walked over to the sensor console, leaning over Humphrey Mallot's shoulder.

Jordan came over the comm: "We're clamped on the airlock, Mr. Hardy. Door is open. We have two Kaachi standing in the hall with their blades at the ready."

Mace said, "Don't take any chances, Mr. Crawford. Take 'em down."

Jordan nodded as he raised an AR15. Four rounds into each Kaachi had them incapacitated and writhing on the ground in pain.

Jordan reported: "Bullets didn't penetrate, Mr. Hardy. "

Mace nodded. "Drag them into a side room, Mr. Crawford. I want those reactors outside for grappling in ten minutes."

The bridge of the *Rogers* watched in fascination as the teams of Human soldiers swept through the cruiser remnant. Five minutes after their arrival, the first of the bolts holding the target reactors to the floor were cut. Two minutes later, the reactor was on the move.

Jordan reported. "We've cleared this section, Mr. Hardy. The door has been sealed and we're about to cut through the outer wall at the points Mr. Klept instructed."

Crawford's second reported in. "This is Beals. We have the first two transducers in hand. Moving to the next two."

Mace sat back in his captain's chair as Jane stood by his side. "I can't believe how smoothly this operation is going."

Jeff walked onto the bridge. "Mr. Hardy, I think we're missing a big opportunity. The hydrogen stores on two of those cruisers are nearly full. Any way to top off our own?"

Mace replied, "What did we use on the shuttles?"

Jeff frowned. "Those were sitting in our bay, Mr. Hardy. We rigged a simple transfer line. We couldn't do that unless you park us up against that remnant. I don't know how large a line we could rig for that, or if we even have enough."

Johnny turned. "Could it be stripped from the cruiser itself? They won't be needing it."

Mace looked at Jeff. "That cruiser is identical to this one. Can we find the parts?"

Jeff thought for several seconds. "I might have a better idea. What if we try to pull out the hydrogen store itself?"

"Could we do that?"

Jeff shrugged. "I don't see why not. We have the torches. Mr. Klept, does that sound feasible?"

Jane shook her head. "You won't get any answers out of him today. That was supposed to be his ride home out there. "

Jeff said, "Let me take David, Mr. Heeb, and Mr. Hooba into conference room C. I'll have an answer for you in maybe... fifteen minutes?"

Mace nodded. "Do it. And keep in mind, if we screw up, we've got three more chances."

Jeff laughed. "No, sorry, we screw up with one of those stores and we're out of chances. Liquid hydrogen is not very forgiving of mistakes. One mishap inside here with an oxygen source and it's the *Hindenburg* all over again. And if you inadvertently raise it's temperature while liquefied, it tends to expand rapidly... explode would be a better word."

Johnny turned. "I agree with Jeff. We don't want to be reliving the past. Especially not out here."

Jeff headed to the conference room as he opened a comm to the others.

Jordan said, "First reactor is ready for grappling. Number two is about five minutes away."

Beals added, "Eight transducers in the bag. Two to go and this barge is finished. We should be heading back in about five also."

"Mr. Humphrey, give us a deep structural scan of that remnant. We need something to pass to Jeff's team. Follow it up with the same for each of those sections. I want to know which store would be the easiest to remove."

Several tense minutes passed before the next report came in. "This is Beals. We're returning to our shuttle."

Mace nodded. "Bring those transducers home before moving on to the next section, Tom."

Tom Beals replied, "You got it, Mr. Hardy. Should be home in three minutes."

Jordan said, "Reactor two is in the grapple. What should we do with the prisoners?"

Mace replied, "Leave them be, Mr. Crawford. We can't bring them aboard here. They still have power don't they? "

Jordan nodded. "We left one running. It has slight damage, but it should keep them from freezing until help arrives. If help arrives."

"They aren't our responsibility, Mr. Crawford. Their leadership left them in that position. Not what I would prefer, but we can't take them with us either."

The two prized reactors and ten transducers were dropped in shuttle bays one and three. The teams were soon on to the next remnant. Forty minutes later, two additional reactors and thirteen more transducers were aboard the *Rogers* .

Jeff walked onto the bridge. I think we have a solution, Mr. Hardy. The next remnant has a nearly full hydrogen store. We think we can salvage the lines from this cruiser section. Liam will have to bring us to within a hundred meters of that ship and hold us there. We can string the line between the two fill ports on the exterior of the two ships."

Jane asked, "How do we move the fuel over?"

Jeff smiled. "We can thank Mr. Heeb for that one. When the tanks are connected, we'll get some fuel naturally just from the pressure differential. The rest we get by heating the other hydrogen store."

Jasper shook his head. "Now that doesn't sound dangerous at all, does it? Anyone? Anyone else take issue with that scheme?"

Jeff waved it off. "Relax. We're only talking two or three degrees. We won't achieve a full tank from it, but we believe we can get close to 80 percent."

Mace nodded. "Sounds good, Jeff. Do what you need to make that happen. The shuttles can keep going while we rig this up."

Jeff continued: "And we did a few calculations while we were at it. It seems one of those fuel stores will fit almost perfectly into one of our shuttle bays. Means we'd lose a shuttle, but we could bring in a full tank of fuel, which right now we are in desperate need of."

Jasper shook his head. "I think putting a fuel store in one of those bays is a catastrophe waiting to happen. How about this instead: pull the store, grapple it with a shuttle, and fly it somewhere else. I don't like us sitting in front of that open portal."

Jeff nodded. "That would save us from having to potentially dump one of our shuttlecraft. Excellent suggestion, Mr. Collins."

The *Rogers* was moved to the suggested location. Salvaged pipe was strung between the two warships and fuel was soon flowing across.

Johnny turned. "We'll be out of here in an hour. We have new reactors, more fuel, and more transducers. I call that a win-win-win."

Mace shook his head. "Would have preferred the Aussies and another hundred ships."

Johnny replied. "Obviously. But we should be happy with the win anyway. There's nothing saying the Aussies aren't OK."

## ▲ Chapter 20 ▲

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**H**umphrey reported. "Hydrogen store is now at 63 percent."

Tom Beals came over the comm. "We're on the last remnant. Only five transducers left. We should be in and out in about fifteen minutes on this one."

Jordan Crawford said, "We're in bay three, dropping off reactors four and five. One more on that last remnant and we're done."

Humphrey held up a hand as he raised his voice. "Sir, I'm picking up another wormhole opening! It's on the other side."

Mace yelled, "Mr. Beals! Get out of there immediately! We have incoming! Crawford, where are you?"

"Still in bay three."

Mace yelled, "Stay where you are! Button everything down! We have another ship coming through! Mr. Moskowitz, cut our ties to that hydrogen store! Mr. Humphrey! Tell me what you see!"

Humphrey replied, "I'm getting mixed signals, Mr. Hardy. Whatever it is, it hasn't come through yet."

Mace turned to Jasper. Get down to Jeff and see to it that we're fully disconnected!"

Jasper stood, racing to the bridge door.

Mace turned to face Hans Mueller. "Mr. Mueller, I want you to start throwing plasma rounds through that portal. Whatever wants to come through will have to deal with that first. Might just buy us a few seconds more."

Tom Beals yelled out: "We'll be up in thirty seconds! Forty-five

after that we'll be home!"

Mace replied, "Do what you can, Mr. Beals! Every second may make the difference! "

Jeff said, "We have separation, Mr. Hardy. But you might want to pull away. We couldn't shut off the flow from that other tank. Anything could set it off. Don't know if our dampener fields would save us from that blast."

Humphrey said, "We have a ship coming through the second portal. And it's big! Bigger than that dreadnought!"

Mace drew in a long breath as he rubbed his hands together, looking down at Jane and Gnaga Klept. She was scanning the display and he was staring at the floor.

"You might want to belt yourself in. And strap him in, too, while you're at it."

Gnaga mumbled imperceptibly.

Jane asked, "What? What'd you say?"

Gnaga turned to face her. "It's a Dauntless-class dreadnought, the third largest ship in the Galactic Union fleet. It means the Union is now paying full attention to you. We might as well fly into the nearest star. We're dead now."

Mace replied, "We aren't dead until I say so. Jane, as soon as we're done, get him off the bridge to somewhere secure."

Jane replied, "Consider it handled."

The wormhole in front of the *Rogers* began to grow. An enormous ship moved into sensor view.

Hans yelled, "I don't think our cannons are doing any damage!"

A single shot came through the expanding wormhole, incinerating shuttle one, along with Tom Beals and his team.

Mace closed his eyes and yelled, "Mr. Hobbs! Get us out of



here!"

The *Rogers* turned as a second high power plasma round ripped through the Kaachi ship remnants that had drifted in front of the opening. The Kaachi remains were vaporized, as were the Kaachi crewmen who still manned it.

As the Humans attempted escape, the nose of the great ship came through the still expanding portal. A forward cannon expelled a plasma charge in the *Rogers*' direction as a hail came over the comm.

Johnny accepted the hail, passing it to the main display wall. An alien of a new species, barely two and a half feet tall, stood in full military garb. Tabs of alabaster skin flowed over the top of its head like hair, disappearing into the back of its medal-encrusted uniform.

Jasper said, "Holy cow! We're being attacked by little buck-toothed beavers!"

The figure on the display spoke in a squeaky, high voice. "Rebels of the realm, King Favagud has chosen to offer you this one chance at peace. You have shown yourselves to be worthy of our rule. Accept and become subjects of the Dellus Kingdom as military subjects, or forever be scattered among the stars as disintegrated particles of debris."

Mace cleared his throat and replied: "We are a free people, to be ruled by no others. You have invaded our space. You attempt to take our lands and our people."

The figure scowled. "This galaxy and all who are in it are part of the Galactic Union. As its arbiters, we are giving you one last chance to join us. Your alternative is death."

Mace stood and leaned in toward the bridge camera. "Then give us death. Otherwise, we will live on and fight, if only to be a thorn in the side of the Galactic Union."

Mace turned to face Liam. "Tell me we will be out of range in a few seconds."

"I could tell you that, but it wouldn't be true."

The forward plasma cannon on the front of the Dauntless glowed white hot only an instant before the highly charged plasma round was released. The *Rogers* shuddered as the round clipped the left side gravity drive.

Humphrey yelled, "Damage is minimal! We have one transducer operating at 50 percent!"

Liam Hobbs set the *Rogers* twisting and turning, always moving away from the mammoth Dellus warship. A second plasma round found its mark, blackening the hull and ripping a transducer from its welds.

Humphrey yelled, "Fifteen seconds to be out of range!"

Mace took a deep breath and held it as the image on the display flipped around and dashed from side to side.

"Mr. Humphrey! Anything we can do to stabilize that image?"

A button was pressed and the Dellus ship centered in the display.

Jasper shook his head. "Finally. Thought I was gonna puke."

"Please don't," Mace replied.

A bright flash and a violent jarring signified another hit. This time taking two transducers with it.

Humphrey yelled, "Our ass end is exposed!"

Liam maneuvered to the side, attempting to keep the exposed section from direct line of fire. The plasma round that followed took out another three transducers and ripped into shuttle bay one, the blast doors sealing it off from the remainder of the ship.

Mueller looked up. "We just lost Jackson, Chan, and Riga, Mr. Hardy."

"How long, Mr. Humphrey?"

"On the edge of their range, sir."

Hobbs yelled over his shoulder. "We have enough distance to react! I should be able to dodge any new rounds!"

A bright flash emanated from the powerful Dauntless forward cannon as the great ship turned their way. Liam Hobbs performed a hard left rolling maneuver. The plasma charge whispered by, just missing an exposed section of the gravity drives.

Humphrey said, "Mr. Hobbs! Careful with those turns! We're close to losing structural integrity without the dampening fields fully covering our outsides!"

Liam shook his head. "Have to work with what I've got, Mr. Mallot! If we split apart on our own, then so be it! "

The next expected plasma round did not come. Liam straightened out the forward trajectory, heading toward the nearest planet. Mars was centered on the nav display.

Mace released a long held in breath. "What's our status, Mr. Mallot?"

Humphrey replied, "Shuttle bay one took severe damage. I don't have camera access to the bay itself. The section is sealed. We aren't out-gassing air from anywhere."

Mace turned. "Mr. Collins, take Mr. Klept to a secure location until we get settled. Jane, organize a team to get into bay one to check over that damage."

Hobbs yelled, "They're coming after us!"

Mace sat forward. "Are they gaining?"

Hobbs shook his head, "Can't tell until they reach full speed. Give me a few more seconds... it looks like they are topping out below us, Mr. Hardy. We might just make it out of here!"

A rumble ran through the *Rogers* .

Mace asked, "Tell me what that was, Mr. Mallot!"

Humphrey replied, "We lost a reactor!"

Jasper released his grip on Gnaga Klept and raced off the bridge. Humphrey switched wall views to the reactor room. Two of the Mawga crewmen were attacking the reactor control console with their short swords.

Mace stood and sprinted after Jasper, yelling as he ran. "Sabotage!"

Jasper turned the corner into the reactor room, charging ahead as the exosuit pushed him forward. The first saboteur turned with his sword too late. Jasper caught him with his plated fist, nearly severing his head from his body. The second crewman swung his sword down hard, impacting the forearm of Jasper's battlesuit. Jasper winced but returned the favor with a punch to the chest. The Mawga slammed hard into the side of the reactor he'd attempted to disable, slumping to the floor.

Mace entered the room. "What happened? Are there any more?"

Jasper shook his head. "Just those two. But I think it's time the rat people were all locked up. Can't be trusted."

Mace looked over the damage to the console. "This one still appears functional. Mr. Hobbs, how's our speed?"

Liam replied, "We lost 5 percent."

Mace scowled. "Mr. Mallot, where's the Dellus ship?"

Humphrey replied, "Still following, but slowly losing ground. Had they taken out that second reactor, we'd have had a real race on our hands."

Mace shook his head. "Mr. Collins, lock that one up and take his friend to an airlock and dump him."

Jasper picked the groggy Mawga up by his neck. "You're

coming with me. You're gonna tell me everything you know."

Bontu Montak walked into the room. "What happened?"

Jasper dropped the injured Mawga, leaping forward and pinning the Mawga Chancellor to the wall. "You traitorous little rats tried to do us in, that's what happened!"

Bontu returned a horrified stare. "That could not be. I've known both of those crewmen for ten cycles. They could not have done this to us!"

Jasper pointed a finger at Bontu's left eye, as if preparing to gouge it out.

Mace stepped forward, taking Jasper by the shoulder. "They did this, Bontu. Tell us what's going on."

Bontu continued his horrified stare. "I can assure you, Mr. Hardy, I knew nothing of this. For us to be captured by the Union is certain death for me. What reason could I possibly have?"

Jasper gave his best mean face. "You did this to try to get back in favor with your other little rats."

Bontu slowly shook his head. "No, Mr. Collins, I did not. There are no actions taken in the Emperor's name that could bring me back into his graces. As a former chancellor, I am an outcast from the Mawga, forever."

Mace asked, "Why would they do it? "

Bontu wanted for answers. "Perhaps they thought as Mr. Collins suggests, that they would somehow be allowed to go home. It was my decision to defect to your side, Mr. Hardy. My decision forced them to follow, even though I thought them to be loyal.

"You see, Mr. Hardy, when a subject loses favor with the Emperor, all those who surround him are punished as well. I have often shuddered at the thought of what happened to my remaining crewmen. They are likely now in the Mawga military as front-line

troops."

Mace glanced over at the injured Mawga. "Take Mr. Montak and that scum and lock them in conference room C, along with the other Mawga, until we figure things out."

Jasper walked Bontu over to the other crewman, bending over and picking him up by the neck. He did the same to Bontu, the alien's small arms and legs dangling toward the floor as a scowling Jasper carried them out.

Mace walked to the bulkhead of bay one, where Jane was standing by.

Jane pointed. "Look at this seam. We got lucky. This whole wall has moved in about an inch. Kind of surprised it held. And surprised we don't have any leaks from it."

"I take it someone has gone through the chamber?"

Jane nodded. "Jeff, Heeb, and Hooba are in there."

Mace opened a comm. "Mr. Moskowitz? How are things looking in there?"

"It's a mess. We found two of the three bodies. I think the third may have gotten sucked out. We have a hole in the main bay that's probably two meters in diameter. Looking out you see nothing but stars."

Mace leaned close to his camera and whispered. "Any strange behavior from Heeb or Hooba?"

Jeff looked into his comm. "No, why? Does this have something to do with those rumbles we felt?"

Mace nodded. "Two of the Mawga took out a reactor. They were working over a second when Jasper caught up to them. "

Jeff stopped and stared. "The Mawga? They've been nothing but helpful."

"Yeah, well, two of them decided they wanted to take their chances with the Galactic Union."

Jeff slowly turned to look across the bay at Heeb and Hooba as they poked through the debris.

Maala Heeb looked back. "We found the transducers! They look to be intact!"

Mace said, "I think you better bring them out until all this gets settled."

Jeff returned a half frown as he shook his head. "Too bad. They're both great workers. But I can see us needing to put our safety first. Heeb! Hooba! Come over here!"

The two former Mawga were hurried through the airlock chamber and into the hallway. Jasper was standing by to escort them to their temporary cell in conference room C.

Mace looked at Jeff. "Can it be fixed?"

Jeff shrugged. "Too early to say. First thing we need to do is patch that hole. That charge blew that section of hull straight into that blast wall. Did Jane show you the seams?"

Mace nodded. "She did. Look, we're out of danger for the moment. Round up as many crewmen as you need to help with this. And, Jane, why don't you head to the reactor room and see if you can get that downed reactor restarted."

Mace made his way back to the bridge. "Mr. Crawford, Jeff will be needing assistance. See that he gets whatever he needs."

Jordan nodded and briskly left the bridge.

Johnny asked, "Jasper didn't waste any time getting down there, did he. We were watching on the display."

Mace sat. "He did what we needed him to do. The rest of the Mawga have been rounded up until we figure out what to do."

Johnny winced. "You think they acted under orders?"

Mace half scowled. "I don't think so, but anything is possible. "

Liam said, "We're still pulling away. At this pace it will take us another two hours to be out of sensor range. You have any place in mind you'd like us to go?"

Mace nodded. "I think we head to Proteus to nurse our wounds. We lost another fifteen people back there. If we also count Gnaga and Montak's people, we're down to seventy. That doesn't leave us much extra on our crew rotations."

David Yancy walked onto the bridge. "I've been studying the workings of this ship, Mr. Hardy. With a little effort, I think we can automate a half dozen or so duty stations. If true, that drops our needs down to twenty-four crew for any given shift. That's three nearly full rotations."

Mace pulled up a camera view of the hall outside bay one. "Sounds great, David, but I think we're just going to have to suck it up for a while longer. Head down to bay one and see if you can give Jeff a hand. We need that breach closed up."

Jane came over the comm. "We have control panel parts from those other reactors we just salvaged. Give me twenty minutes and I think I can have number eight back online."

Mace returned a pursed smile. "Take whatever's required, Jane. We could use that extra speed."



## ▲ Chapter 21 ▲

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Once the *Rogers* was well out of sensor range, her course was altered to a heading that took her past Jupiter. From there, a straight line was followed out to Proteus. Hours later, the former Kaachi cruiser settled on the hard rocky surface.

Mace stood looking at the reactors. "Nice job of getting that back online."

Jane grimaced. "I sure could have used Gnaga. Have you had a chance to talk to him?"

"Not sure we'll get him back. His people kind of abandoned him when they called in the Union. He was pretty distraught over that display. I don't think he's ever had real dealings with the founders. Sending out those shuttles was forced suicide."

"Give him a little time. If this war is now with the Galactic Union and not the Kaachi, I would bet his attitude will change."

Mace stood with his fists on his sides. "What's one ship going to do against the Galactic Union? Really, we barely squeaked out of there with our asses intact. And not really intact given we lost fifteen crewmen."

Jane sighed. "And yet we're still here. Jeff says that hole should be patched within the day. And Jordan has his team replacing those transducers. How many new ones do we have to add?"

"We have forty-eight, minus the seven that were damaged or destroyed. And seven reactors we can add."

"We'll definitely need Gnaga back for that. He's the only one who knows how to align those containment fields properly. We leave that to anyone else and we might burn this ship down."

Mace nodded. "I guess I'll go have a talk then."

As Mace turned to leave, Jenny Taub walked into the room. "Miss Taub, I wouldn't have expected you to be up and about. "

"Doc said I could move around, but to still take it easy. I figure there are things that need doing and I'd like to help where I can."

Mace gestured toward her bandaged midsection. "Still in pain?"

Jenny nodded. "Oh yeah. But nothing I can't push through. Mrs. Tretcher, anything I can help you with in here?"

Jane looked around. "Well, we do want to clean out that area. We have new reactors we want to install. Maybe put on your exosuit and you could manage that for me."

Jenny smiled. "Thank you. I've been going stir crazy in there with nothing to do. Not like this ship has an entertainment system to help occupy your spare hours."

Mace returned a smile as he turned to leave the room.

Jane said, "Miss Taub, hold right there. I'll be right back."

Jane followed Mace into the hall with a grin. "So? Anything you want to tell me about?"

Mace replied, "What?"

Jane smacked him on the arm. "Oh, come on, I saw the look you two gave each other. That had attraction written all over it."

Mace turned slightly red. "I really just talked to her for the first time the other day, after the drive room took that hit."

Jane sighed. "Look, if you like her you should let her know. You need someone to lean on. And I'm sure she does, too."

Mace offered a half smile. "While the thought of that is appealing, we have too much to do out here. I've got zero time for a romance. And besides, what happens if it doesn't work out? Not like we can go our separate ways."

Jane laughed. "No, I suppose not. But you're both adults. If it doesn't work out, you could part ways amicably. You know, that's how most people do it. And I've talked to her a few times. Both of you have easygoing, practical personalities. I could easily see you hitting it off. "

Mace held up a hand. "Jane, I love you as a friend, but please don't try to push this. I have way too much stress and responsibility right now to get involved with anyone. I like her, but we'll have to leave it at that."

Jane crossed her arms. "Fine. I won't push it."

"Thank you. Now, if you want Gnaga's help, I need to go have a talk with him."

Jasper was sitting in a chair in the hallway adjacent to conference room C.

Mace asked, "Where you keeping Gnaga?"

Jasper pointed. "Third door. It's open."

Mace tilted his head. "Open? You trust him?"

Jasper shrugged. "He hasn't attacked us. The Mawga did. Hence the door to the conference room is locked."

Mace entered the room to see a moping Gnaga Klept. "Abandoned by your people. Not a good feeling, is it?"

Gnaga slowly shook his head. "My whole life I have been proud to be a member of the Galactic Union. That back there, it goes against everything I have ever been told. They are benevolent, and kind, and fair. That's not what I just witnessed."

Mace sat. "It's a hard thing when the things you admire fall from grace. Look, I'm an American. Had pride in my country. Still do. I've had some misgivings about my devotion to its concept from time to time due to various laws passed by our government, but I keep coming back to the same conclusion, that it was a good thing. I would

be quite happy with that form of government again.

"In the end, it wasn't the concepts, or the institution that failed me, it was the handful of people in charge at a critical moment in time. Instead of doing what you'd expect, to try to pull everyone together, to make plans and to take action for the common good, they scurried into the shadows to protect themselves. We lost three quarters of our population because of it .

"I was angry for a while. But you take out those individual people and I would be all for supporting that government once again. I suspect your Galactic Union, and maybe your own Kaachi leadership, is much the same. Bad eggs—greedy eggs—are running it at the moment.

"They don't care about the common people, only themselves and their grasp on power. Same thing has happened to just about every government man has ever known. Looks great on paper, but it's all dependent on the people in charge."

Gnaga looked up. "What am I to do, Mr. Hardy? I can't go back. They would certainly kill me."

Mace sat back. "Kill you? You did nothing wrong. I think your problem now is that you don't have a way back. We don't have the means to take you anywhere."

Gnaga let out a deep breath. "I haven't been honest with you, Mr. Hardy."

"How so?"

Gnaga stood and began to pace. "I am an agent for the Kaachi government. I was purposefully left on that remnant to gather intel on this system. The sensors were all fully functional. I was told to stay and ordered to gather information. A ship would return in six months to pick me up. Your happening across me was unplanned. But I saw it as an opportunity to gather far more information than would have been possible while staying on that remnant. That message you passed through to the Kaachi Military Council, I embedded a special

message into it. When we met and sent through the Australians, I had numerous contacts with my people. I was told to stay, to get myself in a position where I could take action if needed."

"And why didn't you... take action?"

"You were not at war with my people. If anything, you sought an alliance. I believed in our leadership, Mr. Hardy. Only I just now discovered that we are nothing more than puppets for the Union. It turns out your cause is much more just than mine."

Mace shook his head. "I tried to tell the Mawga the same thing. We should all join together to kick the crap out of the Union. They're nothing more than greedy thugs using your people to do their dirty work while they reap the rewards."

"I wish I had a better alternative to offer you than to just stay on this ship and to help us survive, but that's all I've got. We need your help getting those new reactors installed. The only way we're gonna survive an encounter with those Union ships is for us to make ours even more powerful."

"I'm told we can do that with more reactors and more transducers. We have both. And I'd like to get even more if that's what it takes."

"Our other problem at the moment is we really have no offense. Our cannons are weak. Sure, we can take on your ships, or Mawga ships, but we can't take on those behemoths the Union has. What I need is to have crewmen who are willing and eager to make that happen."

Gnaga shook his head. "You already have your offensive weapon, Mr. Hardy."

"How do you figure?"

Gnaga sat. "It's you, Mr. Hardy. Humans. My people fear you. The Mawga fear you. And now that the Union is here, I can only conclude they fear you as well. You're large, strong, intelligent,

resourceful, and highly adaptable. If you want to take out a Union ship, all you need to do is get a handful of your people aboard it."

Mace looked up at the ceiling with his mouth gaped open. "Huh ... I guess I never considered that. I doubt we can get our hands on a more powerful cannon. Maybe we can instead try to figure out a way to board a ship."

Gnaga nodded. "Get your warriors onto one of their ships and you would have their entire crew in terror."

Mace asked, "Would you have any interest in helping us to achieve that, Mr. Klept?"

Gnaga stood. "You would place your trust in me after what I just told you?"

Mace stroked his beard. "You've shown yourself to be a man of reason, Mr. Klept, not a loyalist ideologue. As things stand now, you survive if we survive. I see that as incentive enough to once again ask for your help."

Gnaga held out his small, thin hand. As I offer this customary Earth shake, I pledge my support."

Mace laughed as he took Gnaga's hand for a firm handshake. "Earth shake? We just call it a handshake. Come with me. We need to add a few reactors to this boat."

Jasper stood as they entered the hall. "Mr. Collins, Gnaga is returning to our crew. He'll be assisting Jane with the reactors. Please walk him down there while I have a word with the Mawga."

Jasper nodded. "I could use the walk. Come on, Klept. Let's get your puny ass back to work."

Mace shook his head as he walked through the door into the conference room. The Mawga were spread throughout the room, lounging in a way that would be expected from a group with nothing to do.

Mace took a seat at the table. "Tell me your thoughts, Mr. Montak."

Bontu replied, "I feel I have gravely wronged you by not controlling my people."

Mace glanced over at the injured Mawga lying in the corner. "He doing any better?"

"He's dead."

Mace sat forward. "What? I didn't think he was hurt that bad."

Bontu shook his head. "He wasn't. We questioned him. Both of them had motives of greed. They felt if they brought us to our knees, they would be rewarded by the Union. For some strange reason, they forgot the Galactic Union does not forgive, and rarely rewards. You either comply or you are done away with."

Mace asked, "Well, how'd he die?"

Bontu gestured toward the others in the room. "They beat him to death. We Mawga are very unforgiving when it comes to betrayal. Which is why we can never go home. "

Mace crossed his arms. "Wow. I wouldn't have expected that kind of justice out of you."

"He did try to kill us. I can assure you the death we would have experienced by being turned over to the Dellus would have been much more unpleasant."

Mace sat forward. "So, tell me, are there any more betrayers among you?"

Mace glanced around the room to angry stares.

"I believe this to have been an isolated incident," said Bontu. "The others here see and believe that there would be no reward for turning any of us in. The Union does not reward. You comply or you die. That rule at least is simple to understand."

Mace set his hands on the table. "So, Mr. Montak, are you and your people now ready to be members of the Confederate Alliance?"

"Confederate Alliance?"

Mace nodded. "I thought we might want to change our name after Stark's people made fun of it last time. The Federation was taken, as was the Rebel Alliance. Your people have the Empire and the Kaachi have their Domain. Your inclusion would give us three member species."

Bontu stood holding out his hand. "I would be proud to join your Confederation, Mr. Hardy."

Mace stood and smiled. "Good, we'll seal it with an Earth shake."

Bontu tilted his head. "Earth shake?"

Mace laughed. "Sorry, it's kind of an inside joke."

Mace led the group of Mawga to the hallway outside bay one. "Mr. Crawford, I brought you more volunteers. Assign tasks as you see fit."

Jordan called down the hall. "Jeff! I've got more workers for you. Where you want them? "

Jeff pointed at the blast door. "See if that door will open. If not, send them through the pass-through. Have them start on debris cleanup in the main bay."

Mace returned to the bridge with a half smile on his face.

Johnny was waiting. "Gonna need you for a few words down in bay three in about an hour."

"The funeral?"

Johnny nodded. "For the bodies we have. We're gonna release them in high orbit over Neptune. Again, should take about two years for the bodies to fall into the planet and burn up. And what are you all



smiley about?"

"I have Gnaga working with Jane on the new reactors. And Bontu and his crew are down in bay one helping clean up."

"Yeah, so what are you smiling about? Is it what Jane was telling me about?"

Mace shook his head. "She doesn't waste any time, does she? And no. Can't I just be in a good mood? We did manage to escape that Dauntless behemoth. That forward cannon may be the most powerful weapon they have. If we can defend against that, we have nothing to fear."

Johnny frowned. "I don't know what you've been drinking, but I want some of it. Please tell me why we have nothing to fear."

Mace sat in the captain's chair. "We have nothing to fear because according to both Gnaga and the Mawga, it's us that is to be feared. Humans. According to them, we could take control of any Union ship out there... if we can get aboard. They seemed very confident about that. And if you think about it, this ties directly into why we think the Mawga came to Earth in the first place. They wanted us in their armies. Now the fact that Union ships have shown up tells me they want control. Not sure how well that will sit with Stark."

Johnny replied, "Lord help us if they start giving Stark those Dauntless ships. "

Johnny leaned in on the armrest of Mace's chair. "So, if we're this weapon of terror, how exactly do we get aboard those ships?"

Mace stroked his beard. "We keep adding reactors and transducers until their cannons can't break through our dampening field. After that, we only need pull alongside with our grappling and cut our way inside."

Johnny smirked. "And what happens if they decide to turn and race away. No grappling is gonna keep hold of one of those massive

ships. The arms would just snap right off."

Mace continued with his stroking. "I wonder if we could outfit a shuttle? It's small. We could easily beef up the grappling for that to keep it bound to that ship. I'll have Jeff and David do the calculations. There should be adequate room to stuff a couple of those full reactors aboard. Pack a bunch of transducers on her hull and voila! We have our raiding vessel."

Johnny shook his head. "You pack two reactors on there, just how many soldiers you think it could carry?"

Mace replied, "According to Gnaga and Bontu, we would only need a couple."

Johnny laughed. "A couple? It would take a couple of us two weeks just to walk and check every room on that ship. That thing was huge."

Mace smiled. "I kind of agree with you. Two is not enough. I was thinking more like a team of four. You could split into two pairs of two if you needed to work your way around an obstacle."

Johnny rubbed his forehead. "Sounds like you're serious about this."

Mace nodded. "I am. Imagine us having that dreadnought as a resource."

"You do realize that would be all-out war with the Union. They might have thousands of those ships. Or even bigger ones."

Mace said, "They do have bigger ones, we know that much. The question is, do they have bigger guns?"

"So when do we start on this grand venture? "

"I think we just did. Oh, and I have a new name for us. I didn't care for Stark's people laughing because of our acronym. So we are no longer the EAFF. We're the Confederate Alliance."

Johnny began to laugh hysterically.

Mace asked, "What? What's so funny about that?"

Johnny settled himself down. "So you thought it good to make us the Confederacy?"

Mace shrugged. "Sure. Why not? It's not like we're for slavery or anything. And I thought the tie in to the cave was kind of fitting."

"So you made us the Confederacy... and we're fighting the Union. If I recall, the Union won last time."

Mace shook his head. "Yeah, crap. I didn't even think of that. Well what would you suggest?"

Johnny laughed. "Well, not the Galactic Confederacy."

Mace chuckled. "When I picked that I was thinking the Federation and the Rebel Alliance had already been taken."

Johnny replied, "OK, how about Mace's Raiders?"

"This isn't about me."

"The Minglers, Cohabitators, the Blend?"

"Now you're just making fun of me."

Jasper walked up. "How about the Free Faction?"

Johnny thought for a moment. "That's not bad."

Jasper took a breath. "The Rift?"

Mace slowly nodded. "I like that one. A serious break in friendly relations—not that we were friendly with any of them before—but it does make a statement."

Johnny gave his approval. "There we have it. Henceforth, we shall be called the Rift."

## ▲ Chapter 22 ▲

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Jeff stood in front of the display wall looking at an image. "A shuttle with eight transducers on front, two reactors inside. The dampener field, if going by the plasma charges they fired at us, should be more than enough to handle the Dauntless cannons. Only thing is, this would be a one-way ride. Two reactors would not offer enough field coverage for the whole ship. We pack them on the nose and go straight in. I have some ideas for beefing up the grappling as well."

Johnny asked, "How many crew aboard it?"

"Four, tops. Five if three are Mawga or Kaachi."

Johnny shook his head. "The Mawga or Kaachi going kind of defeats the purpose, doesn't it? We're going, Humans, because we're big and intimidating."

Jeff nodded. "That's true. I would ask though, what if we have a special need for them? Maybe we require a small person for access into somewhere. I don't think that would be you, Mr. Tretcher."

Johnny sucked in his gut. "Hey, I've lost thirty pounds now. I'm getting there."

Mace asked, "The structure of the dreadnought, do we know what that is? I mean, can we cut through that hull to get aboard? They aren't gonna just open an airlock for us."

Jeff turned to Gnaga for a response. "The hull armor is thin on the Dauntless-class vessel. I know this because they brag about not needing it due to their strong dampening field."

Johnny laughed. "Why would you even give out that sort of information?"

Gnaga replied, "Because they are arrogant. They don't fear attacks from anyone, because they know our weak cannons will not penetrate their shields... and that no one dare take a position against them. "

Jasper said, "That arrogance could definitely work to our favor. I say we march right up to 'em, cut a hole in that ship, take it down and space the lot of 'em."

Jeff looked at Mace. "He's right, you know. If the Dellus are as small as their admiral was, and as arrogant, and if they're not used to actually fighting, it could be a cakewalk."

Mace frowned. "Lot of ifs in there."

Jeff nodded in agreement. The short briefing ended and the parties each moved back to their duties. Mace settled back in his chair in thought. Jenny Taub walked onto the bridge.

Mace smiled. "Miss Taub, you look to be moving around better."

She returned a warm smile. "I still have the occasional twinge of pain. Nothing I can't handle though."

"What brings you up to the bridge?"

Jenny sat. "There's been talk of a mission. Taking a shuttle in on a raid of one of those dreadnought ships. I'd like to pilot that shuttle."

"We haven't yet talked about who would go. And you're still nursing those ribs."

"The ribs are an issue right now, but they will heal. I have combat training. I finished first among the women in my training unit, and third overall. I have stamina. I can run just about forever. And I have the Expert Marksman badge."

Mace smiled. "Seems we have a slew of marksmen aboard."

"I know my duty station is monitoring those gravity drives, but that's really just a one-person job. If they go down, there's not much

we can fix. So I'd like to add a few duties to my roster if possible. I've only flown those shuttles in the simulators, but the Mawga trainer told me I was the best he had seen. I want to contribute, Mace. I'm not one for just sitting around."

Mace pulled an image of a shuttle up on his arm pad. "You have free time right now. If I was you, I'd go sit in one of those shuttles with it in sim-mode. Brush up on it. The Kaachi shuttles are slightly different. When we get down to the point of making decisions about who goes, I'll put your name in the mix."

Jenny smiled and nodded as she stood. "That's all I ask."

Mace said, "You leaving so soon?"

"I need time in those shuttles if I'm to be considered. No better time than the present to get started."

Jenny left the bridge.

Johnny turned. "Looks like you found a female version of you."

"She's a lot smarter than I am. I tried for flight training when I first signed up. Washed out in the first week. Didn't do much better on a second attempt a couple years later. From what she's told me, she was tops in her class. And get this, she wanted to be a ground-pounder like me. I get the feeling she would have done well at it, too."

Johnny smirked, "Gotta love a woman who has no fear. Other than her size, I think Jane would have kicked ass at that, too."

Mace smiled. "Well, now she has a size advantage. And I haven't said anything yet, but I was thinking three out of the four on that shuttle should be you, Jane and me. I was leaning toward Jeff as he would be good for interpreting the controls and systems on that ship, but now I'm thinking he's too valuable to put in harm's way."

Johnny asked, "How about Jordan Crawford?"

Mace shook his head. "I want him here in command."

Johnny said, "You know, the Brits and the Germans are going to complain. They will want in on such a raid."

Mace sat back. "That's why I was thinking of taking two shuttles. We should at least prepare for that anyway. What if when we catch up to them there are two of those Dauntless-class dreadnoughts? We can't just take out one."

Liam turned from his console. "I would like to throw in my hat, Mr. Hardy."

Mace winced. "We need you here, Mr. Hobbs. You fly this ship way better than any of us. We can't give that up. I would, however, like you to be involved in picking who makes up the second team. Same thing goes for Mr. Mallot on that sensor console. He knows it. We need him right here. But I'd like his input on who should go."

Jasper walked onto the bridge. "What we talking about?"

Johnny replied, "Who would go on the raids against the Dellus ship."

Jasper sat. "You know I'm the first to volunteer for that, right?"

Mace nodded. "I had considered that. There will be limited space. We only have room for four."

Jasper nodded. "You, me, Johnny and Jane. That's the team Dellus nightmares would be made of."

Johnny laughed. "You? If it wasn't for that exosuit you'd be crinkled up in a chair somewhere."

Jasper scowled. "Yeah, but with it I'm more spry than the three hundred pound ape-man. And a lot smarter."

Johnny shrugged. "Ape-man has a lot more shooting experience than the old fart. Just saying."

Mace held up a hand. "Before we get another war started, Jasper, you understand we have to take those who are most qualified for this type of action, right? You've shown yourself to have excellent

decision-making abilities while under pressure, which is a plus, but we have to send out those who we feel are best suited for this job. We're considering a second shuttle. If that happens, you'd be in the running for that."

Over the two weeks that followed, a shuttle was gutted, two full-size reactors installed, and eight transducers mounted on the leading edges.

Mace walked though the doorway, turning back toward Jeff. "Wow, how were you able to cram all this in here?"

Jeff replied, "Thank Heeb and Hooba for that. They redesigned that cockpit to fit four. And all the environmentalals have been removed. There's a power feed for our suits, but they'll have to produce their own oxygen. No heaters. No restrooms or seats. They tore out practically everything inside except for the nav console. We managed to squeeze in a couple thousand rounds of ammo. But it's in sacks that we squeezed into every nook and cranny. Gnaga suggested we create a backpack to add to one of the exosuits. Once aboard the Dellus ship, someone would have to pass the spare rounds through to be put in the backpack."

Mace said, "I only see a single chair."

Jeff nodded. "All there was room for. The pilot sits. The rest of you stand. I can't imagine that would be for long, so it shouldn't be a concern. We talked about expanding this section back here outward, but nobody thought our construction would offer enough structural integrity. You'll be taking plasma pulses to the nose. There will be residual spill-around to the sides. We didn't think it worth the risk. If we're happy with this when we're all done, we can get started on the second."

Mace replied, "The amount of work you've done in such a short time is impressive."

Jeff glanced back at the shuttle bay. "The teams we have working on all this are sharp and committed. I would have loved to



have worked with this team on prior projects. Every one of them, including me, has been fully immersed in this effort."

Mace smiled. "It shows."

Mace turned to walk down the ramp as Jenny Taub walked up. "Looks to be almost ready."

Mace replied, "We should be able to take it out for flight testing in a couple days. I can't believe they were able to squeeze these reactors in like they did."

Jenny stopped at the top of the ramp. "Wow. Calling it a tight fit doesn't do it justice."

"Ribs still healing?"

Jenny nodded. "Almost back to normal. And I've been working out hard in an attempt to get ready for this. Hasn't been a problem, so I feel like I'm ready to go."

"Liam has been telling me about your simulator runs. He says he has full confidence you can fly this as well as or better than anyone. I'm thinking you've earned your spot on the first crew, but that will be up to a vote by our council."

"Yeah, I'm surprised it took you this long to put together a leadership group. Not that you haven't done fantastic up until now yourself, but it helps to have a consensus when planning big projects like this."

"I still think all this is crazy. I mean, we're Humans. We go to the store, we watch TV, we poop. Assaulting a megaship with a shuttlecraft? That's just nuts."

Jenny laughed. "And yet we're getting ready to do it. And we're all excited about that. I can't tell you how many nights I've lain awake in the last two weeks, picturing in my mind how all this will go down."

Mace smiled. "And what did you picture? Were we successful?"

Jenny returned a smile. "Every time."

Jane walked up with a grin.

Mace asked, "What?"

Jane shrugged. "Nothing. I'm just having a happy moment."

Jenny asked, "Have they been able to piece together any structural data for the big ship? Any idea what the insides look like?"

Jane nodded. "We have data from our encounter. Unfortunately no hi-res scans were done. We're just piecing together what we have from the active sensors. I think we have three docking bays identified. Other than that, we don't have a clue."

Mace added, "I'm sure it's like any other vessel. Hallways and rooms... and more hallways and rooms. We can do a deep scan as we come in. That should tell us where we'll want to go."

Jane asked, "Have you decided on the fourth yet?"

"Jenny here is a leading candidate. She has the piloting skills for the shuttle and the combat training for once we're aboard. And she happens to be an expert marksman. "

Jane grinned. "Really? You and I will have to get together for a talk."

"I've heard about your prowess with both a rifle and handgun. I look forward to that discussion."

Jenny turned to head back down the ramp. "Now, if you could excuse me, I need to spend more time in the simulators."

Tres walked into the bay with Vanessa holding his hand. "How's it coming?"

Mace replied, "Getting close. How are you two doing? I hardly see you anymore."

"Three months and we'll be parents. So far she hasn't really had any difficulties. And Doc says it's three girls."

Mace laughed. "Sounds like you're gonna have your hands full."

Vanessa rubbed her belly. With any luck, they'll all be like Miss Jane. Kind, caring, hardworking and fearless."

Jane laughed. "Hey, I've got plenty of fears. I just don't have the luxury of letting those fears control me."

Mace said, "I've been meaning to stop in to see you when I'm in the mess hall. Thanks for all the work you've been doing. I can go in there and have a bite and relax. One of the few times I have where I'm not all twisted up about something."

Tres replied, "Can't say I ever thought I'd be running a cafe of sorts on an interstellar warship."

Mace laughed. "Yeah. Well I can't say I ever envisioned commanding one. Either way, I appreciate the work you've done and I know everyone else does, too. Having the beverage-of-the-day has been a huge hit. Variety with our diets is one thing we've all been missing."

"I'd kill for pizza right now."

Mace sighed. "Yeah. I could go for few slices myself."

Tres gestured toward the shuttle. "When do you think it will be ready?"

"I hope to be taking it out in a couple days. I want to make at least a dozen practice runs coming in toward this ship before even thinking of going against one of those behemoths. If it all checks out, we might just do it again to a second shuttle. I wouldn't mind having two teams ready to go when the time comes."

Tres asked, "Who are you putting on the other team?"

"You interested?"

"Absolutely not. I'd rather stay back here with the pregnant women."

Mace chuckled. "Understandable. I was thinking one of the Brits, one of the Germans, and Jasper has been bugging me constantly about it. I tell you, ever since he got that exosuit, he's been raring to go with just about anything we've done. And don't let him know I said this, but he's been extremely effective at whatever he's taken on. I only say not to tell because I don't want him lauding it all over Johnny. The two of them get on each other enough as it is."

Tres nodded. "Your secret's my secret. And hey, poke your head in the kitchen to say hello sometime."

Mace asked, "What's the beverage-of-the-day today?"

"I call it tumbleweed. It's a mix of three of the Kaachi spices they use on meat. One's tangy, one's hot, and one's sweet. I actually think it's one of the better ones we've come up with. Kind of tough when your only flavorings are left over from the prior species. We could seriously use a run to Earth to pick up some real spice. I long for the taste of cinnamon."

Mace nodded. "You and me both."

Tres left the bay. Mace went for a slow walk around the shuttle with Jane.

The Ranger asked, "Are we doing the right thing?"

Jane replied, "You're kidding, right? We have to do this. It's like our only shot at returning home now. I don't know about you, but I like my planet. I like walking on the ground. And I could seriously use a good sleep in a featherbed. I think that's what I miss most about our house. I want a real bed to sleep in. These Kaachi bunks are a bit too firm for me. "

Mace stopped, looking up at the nose of the shuttle with its eight welded-on transducers. "Every day I think about all the things we took for granted. With just a little effort, you could have a decent life, a roof over your head, a personal car. You ate and drank just about whatever you wanted. And went wherever you wanted, when you wanted. Even with as miserable as I sometimes made mine out to

be, it was a far sight better than what we have here."

Jane put her hand on Mace's shoulder. "I think you just outlined why we're fighting. Even though we'll probably never get things back to where we had them, we're more than willing to fight for the chance."

## ▲ Chapter 23 ▲

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Jenny Taub was selected as the pilot and fourth member of Raider Crew 1. The shuttle was launched and sped out to seventy-five million kilometers distance. The crew aboard the *Rogers* was readied and the first staged attack begun. As an added effort of practice, Hans Mueller was given the green light to fire low power plasma rounds at the incoming shuttle. Jenny's job would be to avoid as many of them as she could.

The first raid lasted twelve minutes, the second fourteen. The plasma impacts were measured and passed to Jeff, David, Maala Heeb, and Jellog Hooba. The dissipation by the dampening field showed it would hold against the Dellus cannons, with a modest level of protection to spare.

After the fifth attack, the second phase of the assault was put into practice. The shuttle pulled alongside the *Rogers*. Mace and Jane were the first out of the rampway door with plasma cutters, tearing into a piece of hull plate that had been welded in place for practice. By the fifth attempt, a hole had been cut through after only thirty-seven seconds. When attempt number twelve was complete, the practice missions were deemed a success. Sixteen days later, Raider Crew 2 was equipped, practiced, and ready to move.

Mace walked the hall toward the bridge with Jeff right behind. "Mr. Hardy, everything we have says this is a go. We're ready. The dampening field should be sufficient to stave off those cannons. The cutting times for both teams are excellent. And the crews we picked are ready to charge ahead."

Mace replied, "The battlefield has a way of throwing your plans out of whack. I'm not saying we don't go, I'm just saying that a lot can happen when people start firing at you."

Jeff shook his head. "I don't know what else there could be? We've simulated hits from every angle. The shuttles can take it. "

Mace stopped. "And if there's a second ship?"

Jeff shrugged, "Then we don't go. We'll know right when we get in sensor range. If it looks different than what we planned, we abort and go home."

Mace thought for a moment. "You're probably right. I tend to get cautious right before going into a fight. I've been in enough of them to know things sometimes go wrong. The enemy doesn't always react the way you think they will."

The two men walked onto the bridge.

Mace opened a general comm. "Everyone, listen up. We're only a few minutes from where we think the Dellus warship will be. We could easily be off, and we might not find them for days... if at all. However, when we do find them, I want everyone prepped and ready to go in five minutes.

"I'd like the raider crews to meet me in the dining hall. Everyone else just hang with your duty stations. If we can pull off a successful raid, we'll be in control of the most powerful ship in this region of space. If we're going to retake Earth, this raid is what will put us on the path to doing so. That is all."

Mace turned to face Jordan. "Mr. Crawford, the bridge and the *Rogers* are all yours. Once we come into contact, keep this ship at maximum distance. If we don't make it, don't come looking to do some kind of rescue. Take the *Rogers* back to a safe location and the rest of you can begin planning your next move. Best of luck to us all. We're gonna need it."

Mace settled at the table with the other raiders. Johnny, Jane and Jenny, along with a Brit, a German, a Frenchman, and an Australian. Beverages were brought in from the kitchen.

Tres set a tall mug in front of each of the crew. "I made these up

special. It was the last of our brewed alcohol, along with a drink I call a plasma infusion. Only enough alcohol to take the edge off for the smaller of you all, ladies.

"For the rest, well, I hope it's to your liking. It should taste something like a mixture of chocolate, caramel, cinnamon, and salt, sweet but smooth, with that bit of a salty aftertaste. It's not any of those things, but it's as close as I could come. I hope you enjoy it. "

Johnny took a swig. "Oh, Tres, you've outdone yourself. When we get home you need to figure out how to bottle this."

Tres replied, "Thanks. But I'll have to assume it's only so-so because it's the best of what we have. And you haven't had any real food or drink for months."

Jane took a sip. "I actually have to agree with my husband. You did good with this combo."

Tres grinned. "Thanks. I do the best with what we have."

The celebration went on for twenty minutes before Jordan Crawford came over the comm. "Mr. Hardy, you'll need to report to your shuttles. We found the Dellus ship right where we thought it would be. And other than a couple cargo haulers, it looks to be alone."

Mace replied, "Thank you, Mr. Crawford. We should be ready in five."

Mace turned. "OK, let's hustle up. It's go time. I want everyone to run through their checklist twice before we lift out of here. And to all of you, I couldn't have asked for finer crewmen. You are all true professionals. Now let's go out there and kick some Dellus ass!"

The shuttles were boarded, the checklists checked and rechecked. After a reaffirmation that the behemoth warship was still alone, Jordan Crawford gave the order to launch. Two modified Kaachi shuttles were quickly away.

Jenny Taub piloted the first shuttle as Mace, Johnny, and Jane



stood beside her. Johnny's head was bent over to one side.

"I hope this goes well. I got a crick in my neck after those practice sessions. Man's not made to stand with his head like this."

Jane replied, "Well, maybe you shouldn't have grown it so big then. Or maybe we should have taken Jasper along instead."

Johnny replied, "I didn't see the old sack around anywhere. I would have expected him to see us off."

Jane shook her head. "Probably still sulking because he didn't make the crew of the other shuttle. "

Johnny laughed. "Yeah, when Mace said the selection of the other crew was a representation of all nationalities, I thought I was gonna bust a gut when he started in with 'What about the elderly, shouldn't they be represented, too?'"

Mace replied, "He was pretty disappointed. I think he's found his DSO job there on the *Rogers* to be a bit boring."

Jane nodded. "I can sympathize with him. The walls of the reactor room start closing in on you after a while. With his duty, though, at least he can get up and walk around the ship."

Jenny Taub said, "Boy, you three are just a bunch of Chatty-Kathys, aren't you?"

Mace smiled. "We've known each other for too long, that's all."

Jenny replied, "I'm not actually complaining. It's nice to hear normal conversations once in a while."

Mace asked, "How we looking?"

Jenny replied, "One minute to weapons range. The ride will get a bit hairier after that."

Jane said, "I'm surprised they haven't made a move of some sort. You know, shown some kind of reaction."

Jenny shrugged. "Maybe they're as arrogant as Gnaga said. Or

maybe they're just dumb. Either way, I'm happy to not be getting shot at."

A port cannon on the dreadnought flashed bright with plasma. An orange ball of searing light shot out toward the shuttle. Jenny rolled hard left, and the other shuttle hard right, the plasma round passing between them.

"This is shuttle two, splitting off to our designated target now. Good luck to us all."

A second ball of plasma leaped from the port cannon, this time seeking shuttle two. A quick dodge had the plasma charge zipping harmlessly by.

Jenny said, "They have a two-second recharge time."

A hard left spiral saw another round slip past shuttle one and her crew .

Johnny winced. "I'm gonna have to close my eyes. With my head bent and the display spinning with those maneuvers, I'm starting to feel nauseous."

Jane laughed. "Don't be getting sick on us. We don't have any barf bags on this flight. And you don't want to be puking in your helmet."

"You're not helping."

"Well, you're just going to have to man-up for the next eight minutes."

Jenny switched the cockpit display to lock into a single orientation. The growing image of the Dellus warship would now remain aligned on the screen. As the shuttle rolled and pitched, the image on the display remained stable.

Johnny said, "Thanks for that. Much better."

As the shuttles drew closer, Jenny said, "Ladies and gentlemen, we are approaching a weather front that will possibly have some

turbulence associated with it. Please return to your seats and fasten your seatbelts."

Johnny took a deep breath.

Jane took his arm. "We've got three minutes to go. Just shut your eyes and dream about fishing or something."

The first round to make contact was a partial hit. The shuttle gave off the slightest of vibrations.

Jenny said. "I can't dodge them anymore. Not enough time to react. From here on in, we'll just have to take our pounding."

With each new plasma round, the shuttle shook with an increased ferocity. With just under a minute to go, the first fully direct hit sent a jarring jolt through the crew. Johnny lost his grip on a rail, slamming forward into the console screen, before rocking back into the others. Mace grabbed his forearm as they steadied for the next strike.

The next round formed on the cannon emitter and Jenny yelled, "Grab what you can!"

Johnny slammed into the forward wall. "Maybe you're right. I should have let Jasper come instead. "

Jane yelled, "Here! Take this handle! I'll hold on to Mace!"

Johnny reached out just as the next round impacted the small shuttle. Again he lurched forward and again slammed hard into the forward wall and display screen. On the bounce back, he grabbed the handle. For the remaining dozen hard strikes, the crew of shuttle one held themselves in position.

Jenny turned as she slowed, angling the forward section of the shuttle toward the still firing plasma cannon. The shuttle slid to rest just inside firing range.

Jenny let out a sigh. "We're in! Cutters, you're up!"

Johnny turned toward the lowering ramp as Jane pushed him

forward. "Wait! I'm caught! My AR strap is wrapped around that handle!"

Jane scowled. "How on Earth did you do that?"

Johnny chuckled as he pulled it free. "'Cause we're not on Earth."

Two long steps later, Johnny was on the ramp. Pulling a cutting torch from its stowed position, Jane took the torch as she hustled by, her magnetic boots keeping her on the ramp. A short leap had her standing on the hull of the Dellus warship. A bright flash saw the plasma cutter ripping into the plate metal. Mace was quickly at her side.

Jane yelled, "Thirty seconds! I'm getting outgassing!"

Johnny said, "Team two is on the hull and cutting!"

Jenny stepped onto the ramp. "Grappling has us locked on. If they decide to run, we're going with them."

Johnny opened a comm to the other team. "How you guys getting along?"

A reply came back. "Cutters are running now. You have as bumpy a ride as we did?"

Johnny nodded. "And then some. Lost my grip and got tossed around a bit. We should be in any second now."

The voice replied, "Us, too. Will give status again once we're inside."

Jane said, "Cut is complete. "

Mace pushed against the plate. "It's not moving. Must be connected to something on the other side. Hang on."

Mace took his torch, cutting away a small section of plate, punching it with his fist to break it fully free. "Great. We have a wall section right in the middle. Jane, get that cutter over here.

The second team came over the comm. "We're inside! Some kind of storage room. We set several crates afire with the torches. Can barely see, although it's clearing out through the hole. Door to outside is locked and sealed. Bio scan says there are others on the other side. Looks like the welcoming committee has arrived."

Jane finished her cut. "I'm hitting another beam. I can't cut this hole any bigger."

Johnny shook his head. "I can't fit through there. Cut another one."

Jane huffed as Mace slipped through the cutout. "Johnny Tretcher, I'm putting you on a diet when we get back."

Johnny laughed. "It's not me, it's this battlesuit and the exosuit."

A jolt to the back sent panic down Johnny's spine.

"Fat man can't get inside?"

Jane turned. "Jasper? Where'd you come from?"

"I stowed away on the outer hull."

Johnny returned a look of disbelief. "How? We must have taken twenty-five straight-on plasma hits."

Jasper shrugged. "I found myself a cubbyhole on the back and held on for dear life. I tell ya, that was almost too much excitement for me. I used to love riding the coasters over at Williamsburg. That shuttle ride didn't disappoint."

Johnny shook his head. "You are absolutely whacked out of your skull, old man."

Jasper laughed. "Me? I think you mean we! We're all standing here on the outer hull of an alien warship. How am I any crazier than you? "

Mace yelled over the comm. "Jane! Get that cutter in here. Open a hole big enough for Johnny while I cut through to the next room!"

Jane slipped through the hole, followed by Jenny and then Jasper, who wagged his tongue and crossed his eyes as he passed his comedic nemesis. Johnny couldn't help let out a chuckle.

Jenny pulled up an image above her arm pad. "We have two rooms beyond that wall before we hit a hallway. Looks like they house mechanicals. Might be the environmental systems for this section."

Mace said, "Once through this wall, we'll seal off this room."

"I tried to get a sample from that outgassing," said Jenny. "Atmosphere definitely has oxygen, but I couldn't get any consistent readings. When we get through to this next room and get it sealed off, we should be able to tell if it's breathable."

Mace said, "We all keep our helmets on."

Johnny said, "Not like we're looking to breathe the air in here anyway."

Jenny replied, "Maybe not at this moment. If our plan is to fly this ship for any length of time, we're gonna need it. And besides, our suit oxygen will last a lot longer if there's an external source to feed on."

"Cut is complete," said Jane. "Jasper, help me knock this chunk out. Johnny, back away."

The boots from two exosuits impacted the cut hull plating, sending it spinning out into the black, cold void beyond.

Johnny slipped through the hull. "Thanks!"

Team two came over the comm. "Hole to the hallway is open! Got a bunch of little creatures standing just outside with swords."

The sound of gunfire could be heard over the comm. "They're scattering!"

Mace said, "Head this way until we're through. We're about three hundred meters apart. I want us to join up before we start taking

this place down. Keep in close proximity in case there's trouble."

"Roger that. We'll start working our way back. The little guys are all backing away. Must be waiting on orders or something."

Mace said, "Don't let them draw you into anything. Just keep heading this way."

Mace stood, kicking in the wall plate in front of him. "Let's go! We need to seal up this wall!"

The group moved through. The cut plate was lifted and tacked back in place. A larger cutout was made into another interior wall. That cut was then welded over the top of the original hole, sealing off the room from the other. It slowly began to fill with air.

Jenny said, "Oxygen is 19 percent. Sulfur is high though. It isn't gonna smell nice."

Mace said, "Switch your oxygen intake to filtered. We'll save what we've got in our supplies."

With atmosphere restored, the door to the next room unlocked. A further door led to a hallway. The dozen or so sword-wielding creatures at the end of the hall disappeared around one corner as team two came around the other.

Mace said, "No resistance?"

The team lead replied, "They look terrified. Same as Mr. Klept predicted. And with their size, I feel like we're attacking a ship full of grade-school children. I have to wonder if they're all ready to surrender."

Mace nodded. "Let's go find out."

## ▲ Chapter 24 ▲

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Jenny said, "Scans say this ship has twenty-five decks. We're right in the middle on deck twelve. Looks like there's a central hallway that runs from front to back. Half a dozen parallel halls to either side of that. We could start here, sweeping our way back, working our way all the way around in a clockwise manner."

Jasper scowled. "Or we could search out the bridge and take control from there."

Jenny replied, "And where do we get the location of the bridge from? If we follow a pattern, we'll eventually find it. And we get a better feel for the complete layout of this ship while we're at it."

Jasper nodded. "We could do that. Might take us a year given the size of this place. Or we could grab one of those little critters running around with their pig-stickers and beat the location out of 'em."

Johnny laughed. "The old man's a monster."

Jasper scowled. "They're the ones who invaded our space. They've killed billions of humans through their actions. As far as I'm concerned, we could off the lot of 'em right here and now."

Mace held up a hand. "I think Jasper has a point, at least with finding the bridge first. We take control, we can fly this rig elsewhere. That would give us time to bring over more people where we can clean this ship from top to bottom. We leave a single room unchecked and it risks us all."

Jane said, "So, grab one of the little guys? Maybe we could have planned this out a bit better."

Mace nodded. "Grab one of the little guys. And next time we'll



know better what it is we're doing."

Jasper turned and sprinted toward the far corner .

Johnny laughed as he ran after him. "Let's go before he kills them all!"

Johnny rounded the first corner to find Jasper walking toward him with a captive. "I think this one peed himself. Careful."

The others caught up.

Jasper set the captive down, pinning him against a wall with his knee as he pressed several buttons on his arm pad. "The translator should have him talking."

Jasper said, "Look, little man, we're Humans. This ship now belongs to us. You cooperate, you live. Tell me a tale and I'll snap your scrawny neck."

Johnny shook his head. "He would not have made it under the Geneva Convention."

Jasper pressed his knee. "Point toward the bridge of this ship. Where is it?"

The creature pointed forward as its eyes darted about frantically.

"And is it up or down from here?"

The creature gulped in terror before pointing down.

Jasper looked back. "See. That wasn't so hard. Forward and down."

Jasper turned his AR15 toward the wall behind him, loosing a round into it. The small alien cowered.

"Now, you're gonna take us there. Lead the way. And keep in mind, you take us the wrong way, or into an ambush, and you'll be the first one to get it."

Jasper spun the creature to face the forward direction. "Any

shenanigans and I'll put a cap in you right here in the center of your back. Understand?"

The creature nodded as Jasper pushed him forward.

As the group walked behind their new guide, Mace looked behind them. A dozen of the small creatures scurried around a far corner .

Fifteen minutes later, they walked into the immense room that made up the bridge. A single chair sat in the middle, elevated above the others. Sitting in the chair was the alien admiral that had first asked for the *Rogers* to surrender. A gang of quivering crewmen stood around the base of the chair with their tiny swords drawn.

A single creature stepped forward. "Halt! Lay down your weapons!"

Jasper raised his AR15, firing a single round into the face shield of the small alien. The shield shattered, yellow blood splattering inside.

Jasper stepped forward. "Who else wants some?"

The admiral held up his hand. "Gentlemen, before any more blood is shed, let us discuss our options."

Mace replied, "Hatuk Gar, right? You're the one who told us to surrender when you came through the wormhole."

The small alien nodded. "That was me. You are Mr. Hardy? The leader of this band of Humans?"

"Might be. Doesn't matter. What matters is that you, and this ship, are now property of the Rebel Confederacy."

Johnny laughed. "Wait, I thought we were the Rift?"

Mace shook his head. "Couldn't remember that, and it doesn't matter."

Mace turned back to face the admiral. "You are Dellus, one of

the founder species of the Galactic Union. Who is it you answer to and how do you make contact with them?"

The admiral replied, "This ship can generate a wormhole for communication purposes at any time. All that you are doing and saying is being fed through to our high council."

Mace said, "Well, are they interested in hearing our demands?"

Gar replied, "Oh very, Mr. Hardy. In fact, you and your ship are the very reason I was sent through. My mission here was to either eliminate you or to make contact with you."

"What purpose would you have for making contact? "

The admiral stopped, removing his helmet and exposing his wide, bat-like ears. His nose appeared as if a pig snout had been pushed up into the center of his face.

The admiral said, "I do so hate wearing that. Most uncomfortable and undignified."

"First rats, now bats," said Jasper. "It's a full-on rodent invasion. I'd like to change my title from DSO to exterminator."

Mace shook his head. "You've made contact, Admiral. Now, tell us why we shouldn't shove you out an airlock?"

The admiral's ears stood up, giving him a sinister look. The scowl on his face and the bleating sound he emitted had the bridge deck cleared in under a minute. The blast doors closed behind them, sealing off the deck.

The admiral waved the group forward. "Please, come here so we do not have to yell at one another."

Jasper said, "You go talk to your bat friend. I'll have a look around."

Mace stood in front of the admiral. His high perched seat had the two adversaries at eye level.

The admiral placed his hands on either armrest. "I was sent here by the Union to do away with you, Mr. Hardy. However, I was also sent here by my people, the Dellus, to see if we could come to an understanding."

Mace lowered his AR15. "What kind of understanding?"

The admiral pressed several buttons on the arm of his chair. A holo-image appeared beside him. "This is of course the Milky Way galaxy. We call it the Bishop's Fold. But that's of little consequence to you. The galaxy we both live in has a hundred billion stars. Of those stars, 70 percent are believed to have orbiting planets. Of those 70 percent, 6 percent are believed to inhabit the 'habitable zone,' as you call it. We estimate nearly 1 percent of those to be capable of supporting life in one form or another. Are you getting an image of what I'm speaking of, Mr. Hardy?"

Mace replied, "Not yet, no. "

The admiral brought his hands together, touching fingertip to fingertip. "That means there are somewhere in the neighborhood of forty million worlds that may be inhabited, Mr. Hardy. Forty million. A mind boggling number. Of course, the majority of those are not inhabited by sentient species like you and I. We believe that number to be less than 1 percent. Our estimate, given what we've encountered thus far in our very limited explorations, leaves the possibility of hundreds of thousands of sentient species out there. A number that is both exhilarating and terrifying."

Mace asked, "I thought the Union had explored something like a third of the galaxy?"

The admiral waved his hand. "The actual number is closer to 2.5 percent, Mr. Hardy. The number you cite is a number given to the lower species as a way of helping to keep them in line. You see, even with our superior ships, and all of our rules, we find it increasingly difficult to maintain control. A new species is discovered every few of your months. While most are not to our level of intellect, each new species has the potential to change the delicate balance of power we

maintain.

"Mr. Hardy, the founders of the Union are sometimes at odds with one another. A series of worlds or resource discoveries by one founder may tip the scales heavily in their favor. The rest of us must be constantly vigilant if we wish to remain as equals."

Mace said, "So were you worried about the Mawga gaining power somehow? Is that why you showed up?"

The admiral laughed. "Goodness no, Mr. Hardy. The Mawga work for us. We discovered their hut-covered world a millennium ago. Their glorious past has all been carefully crafted and written by my people. Virtually all of their discoveries—electricity, flight, even space flight—have all come from seedings by the Dellus. The information was placed into their scientific communities, allowing a series of accelerated discoveries to happen, whose progression would be viewed as fast but normal. "

Mace crossed his arms. "Are you trying to tell me all our great scientific achievements were planted by your people? Somehow I'm not buying that."

The admiral shook his head. "On the contrary, Mr. Hardy. You see, we only learned of your species, through the discovery of your world by the Kaachi, four of your years ago. The Kaachi are another of our species. The only seeding done in this instance was of your discovery of dark matter. It was a discovery that your own scientists would have made within the century. From there, your advancements would have accelerated, allowing you to travel the stars on your own."

"And was it you that bombarded us with electromagnetic waves? Nearly killing us all off?"

Hatuk Gar returned an angry stare. "No. We believe that abomination to have been conducted by the Zinka or the Quelli, two of the other founders who obviously saw your discovery as a threat. As I said, Mr. Hardy, it is a constant struggle to maintain equilibrium

in the Union."

Jane asked, "OK, why are you telling us all this?"

The admiral replied, "I am telling you this because the Union has now gotten involved. They have had direct talks with your king. Arrangements are being put in place now to elevate the status of your species to a full-fledged member.

"And not just a lower tier member such as the Mawga or Kaachi, an elite member, with a fast track to tier two, reporting directly to all members of the founding seven. If that were to happen, your species would be divided among the founders like so many trophies. Your citizens would be armed and sent out to do battle with the Karthians."

Johnny held up a hand. "The Karthians? Are you saying your all powerful Galactic Union has enemies?"

The admiral nodded. "Four at this time. These are powerful enemies. Enemies that would enslave or kill us all."

Jasper said, "Kind of like the Union is doing now? I still say we space the lot of them. And keep doing it until there aren't any left. Problem solved. "

The admiral replied, "That is precisely why the founders fear you Humans. Even with all of our advantages, a handful of you have managed to capture one of our warships. Your drive, your inventiveness, the spirit of never-say-die, that is why I am speaking to you today.

"The Galactic Union wishes to make you subjects of the Union. We... wish to make you equals to ourselves. A Dellus-Human alliance would be powerful. It would be an alliance that would tip the balance of power heavily in our favor. All of our technologies would be yours.

"You would be welcomed everywhere as our equals. The Mawga and the Kaachi, and a half dozen other species, would be

there for your use. And if the Union were to dissolve, the seventy species that make it up could all be brought under our control."

Jenny said, "Sounds like you've got some big plans, Admiral. Why would we ever trust that anything you say is true? How do we know you're not making a similar deal with Stark?"

The admiral nodded. "Fair questions. The level of trust required for you to believe my statements will only come through time, and only from your belief in our actions."

Mace said, "And what actions would you take to begin this alliance? And why us? Why not Stark?"

The admiral sighed. "Your Mr. Stark, as I said, has already begun negotiations with the Union. We believe those negotiations will move slowly, giving us time to build an alliance with you, an alliance geared toward taking back the Earth. As an initial gesture, I've been given the authority to turn this warship over to you. I'm giving you the keys, so to speak."

Jasper said, "We already have the keys. You're trying to make a deal after we've already gotten aboard to kick your ass."

The admiral smiled. "Consider getting aboard a test of your abilities and the strength of your resolve. You were willing to risk flying headlong into a warship that is far more powerful than anything you have. Here, let me show you something. "

A new image showed on the holo-display. "These are fighter craft. This ship has a contingent of eighty such craft. At any time during your advance I could have launched a half dozen such craft, thwarting your aggression and putting an end to all of your lives. With the press of a button I could call ten of these warships into battle with your Kaachi vessel. While I must admit your transducers offer a formidable defense, it is a defense that would eventually fail. Especially given the fact that you have no weapons of your own to counter with."

Jasper said, "And what if we just outrun you like last time?"

The admiral nodded. "Your speed is impressive. But this ship has something far superior. We have a wormhole generator."

Johnny said, "I thought the wormholes were expensive. Is that a fallacy?"

"The wormhole generator is indeed a costly mechanism. It requires a resource that is quite rare, and therefore quite expensive, a heavy material with an atomic weight equivalent of three hundred ten. One hundred twenty-six protons and one hundred eighty-four neutrons. It was a material thought not to exist for many centuries. However, it seems certain types of supernova explosions have provided us with a minute amount of this element.

"Extreme magnetics are used to create a tiny fracture in the space time continuum. The gatrellium, along with dark matter, is used in a fission reaction to generate the gravitational fields needed to force that fracture open. That opening is forced wide enough for a ship to pass through. During that process, the gatrellium is consumed.

"To date, there have only been four modest sources of this material discovered. All of the gatrellium is mined and divided equally among the seven founders. We happen to control one of the mines, and through such, have been able to acquire a small amount illicitly, shall we say.

"That extra is used for off-the-books operations such as this. You see, you are the only ones who know we are here."

Jane said, "There are two Mawga cargo ships out there. We aren't the only ones who know. "

The admiral shook his head. "The cargo ships were brought here under automated control. And in fact they are part of my offering here today. They are full of fuel refiners and nutrient bars, enough to keep a much larger contingent than your own in good health for several years. And I am willing to give them to you here today, regardless of your decision. If you would like, I could send them out to your ship as we speak."



Mace held up a hand. "Just keep them where they are for the time being. For all we know you have them rigged to blow, or at a minimum bugged."

The admiral smiled. "Your suspicion is refreshing, Mr. Hardy. I can't tell you how many of the species we now govern would have immediately ordered those vessels out to meet their own. Your judgment is one more reason why, in my report, I will recommend you for a full alliance with the Dellus."

"You've given us a lot to think about, Admiral. We'd like some time to talk it over."

The admiral nodded. "Certainly, although I would recommend that we move from this area. It is occasionally scouted by the Mawga. And while they report directly to us, the spies that reside among them do not. Would you have anywhere you might suggest we go?"

"How about the northern pole of Mars? We'll put this ship right down on the surface."

The admiral replied, "I'm afraid this vessel does not have the ability to land, Mr. Hardy. It can dock, or be docked with; however, its construction is not made for landing. I'm afraid the lower decks would collapse."

Mace thought for a moment. "OK. Can it hover a hundred meters off the ground?"

The admiral nodded. "It can. However, our descent through the atmosphere will have to be slow. Our transducers will shield against all plasma weapons, but not as well against the friction heat of an atmosphere. As I thought I indicated, it is built for interstellar travel. Our shuttles and fighters can easily make the transition to an atmosphere. A ship this size will have difficulty. "

Mace said, "OK, well, if it takes us an hour to put her down, then so be it. That just means you won't be running anywhere in a hurry."

The admiral typed into his armrest. "One hundred meters above the northern pole of Mars. Before I move, please notify your ship of our plans."

Mace opened a comm. "Mr. Crawford, just to let you know, we're all here and we're all OK. We're also making a move. I'm passing you the coordinates now. Follow us there, take a different route if it makes you feel comfortable. And maintain your distance once you get there."

Jordan replied, "Roger that, Mr. Hardy. The north pole of Mars. We'll see you there."

Mace gestured toward the Dellus commander. "Make it happen, Admiral."

## ▲ Chapter 25 ▲

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**J**asper let out a grunt and gave his best scowl. "Thought I was gonna get some good action here today."

Johnny shook his head. "You killed one of them. He ain't coming back."

"They killed billions. They ain't coming back either."

Mace put his hand on Jasper's shoulder. "This fight is anything but over, Mr. Collins. I get the feeling it's just starting. All this could easily lead to wars between these founders, as well as war between us and Stark.

"And that doesn't take into account the other species who are warring with the Union. We don't know if they're better or worse than what we're dealing with here. If fighting's what you want, I think you'll eventually have more than your share."

Jasper spat on the deck. "If you haven't noticed, I ain't getting any younger. I don't have a lot of years left to put into a galactic war. If I'm gonna fight for all mankind, it needs to happen sooner rather than later. There won't be any memorials erected for Jasper Collins if he's dead before all this starts."

Johnny laughed. "Memorials? Getting a little ahead of yourself there aren't you, old man?"

"I'm just saying. I was expecting to grow old sitting in my rocker at the cave until my days on the Earth were done. They took that from me and it ain't coming back. And, well, I ain't dead yet, so I'd like to let them know what I think."

Johnny shook his head. "You sat on that porch in your rocker and from what I saw you were already dead. Hands so crumpled up

you could hardly carry anything, and the rest of your joints so swollen you could hardly walk."

"Maybe. But I always had a fresh set of faces coming up on the porch to talk to me. I had family, including my nephews that cared about me. "

Johnny howled. "Nephews that cared? Are we talking about the same ones you punched out?"

"We had our differences. Don't mean they didn't care."

Jane sighed. "How many times are the two of you going to have this same argument?"

Jasper politely smiled as he replied, "As many times as it takes for it to be settled, thank you."

Jenny asked Mace, "So what are we doing?"

"We're going to Mars. From there we're taking a shuttle back to the *Rogers* , where we take some time to discuss all this. Can't say I was expecting anything like what we've just been told."

Jenny tilted her head. "I don't know, sounds like just another power play to me. The Dellus fear they're losing control of the Humans and this is their way of hedging their bets. If Stark goes Union, they get a piece of that, and maybe they keep us as an ace up their sleeve. If Stark rejects the Union, they have us in their pocket and they'll see to it we take back control of Earth. Seems pretty straightforward to me."

Mace nodded. "That may very well be the case. What it also tells me, though, is the Dellus can't be trusted. If they're willing to make a deal with us behind the Union's back, they won't have any issue with making deals against us later."

"One thing history has always taught us: you may not be able to pick your wars, but you can pick your battles."

Mace chuckled. "That what they taught you are war college?"

"As a matter of fact, yes. That's exactly what they taught."

As the Dellus ship approached the northern hemisphere of Mars, Mace turned to face the admiral. "Mr. Gar, what's the name of this ship?"

The admiral replied, "In your language it would sound something like *Petunia* ."

Mace chuckled. "Great. First the *Lousy* and now the *Petunia* . Admiral, what's the significance of that name? Where'd it come from?"

"It's named after the president's war dog. It was champion in the pits four years running."

"The pits? That doesn't sound very pet friendly."

"The house of Dellus has been breeding and fighting war dogs for almost two thousand years, Mr. Hardy. No other dog has ever won more than twice. It is a fitting name for a warship."

Mace gestured toward the exit. "I think we'd like to go back to the *Rogers* for some discussions on all you've just told us. Would you have a shuttle available to ferry us to our ship?"

The admiral nodded. "Of course, Mr. Hardy. The *Petunia* is your ship now. Whatever you ask is my command. If you would prefer you could leave some of your people behind to keep a weapon trained on me."

Mace raised a hand. "Don't think that will be necessary, Admiral. Your actions here just now tell me you'll be waiting here for our reply."

The admiral gave a command into his comm. Seconds later, an escort appeared in the doorway.

"Mr. Hardy, please follow Citizen Bamre to the shuttle bay. He will see to it that you are away whenever you like."

Mace turned and then stopped. "I do have one last question,

Admiral. The Mawga and the Kaachi, they're enemies, and yet they both answer to you. Why do you have them fight? I would think they would be of more benefit if they both worked together for you."

The admiral sat forward. "That is part of what it means to be in the Union, Mr. Hardy. As founders, we may control the species under our command to a certain extent, but we may never allow them to join forces. Hence the rules we have laid out for each of them to abide by. Skirmishes are kept to a minimum, even if they believe they are at all out war. Losses on either side are also minimized, and for us, we only need show favor to one or the other to bring things back into balance. The result is the five species who report directly to us are always looking to best each other. It keeps them competitive, and motivated to achieve. Provided they accomplish their goals, each species lives a rather peaceful and rewarding life."

Mace nodded. "And in the meantime the founders get fatter and happier off their work?"

The admiral smiled. "I believe you have a full understanding of the Galactic Union, Mr. Hardy. I do look forward to working with you."

The nine Humans boarded the shuttle taking them back to the *Rogers* .

After a twenty minute flight, Mace walked toward the bridge. "The rest of you head into the conference room. I'll be back in a few minutes. We'll do a debrief and then get on with any discussions we need to have. I don't want a word of this going out to anyone until I say it's clear to do so. I don't want Gnaga or the Mawga to know anything about this until we've all determined the time is right."

Gnaga came around a corner. "The time is right for what, Mr. Hardy? You are back. What happened? Were we successful?"

Mace stopped, placing his hand on Gnaga's shoulder. "We were successful. I can't tell you any details at the moment, but I promise to fill you in later. Now if you'll excuse me, I have matters to tend to."

Mace entered the bridge, picking out all those he considered his senior people. The consoles were staffed with replacements with strict orders to take flight if anything unusual were to happen, giving the others time to return to their stations.

The fourteen senior personnel were talking among themselves when Mace walked into the room. He closed the door behind him. "Ladies, gentlemen, we have a lot to discuss and some big decisions to make. First, just let me say that our assault of the *Petunia* was fully successful."

Liam raised his hand. " *Petunia* ?"

"Yes. The Dellus warship is named the *Petunia* . And if you'll allow me to proceed we can discuss that later."

Liam bowed his head in approval .

"The *Petunia* has been given over to us, along with her crew and her admiral, the latter for at least the time being. We also have two cargo ships that will be joining us. One has hydrogen refiners, enough so we will no longer want for fuel. The other carries nutrient bars.

"I'm told there are enough bars to feed a much larger organization than ourselves for a couple years. I'm not yet sure what that means, but it's more than enough to keep us fed for much longer than we had. And if we have a trust issue with those bars being drugged we can always test them first.

"Now, it also seems we have new information about the Galactic Union and its makeup. And a better understanding of why the rules are what they are. Those same rules do not apply to the founders, though they are bound by their agreements with each other. Anyway, we'll talk about that more later.

"What I'd like to discuss here today is what the Dellus admiral wants to offer us. You see, get this ... he says he's looking for an alliance with us. And you might ask, why would a founder species that has access to technology like that ship out there— which by the way has its own wormhole generator—why would they want an

alliance with a scruffy ragtag bunch of Humans like us? Well, that in itself is a good story."

Mace sat down in a chair. For nearly half an hour he talked about the Mawga and the Kaachi and their relations to each other. He talked about their subjugation to the Dellus species and their overarching relationship to the Union. And filled me in about Malcolm Stark and the deal he was trying to make with the Union, and what that would mean for all mankind.

His extended speech ended with a single question: "Do we want to join with the Dellus in an alliance? Yes or no? This alliance would remain secret from the Union for some time. I think the admiral has big plans for us, and I'd like to know what those plans are before committing to this one way or the other. We don't need to answer that question today, but it is one we will have to answer eventually, and I believe that answer will have to come soon .

"The longer we wait, the bigger Stark gets, possibly making him unstoppable. I'm betting he'll want to know the full game plan from the Union before committing to anything. And once he knows, he'll negotiate until the Union is on their last nerve with him. However, at some point he will accept their deal. We need to act before then."

Discussions raged for hours, with points made for and against an alliance. When discussions reached the point where no new thoughts or proposals came forward, Mace called for a break. They were each to go about their daily tasks with the goal of meeting again the following day. Johnny, Jane, and Jasper followed Mace into the dining hall. They gathered a supply of nutrient bars and beverages and took positions at their favorite table.

Johnny started the conversation. "I would really like to get my hands on that ship to see what that wormhole generator is capable of. How much fuel does it take and how hard is it to come by? If they have a detector of some kind I'd like to scour the whole solar system with it."

Jasper said, "Well, why don't we get you a little pail and a



shovel and you can go down there on the surface and dig for it?"

Johnny half smiled. "Har, har."

Jane took a bite of her nutrient bar. "I have to wonder what the admiral's plans are for that crew. Anyone else notice they didn't exactly look like him? He's kind of brown and yellow. They were a definite green. And their eyes were different."

Mace nodded. "I noticed that as well. I know it was only by an inch or two in height, but the admiral seemed big in comparison. I have to wonder if that crew is an entirely different species."

Jane asked, "If... no, let me restate that... *when* we take possession of the *Petunia*, are we going to crew it? I think we need to have a discussion with the admiral as to how many personnel it takes. If it's all of us, do we mothball the *Rogers* for the time being? "

Mace tapped the comm on his arm pad. An image of the admiral floated just above.

"Admiral, how many people are required to crew that ship?"

"The systems are highly automated. If simply moving from one place to another for a delivery of persons or property, one could get by with as few as five. If going into a fight, that number increases significantly. There are eighteen cannon turrets with each requiring two crewmen. There would be a minimum of five maintenance personnel on duty for damage control and another three for medical needs in the case of damage being taken.

"Add to that a half dozen support personnel and then multiply the lot by three to cover your shifts. That would be a crew of a hundred fifty, minimum. Personally, I wouldn't dream of going into battle with fewer than four hundred. One hundred of those would be Marines to defend the ship should an incursion happen, such as what we just experienced."

"Thanks, Admiral. I have a couple more questions for you. The crew that is with you now, what happens when we take over?"

The admiral replied, "They stay with you, you send them home, you dump them all down on the planet—whatever you prefer. This crew is now yours to command, Mr. Hardy. Do with them as you will."

Mace nodded. "OK. One final question: the crew you have with you, are they a different species?"

The admiral nodded. "The Fleck. They have been with us for centuries. Dependable. Hard working. And willing to do almost anything we ask. They aren't good soldiers though. I don't know if you notice, but they are very skittish. If you look at them wrong they will back away. With you Humans and your size, they run in terror."

Mace held up a finger. "One last item. The wormhole generator, it takes that special fuel. How much does it use, and where would we get more? Is there a substantial supply aboard? "

The admiral brought up a small chart, passing it to the comm display. "This will give you the information you seek. It's basically a combination of time, aperture, and distance. The bigger an aperture, the longer a time you want it open or the farther you want to go, the more it costs. As to the amount of fuel we have aboard, we are capable of two modest jumps. The first would take us to the rift, the second from the other end of the rift to our nearest colony on Zendia."

Mace glanced around the table. "Anyone have anything else while we have him?"

Jasper said, "Yeah, I have a few."

Mace passed the comm to Jasper's arm pad before pointing. "Keep it clean."

Jasper scowled. "This is a question about the Galactic Union and her military. From what we understand, the founders, such as yourself, have the big ships. We were told the *Petunia* is the third largest of your ships. I would like to ask how many of each of the three sizes do the Union and her founders have. And how much more capable is each of the next larger ships?"

The admiral smiled. "An astute and wholly expected question, Mr. Collins. The *Petunia* is a Dauntless-class vessel. She has twenty-four reactors powering eighteen battle cannons. I believe there are approximately sixteen hundred of this vessel class divided evenly among the founders.

"The ship above her is the Callista-class. Callista have forty-eight reactors, a fast charge well, and thirty-six battle cannons. She has the ability to fire two cannons simultaneously with a one second recharge time. For comparison, the Dauntless-class dreadnought, as you have seen, has a two second recharge. Each of the founders has fifteen Callista-class ships.

"Finally, the largest of the vessels, the Muhatha-class, is our capital ship. She has eighty-four reactors, can fire six battle cannons at once with a half second recharge. And she has a wormhole generator capable of transferring a fleet of a thousand ships a quarter of the way across the galaxy. Each founder has three such ships. "

Jasper nodded. "OK. How about defenses? What kind of damage can they take? The hull of that Dauntless seems a bit weak."

The admiral pulled up another chart, passing it to Jasper's comm. "This chart will give you the data you seek. As far as armor goes, we've found it to be far less valuable than one would think. The majority of our defenses come from the dampener fields. I believe you have already come to this conclusion since you were willing to come at us with no weapons. I would like to commend you on your achievement, by the way. That type of initiative is precisely why we are interested in your species.

"Now, as to your request for information on our defenses. As you can see, the Dauntless has a dampening field that is approximately eight times the strength of a normal Kaachi cruiser. We term the field strength as *Lida* . The cruiser offers twelve Lida. A shuttle? Two Lida. The *Petunia* , ninety-two Lida. A Callista, one hundred forty-four Lida. And the Muhatha, two hundred twelve. A single battle cannon can overcome a twenty-six Lida field."

Jasper nodded. "Interesting. So your Muhatha ships can't take each other out?"

The admiral smiled. "They were constructed as a deterrent, Mr. Collins. They can resist and destroy any other ship in the Union fleet. Those defenses and their equal distribution serve as points of stability. While they cannot kill each other, they are far more powerful than other warships and they can be devastating to a colony when used from orbit."

Jasper asked, "What's the limitation on your battle cannons? Can't you just make more that are ever more powerful?"

The admiral shook his head. "I'm afraid, even as advanced as we are, we still do not have the knowledge we would like. The laws of physics as we know them cannot support a more powerful cannon. Studies into this very subject have been conducted for hundreds of your years. Our most brilliant minds have not been able to overcome those physical barriers. Perhaps one day a Human will have that honor?"

Mace thanked the admiral and closed the comm .

Jane said, "Every time I feel like I'm getting a handle on all this, I find out something new. We're like babes in the woods out here. And I'm bewildered that the admiral would share such vital information with us. The Dellus must be desperate for us to join them."

Mace added, "Desperate and highly motivated. I would have to guess that's because of what they've seen in both us and Stark. Imagine us assaulting a world full of those little beings. That would be like a race of twelve-foot giants attacking Earth."

Jasper asked, "So what's our preferred plan going forward?"

Johnny leaned in. "I say we take possession of that ship. If more transducers are all that stand between that ship having the same defenses as a Muhatha, then I say we take it and ask for more transducers."

"Adding more would be against the Union rules," said Jane.

Johnny nodded. "It would. And I have to think that's precisely what the Dellus are counting on with us. They want an off-the-books henchman to come in to do what they can't as members. Personally, I'd like to take that ship and obliterate Stark's fleet with it. A setback like that and his little kingdom would begin to splinter."

Jane grabbed Mace's arm. "Wait! Why did we not ask about the Australians? If the Kaachi report to the Dellus, the admiral would know where they are."

A comm was opened again to Hatuk Gar. "Admiral, one more question. Our Australian friends that went through to the Kaachi, where are they?"

The admiral shook his head. "Your associates have been sent forward to the Union. It was the discovery of their existence through spies that brought the Union to seek an alliance with King Stark. The potential for millions of Human soldiers has them all aflutter. It is for that reason alone that I was sent to seek you out. The Dellus would prefer to see the Humans remain somewhat independent. If you are brought into the Union, you will never be allowed to leave. And you would no longer control your own destiny. As an ally to the Dellus Empire, you would have the possibility of ruling the galaxy alongside us as our equals."

The admiral took a long breath. "Your Australian friends are being treated well, but their fates are no longer their own to determine. Our best hope is for them to be transferred back to Earth. Though I fear that is not likely to happen. Our liaisons at court tell us they will be divided equally among the founders. I've heard they may be used as enforcers to keep the lower tier species in line. The Union does well at that already. However, any amount of extra intimidation that can be applied from time to time is welcome."

## ▲ Chapter 26 ▲

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Over the week that followed, possession was taken of the two cargo vessels, and hydrogen refiners were brought aboard the *Rogers* . Fully half the nutrient bars from the second ship were taken out to the storage site on Proteus. A request was made for more transducers and a shipment brought through a wormhole.

Mace sat in the conference room with his senior staff. "That's it, then. We outfit the *Petunia* with double the transducers it currently has. According to the admiral, that will bring it up to the defense capability of a Muhatha ship. From there, we decide whether or not we want to transfer our command. I'd like to have some time on that boat before we decide to fully take it over."

Jeff raised a hand. "With the supply of transducers we now have, why not load up the *Rogers* with a few more? Worst case, we park it at Proteus and just make use of the *Petunia* ."

Mace nodded. "Excellent idea. The admiral indicated we can make full use of the Fleck to add the transducers to the *Petunia* . He says they could have that entire ship done in a day. All we have to do is ask."

Jasper said, "I'd rather not allow them on the *Rogers* , if it's all the same. Don't trust 'em."

Johnny chuckled. "Well, you're the DSO. I would think that entitles you to say who can or cannot come on this ship. We should bring your rocker aboard and you can set it up in the docking bay to keep watch."

Jasper frowned. "I do miss my rocker."

Mace stood. "Jeff, you want to handle the transducers for this

ship while we head over to the *Petunia* ?"

Jasper said, "I'll stay here. I want to give those transducers a thorough scan before they're brought aboard. All we need is for them to slap a beacon in one and they could follow us wherever we go."

Mace smiled. "Mr. Collins, I know some people don't take you seriously, and some find you hard-headed and annoying, but I'd like to say I've been thrilled with how seriously you take our security. We have enemies—we're dealing with enemies right now. And they'll likely remain our enemies for quite some time. Keep up the suspicions. They might just be the thing that saves us all one day."

Jasper nodded. "Seeing as how my life is included in any bad scenario we might face, I'm more than happy to make a full effort."

Johnny held out his hand with a set of car keys dangling from his fingers. "Great. Now how about bringing my shuttle around. We have business down on the surface."

Jasper laughed. "Why on Earth are you carrying those with you still?"

Johnny shrugged. "I don't know. I guess it reminds me of home. You didn't bring anything with you as a keepsake?"

Jasper grinned. "I brought myself. I think that's more than enough. You probably keep a family photo in your wallet, too, I bet."

Johnny pulled his wallet from a pocket on the outside of his battle suit. As a matter of fact, I do. This is Jane and me in Hawaii."

Jasper shook his head. "You still carry a wallet? You scared you'll need some ID at the galactic liquor store or what?"

Mace held up his hand. "OK, we all know where this is going. Mr. Collins, take care of the *Rogers* for us. Johnny, Jane, let's get down to the *Petunia* so we can see what we're in for. Mr. Crawford, the bridge is yours."

As Mace turned, two small dogs blocked his exit.

Johnny knelt down. "What would you say about us taking the dogs with us? I'd like to see how Der reacts around the aliens. "

Jane shook her head. "You aren't serious, are you? I don't want to take Molly down to that ship. What if dogs are like food to them?"

Johnny laughed. "Fine. Molly can stay here. Mace? What do you say?"

Mace sighed. "Might as well. We won't be doing more than a little talking and poking around for a bit. I'd like to get an official tour of our new ship."

Johnny scratched his dog's head. "Hear that? You get to be the first dog on a Dellus warship. A warship named after a war dog. If we change her name we might even go with the *Derwood* ."

The eighteen-pound Dachshund eagerly followed along at his master's heel. Twenty minutes later they were aboard the *Petunia* .

As the ramp to the shuttle lowered, the admiral was there to greet the new owners. The Dachshund charged down the ramp, attacking the leg of the Dellus commander. A look of terror came over his face. Johnny raced down, taking the dog by the collar and pulling him back.

"Sorry, Mr. Gar. I wasn't expecting him to do that."

The admiral settled himself. "Do Humans keep such ferocious animals as pets?"

Johnny laughed. "Again, sorry. Derwood here is anything but ferocious, I can assure you. Here, reach your hand over and pet him."

The admiral pulled back. "I'd rather not lose a finger, Mr. Tretcher. I think I'll refrain from such actions."

Jane stood shaking her head. "Another Johnny moment."

Mace pointed up the ramp. "I think your dog adventure is a bust. Take him back up. He can guard the shuttle for us."



Johnny looked at the Dachshund as he carried it back into the shuttle. "What's got into you, Der Der?"

The three Humans joined the rattled admiral for a tour. "I'll start with what I believe would be most interesting to you. It is gun portal twelve. Just behind the wall we are following are the conduits that carry the charge. Each gun has an individual storage well, allowing us to keep all eighteen charged and at the ready. Once fired, the smaller well draws a charge from the main well. That can either be a full charge or divided among the guns in whatever manner we see fit."

They turned the corner into the turret control room. "To the left we have a tracking station. The ship's sensors provide the gun operator with targeting as it relates to this turret. Targets can be automatically prioritized or manually set."

Mace asked, "Which do your gunners prefer?"

The admiral stopped in front of the console. "Automated, of course. The computer can track hundreds of targets and select those which best fit normal priorities. Our gunners, although well trained, have very limited ability to do that. During our simulated training sessions, the computer attacker will always defeat the individual running in manual mode."

Johnny squatted to look at the console controls. "Then why even have a manual mode?"

The admiral shrugged. "I suppose it is left over from a bygone era. Anyway, shall we move on?"

After a short walk, the tour arrived at the next destination. "Welcome to the reactor station. The *Petunia* has twenty-four full-capacity reactors running."

Jane asked, "What's this big empty space for?"

"That space was designed in for eventual expansion. At one time, the Dauntless class was the most powerful ship class in the Union. She was to get thirty-six reactors, but those plans were

scrapped when the Callista design was approved."

Jane said, "So we could add a dozen reactors if we so desired?"

The admiral stopped in thought. "I suppose. However, the speed of this ship is limited by its drive systems. The maximum power is already available to the drives."

Jane gestured back toward the gun. "Wouldn't the extra reactors speed the recharge time during a fight? "

The admiral nodded. "They would, but the Callista came along, negating that need. As I'm certain you have already surmised, the founders are very suspicious of each other. The balance of power is maintained through having equally powerful fleets. When new systems are brought into the Union, care is also taken to maintain that balance. Even if discovered by a single species, another may challenge that right. The result is usually that the system in question is confiscated by the Union and passed to her other members."

Mace chuckled. "Yeah. I've gotten the impression the game is rigged for the founders. In the end, when the entire galaxy has been explored, the founders will have all the power, with the lower tier species still scraping by with a handful of systems."

The admiral slowly nodded. "I can neither confirm nor deny that vicious rumor, Mr. Hardy. And when in the presence of other Union members, I would be careful not to repeat it. Sedition is punishable by death."

"Noted."

The tour continued, next moving into a hydroponics area. "Gentlemen, and lady, welcome to hydroponics. The Dauntless was our laboratory of sorts for the larger vessels. We are able to grow 20 percent of the food we require. This room allows us to stay on station more than 40 percent longer than otherwise. It also offers a bit of variety from the nutrient bars we normally consume. And I will have to say, I am quite fond of the smell of this room. I can sometimes be found pacing its floors in thought. The life in here adds a freshness to

the air. The remainder of the ship has a slightly sterile odor to it."

Johnny said, "I've noticed the gravity on this ship is a bit on the light side. Would that be set to the equivalent of your home world?"

Hatuk Gar nodded. "Your world, Earth, is 106 percent our standard gravity. Not intolerable, but life would be a somewhat laborious existence there for us. The Fleck world is 2 percent lighter than ours; however, they are a very adaptable species. Their bodies will strengthen after a month or two of exposure, where it would take years for us to adjust to the gravity of Earth. "

Johnny said, "So it has never been the intention of the Union to invade?"

"Precisely, Mr. Tretcher. We possess through our rule and not our physical presence. There are a number of planets with a much higher gravity than Earth. We have yet to find one that had intelligent life. But the animals they produce tend to be both bizarre and ferocious."

Johnny chuckled. "Like my wiener dog back there?"

The admiral shook his head. "I can assure you your pet is docile in comparison, Mr. Tretcher. Imagine a beast twice your size with teeth as long as my forearm. A meat-eater of course, with an appetite for smaller beings such as you and I. The Maglidox. A beast that travels in packs. They are hunters, taking their time to corner their prey, which they always catch. I've seen video of such a beast taking a full plasma round from one of our rifles... and it kept coming."

The admiral shuddered. "A terrifying monster, I can assure you."

The tour continued through the dining hall and other crew areas before finishing at the wormhole generator.

The admiral beamed with pride. "Behold the wonder of modern space travel! With sufficient fuel, we could be on the other side of the galaxy in a day."

Mace asked, "The material you use to create the wormhole, how exactly does that work?"

"The physics of that feat is well beyond my grasp, Mr. Hardy. From what I've been told, when the gatrellium is put through the fission process with dark matter, an exotic element is produced. High magnetics are then used to tear open a tiny hole in the fabric of space-time. The exotic is used to push the edges of the wormhole outward, and is consumed in the process. I understand that explanation leaves many questions. Unfortunately that is the best description of the process I can provide."

"I'm right there with you, Admiral." Mace returned a smile.

The tour concluded on the expansive bridge. Fleck crewmen scurried about conducting the daily tasks of running a warship .

The admiral clasped his hands together as he gestured toward the captain's chair. "Mr. Hardy, what shall be the first order for your new ship?"

Mace walked over, climbing a step to sit in the chair. "I think we take it for a ride. No, wait. How difficult would it be for you to order up a cargo ship loaded with reactors, Mr. Gar? We have food, we have transducers... can we get more reactors?"

The admiral frowned. "Full size? I'm afraid not, Mr. Hardy. The Union keeps strict count of the reactors."

Johnny said, "We got the spares we have on the *Rogers* through salvage. Are there any ship boneyards out there? From fighting between species?"

"When two species go to war, any ships that are completely taken out of service must be demolished. The Mawga were responsible for seeing to it the Kaachi remnants you raided were destroyed. If it comes out in court the Mawga neglected their duty, this system could be taken from their control. As we are beginning to see Union interaction with your king, that may happen regardless."

Mace sat back. "So what we need is more remnants. I have an idea of where we could get some."

Jane offered a half smile. "You're talking Stark's ships, aren't you?"

Mace nodded. "With this ship we should be able to go in and take whatever we want."

The admiral raised a finger. "I must caution you, Mr. Hardy. The Mawga will report that a Dauntless-class founder dreadnought visited their system. This ship is no longer supposed to exist. She was listed as destroyed in battle over a century ago. We hid her away with hopes of receiving a replacement from the Union. That replacement is still the subject of controversy between the Dellus and the other founders. The other six are quite happy with their single ship advantage, and they each blame us for putting such a valuable commodity in harm's way. "

Mace rubbed his forehead. "OK, how about this: we lift off and take her for a run around Jupiter and her moons. I'd like to see how she handles, and I'd like to fire her guns."

The admiral bowed. "So be it, Captain."

The admiral clapped and gave an angry expression. "Do as your captain commands!"

The Fleck crewmen began to scramble.

Mace opened a comm. "Mr. Crawford, we're going for a little ride. Do your best to shadow us. We may fire our guns, so have Mr. Mallot do his best with those sensors. I want data that our team can study. Consider this a practice run."

Jordan nodded. "Roger that, Mr. Hardy. Lead the way when you're ready."

## ▲ Chapter 27 ▲

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**T**he run out and around Jupiter went smoothly. All eighteen plasma cannons were fired at once, twelve of them obliterating a small rocky outcropping on Callisto. After a five-hour run, the *Petunia* returned to the ice-capped northern pole of Mars, settling at a position a hundred meters above the frozen expanse below.

Johnny asked, "Admiral, how difficult would it be to transfer one of these cannons to the *Rogers*?"

The admiral offered a confused look. "Why would you want to do that, Mr. Tretcher?"

Johnny said, "That ship has a defense equal to this, but a puny set of cannons. Can one of these be moved?"

The admiral drew a deep breath. "I suppose. However, it would leave this ship vulnerable."

Johnny crossed his arms. "How so? Every angle of fire is still covered with the existing cannons. Besides, as you just suggested, we can't take this ship to Earth. The Union would be all over us. The *Rogers* we can take. If one of these cannons could be transferred, how long would it take?"

The admiral huffed. "I suppose next you will want to be stripping her of her reactors."

Johnny nodded. "An excellent idea. When can we get started with that?"

Mace asked, "What do you have in mind with all this?"

Johnny grinned. "A confrontation with Stark. We go in and demand that he turn over three or four of his ships."

Jane shook her head. "He's not going to turn over anything."

Johnny shrugged. "I think he could be persuaded. Turn over three or four or we destroy them all. If we get one of these cannons, and a half dozen more reactors onto the *Rogers*, we could demand such from him."

Mace stroked his beard. "I actually like that idea. With four of those ships, we replace the reactors for this ship, and we have ourselves a stockpile of parts for future needs. It also sends a signal that Stark is weak. We could even go so far as to broadcast propaganda to everyone else there, hopefully planting the seeds for a rebellion against him. At the moment, the people have no alternative."

Johnny nodded. "Then we give them one."

The admiral balked at the order, but then complied. The *Petunia* was moved to within a kilometer of the *Rogers*. A continuous stream of shuttle flights saw a small army of Fleck workers moving in and about the former Kaachi cruiser. Jasper Collins followed the workers with a constant suspicious eye. Four days later the reactors were installed, eight in all, along with two of the powerful plasma cannons.

Mace sat on the bridge with Jordan Crawford. "This ship is now as powerful as any in the Union fleet. We also have a huge advantage when in atmosphere. We're smaller and more maneuverable, and even with the extras we're packing, we consume less fuel and require fewer crewmen than those behemoths. I would take a fleet of these over those any day."

Jordan nodded. "I presume you will want to command her on this run back to Earth?"

Mace nodded. "With you right here, Mr. Crawford. The situation there will be fluid. I'm certain to be in need of your advice."

Jordan glanced up at the image of the *Petunia* on the holo-wall. "Who will be hanging back with her? You don't plan on leaving it alone with the admiral, do you?"

Mace scratched his chin. "I think the admiral will do whatever we say, but I'm with you. I'd like to at least have a small crew of us on there. I was thinking we send shuttle team 2 back over. They can camp on the admiral while we take care of Stark."

Jordan agreed. "Sounds reasonable. "

Mace asked, "How are we stocked for food on here?"

"We have enough to last about three months," said Jordan. "Every one of those reactors we add cuts into our storage space."

"Three months will do. Have you had lunch?"

Jordan nodded. "About an hour ago. If you're hungry, I'm more than happy to watch the bridge. Nothing happening now but those reactors being tuned. Jeff says we'll be able to fire those cannons twice per second."

"Possibly faster. He's working with Gnaga on a conduit update that might cut the charge time in half."

Jordan climbed into the captain's chair. "For a group with so little experience, who got kicked off their planet, we seem to be doing pretty well, Mr. Hardy. Everything's been going our way of late."

Let's hope it stays that way, Mr. Crawford. We're still a long way from home, and at the moment we don't have a path back."

"We get Stark out of the way and I think we go home. And I have to say I prefer Mr. Gar's offer of an alliance over servitude to the Union. That gives us something to fight for, and not just against."

Mace wandered down to the dining hall, grabbing his ration of nutrient bars, a beverage, and plopping himself down at his favorite table.

Tres came from the kitchen and sat down. "How are the installs



going?"

"The reactors and guns are both in place. Just last-minute touches being taken care of now. We'll be having a meeting in about half an hour to discuss our next move. It might be back to Earth to confront Stark. How's Vanessa?"

"She's getting big. Should be having the girls in about six weeks. In all the scans we've done, they all look healthy."

Mace chuckled. "I know it's a stretch right now, but maybe we can make it back to Earth for the birth. "

Tres leaned on the table. "I don't know. Maybe having the girls be the first Humans born in space would be something they could carry with them throughout life. Might be kind of cool."

Mace took a bite of a nutrient bar. "Funny the things we think of sometimes. You're right. Maybe it could be a good thing."

"What are the plans for a visit?"

Mace took a sip of his beverage, swirling the mystery liquid around in the cup in front of him. "I think we'll know when we get there. At the moment we're talking of going in with a demand for four of the Mawga cruisers. I have no idea how we'll convince Stark to part with them. What I do know is we can take anything they can dish out. Our defenses are as powerful as the best ship the Union has. Those cruisers won't cause any more damage than a swarm of gnats buzzing around us. And since Stark is trying to deal with the Union, he can't modify those ships."

When Tres was called back to the kitchen, Mace made his way to bay three just as the last of the Fleck workers departed.

Jasper stood tapping his foot. "Before we go anywhere, I want to sweep this ship from top to bottom for bugs."

"I thought you kept them all in a tightly confined area?"

"I did. All it takes is one and the Dellus know our every move."

Mace nodded. "OK then. You might want to get started on your search. We'll be meeting in a few minutes to discuss a possible encounter with Stark. You're welcome to participate or continue your search, whichever you like."

The meeting of the senior crew was over in fifteen minutes. The *Rogers* would approach Earth with an open agenda. Once contact was made, demands would be put forth. If not complied with, damage would be done to the Mawga cruisers, with care taken to not end any lives. Worst case, they would return without the cruisers they sought. The members of shuttle crew 2 were shipped over to the *Petunia* with orders to shadow the *Rogers* but not engage. They were to keep maximum sensor distance from the *Rogers*, where deniability of the presence of a dreadnought was still valid.

Mace sat in the captain's chair. "Mr. Hobbs, take us home."

Liam Hobbs responded by enabling the waypoints back to Earth, and soon the Earth was within sensor range. Five minutes later, a hail came over the general comm.

"This is Earth command. You are intruding on Earth space. Identify yourself!"

Mace accepted the comm. "This is Mace Hardy. We've come to negotiate with Stark."

Three cruisers that had been holding orbit around the planet turned their way. "The King does not negotiate. Prepare to surrender or you die."

Mace replied, "I think your king will want to listen to us. With whom am I speaking? Are you too intimidated to show your faces now?"

A silhouette appeared on the display. "As a method of protecting our leadership, the King has deemed the identity of all officers to be withheld. My name is Captain 36."

Johnny turned. "It's actually not a bad idea. If they get caught

while off the ship, they can deny being an officer. Also makes it difficult for the Mawga to recruit spies."

Mace issued his request. "Well, Captain 36, please relay this message to your king. We are in need of four of your ships—cruisers to be specific. We would like them delivered here to us. Tell him if he does that, we won't destroy his fleet."

The silhouette stood silent for several seconds. "That's a gutsy request coming from someone who's outnumbered three to one."

Mace replied, "You have nothing that can hurt us. Just relay the message so we're not wasting each others' time."

The first of the cruisers came within firing range, loosing a single plasma round from a forward cannon. Eight seconds later, a second round came their way. The first struck the powerful dampener field of the *Rogers*, fizzling out with no noticeable effect. The second round, followed by two from the other approaching ships, ended the same.

Johnny grinned. "Oh, this is sweet. They can't touch us."

Humphrey Mallot gave status. "Plasma rounds dissipated without any residual energy reaching the hull. Your statement is accurate, Mr. Tretcher. They can't touch us."

Hans Mueller said, "Wells are charged and both weapons are ready to fire, Mr. Hardy."

Mace replied, "Dial back the power on those, Mr. Mueller. When we fire, we only want it as a warning. We aren't here to take lives. Some of the crew on those ships might be people we know."

Hans replied, "Power levels set to 8 percent."

Jasper came on deck. "We're bug free. At least from any that we could find. How goes the fight?"

Mace said, "They've hit us a half dozen times now. No effect. I'll let them run around for a bit before we shake them up. So far, they

don't have anything that can hurt us."

Jasper replied, "Just make sure they don't pull a kamikaze on us. Not sure how those fields will hold up if we're rammed."

Liam said, "I'm watching for that, Mr. Collins. We can move faster than they can if need be."

After taking two dozen plasma rounds, the three cruisers came to a halt. Several seconds later, three plasma rounds impacted the *Rogers* hull at the same time.

Mace asked, "Mr. Mallot? Anything register from those?"

"We're seeing a 42 percent increase in impact energy, but nothing that shows effect. They could line up a dozen of those at once and we wouldn't feel it."

Mace looked into his comm. "Are you finished yet? We would prefer if you'd just patch us through to Stark himself."

A new silhouette appeared on the display. "Mr. Hardy, this is Admiral 8. Surrender your ship. You are in violation of Earth space, and as such will invoke our alliance with the Mawga. "

Mace shook his head. "Glad to be passed on to you, Admiral. Now could you please patch us through to Mr. Stark?"

Humphrey said, "I have a bay door opening on the starboard ship. It looks like... we have a missile on the way! Impact in... seventeen minutes. Hahaha!"

Mace glanced over at Hans. "Mr. Mueller. Would you care to take care of that missile for us?"

Hans nodded. "I would love to, Mr. Hardy. Plasma round in three... two... one."

Five seconds later a bright flash told of the missile's demise.

Mace looked into the comm. "Admiral, we can play this game all day."

Humphrey said, "I'm detecting more bay doors opening, Mr. Hardy. We have multiple launches! Twenty-seven, no, thirty-one missiles incoming. ETA of sixteen minutes forty-two seconds."

"Mr. Mueller, feel free to handle those for us."

Hans smiled. "Automated targeting on. Thirty-one targets acquired."

Thirty-one plasma rounds left the forward cannons of the *Rogers* in succession. Seconds later the blackness of space between the ships filled with bright, short-lived flashes as each of the missiles vaporized.

Mace said, "Admiral, you're wasting your time."

An image of Fatso Geerok came on the display. "Mr. Hardy, we were beginning to wonder if you'd left the system altogether. The King is a busy man. Perhaps I can answer any questions you might have."

"Hello, Fatso. I suppose you could fulfill our request as easily as Stark. We'd like four of your cruisers please. Delivered here. And as soon as possible. We have no desire to wait."

The admiral laughed. "Mr. Hardy, I do admire the sense of humor you Humans sometimes display. Let me see... I believe the proper reply to this request would be... take a flying leap? Surrender that ship now and I will work on your behalf to keep the King from executing you, Mr. Hardy. "

Two new cruisers approached, coming up from the surface.

Mace shook his head. "Apparently you aren't taking us seriously, Fatso. Mr. Mueller, send a message to one of those cruisers."

A low power plasma round fired from the port cannon. The targeted ship attempted to move as the round approached, yet it struck home and a bright flash of sparks and dissipating plasma flew from its hull.

Humphrey Mallot said, "We have minor damage, Mr. Hardy. Looks like we knocked out a transducer."

Mace faced the camera. "We're using our lowest power settings, Admiral. We aren't looking to harm anyone, but we will have those requested ships one way or another."

A new silhouetted comm image showed on the display. "Mr. Hardy, so we meet again. It seems you have been busy with illegal updates to your ship."

Mace chuckled. "Illegal? Under whose law? Yours? Certainly not ours. I think it's time you showed yourself, Stark. Why do you feel the need to keep your identity secret?"

Malcolm Stark sighed. "Mr. Hardy, we already went over this. My identity, and the identities of my officers, are kept secret as a security need. Their families and loved ones have nothing to fear from reprisals or kidnappings. They can go about their work freely, knowing their families are secure. A simple concept."

Mace nodded. "I suppose. Anyway, while I have you here, I'd like to reiterate my request."

The silhouette waved. "Yes, yes, yes, you want four cruisers delivered to you. As I see it, you have six sitting in front of you now. Take whichever four you choose."

Mace half smiled. "Would you care to empty them of their crews first?"

"Ah, the crews. What was I thinking? The answer to your request, Mr. Hardy, is no. I do not care to empty them."

Mace turned to Hans. "Mr. Mueller, target two ships this time. "

Seconds later, two plasma rounds struck the two remaining original cruisers. One of the ships brightly flashed from a secondary explosion.

Humphrey said, "Looks like they had a shuttle bay still open.

Damage to that area of the ship is extensive."

Mace looked at the camera. "I think you just caused the deaths of some of your men, Stark. Turn over those ships and we'll be on our way."

Another darkened figure occupied the display. "I see. Hmm, interesting. So you've decided on the propaganda route? Is that what this charade is about? An attempt to distribute messages of discord?"

Mace nodded. "We sent messages to the surface, yes. That was part of our mission. The other part is to acquire those ships. If you'd care to turn them over, we'll be happy to get out of your hair."

Stark shook his head. "I think you'll have to return home with your mission incomplete, Mr. Hardy. Your request is untenable. I'm afraid I don't have four cruisers to spare."

Mace laughed. "Sure you do. You aren't using them for anything."

A comm came in from the *Petunia*. "Mr. Hardy, we're only counting eight cruisers in Earth's vicinity."

Mace nodded in thanks before raising a hand to the main comm. "Eight cruisers? What happened to all the promises, Stark. The Mawga still holding back on you?"

"I suppose it doesn't hurt for you to know. Twenty-four cruisers from our fleet just engaged in a campaign against the Kaachi this morning. I'm awaiting word from the battle, and I expect it to be nothing but good. You see, Mr. Hardy, our alliance with the Mawga is a true alliance, not the sham you perpetrated on them. Our actions have shown us to be valued partners."

Mace frowned. "So you sent Humans off to fight somewhere else? Meanwhile our planet is being run from the shadows by aliens you call allies? It seems you've fallen prey to their earlier ambitions, Stark. They came here looking to exploit our size for their armies. I'm surprised you haven't figured that out yet."

"I'm well aware of their intentions, Mr. Hardy. They aren't very good at disguising those intentions, especially under interrogation. It seems the Mawga are relatively easy to break. Humans are stubborn. We have principles. The Mawga have few."

"So the Mawga just turned over a few of their people for you to torture?"

Stark laughed. "Something like that. The remainder of Chancellor Montak's crew was given over to us. I dare say we learned quite a lot from them. Several are still alive today. I hold out hope that they will one day be useful."

Mace scowled. "Those were innocent people, Stark. They were just following orders."

Stark's silhouette sat forward. "Oh, there are no innocent Mawga, Mr. Hardy. Unless of course you have forgotten about the billions of Humans who suffered horrendous deaths under their watch? They had the means to help us all from the beginning, and yet they chose to watch three quarters of us die, including your own mother, I might add.

"The Mawga are far from innocent. How is Mr. Montak, by the way? Be sure to pass on the news of his crew to him. Since he's on the side of the enemy now, it should brighten his day."

Mace took a deep breath. "We going to sit here all day and chat about nothing or are you going to turn over those ships?"

Stark sat back. "I have no intention of giving you or your band of miscreants anything, Mr. Hardy."

Humphrey said, "I'm detecting shuttles lifting off from the surface, Mr. Hardy. Four of them."

A dark figure joined Malcolm Stark for several seconds before being sent away. "It seems your message may have been received by some of my subjects. Very unfortunate for them."

A general comm came in. Johnny split the main display with the



new comm image. A shuttle cockpit display showed dozens of people going back into the seating area .

"Mr. Hardy! My name is David Traverne. I have twenty six refugees here with me. We're seeking asylum!"

Two of the cruisers turned toward the incoming shuttles.

Liam said, "Mr. Hardy? What do you want us to do?"

Jasper stepped up. "Keep in mind, this could be some kind of trap."

Mace scratched his beard. "We don't have a choice. Mr. Hobbs, move to intercept those cruisers. Mr. Mueller, prepare to take their drives offline."

Stark laughed. "Oh no, Mr. Hardy! It looks as though you may have moved too late."

Humphrey said, "Cruisers are firing! Eight seconds!. First shuttle is gone. Second shuttle... gone!"

Stark shook his head. "Don't you just detest thieves and deserters, Mr. Hardy? Four shuttles stolen from our inventory. A price must be paid!"

Another general hail signaled. Johnny patched it through.

"Help us please! We have women and children aboard!"

Hans Mueller said, "Targeting first cruiser. Plasma away. Second cruiser is firing. Have a lock on the second. Firing! Second has a round away!"

Humphrey yelled, "First cruiser is offline! Drifting. No... turn, turn, turn! Shuttle is down! Second cruiser disabled! Round is closing! Shuttle's turning! Partial hit! We have one shuttle coming through!"

Mace turned to face Liam. "Feed them coordinates for the *Petunia* ."

Jasper took Mace by the arm. "That ship needs searching before we bring it aboard. And we risk exposing the *Petunia* where it sits."

Mace nodded. "We'll have to take that risk. Johnny, have the *Petunia* fully back out of sensor range. The shuttle can rendezvous with them there."

Johnny replied, "We have to go back if we want to talk to them. Comms don't stretch out that far. "

Mace turned. "Mr. Mueller, target the drives of those remaining cruisers. Mr. Hobbs, take us back to within sensor range of the *Petunia* . Let them know the shuttle is coming. Tell them to keep the refugees isolated until we get back."

Liam entered the waypoints. Hans fired multiple plasma rounds at the remaining six Mawga cruisers.

Eight seconds later, Humphrey returned status. "We have six cruisers disabled, Mr. Hardy. Nice targeting, Hans."

Mace sat forward. "Let's get that message to the *Petunia* . Mr. Hobbs, take us out."

Five minutes later the message was sent. The Dellus megaship turned away.

Johnny said, "Comm acknowledged. Now, can we kick the crap out of this weasel?"

Mace nodded. "Mr. Hobbs, take us back in. We have four ships to collect."

The *Rogers* moved to within ten thousand kilometers of the disabled vessels. "Stark, time to pay up. Your men still have shuttles they can leave in. Clear out four of those ships and we'll take them from there."

"Where did you grow up, Mr. Hardy? What part of the country was your family from?"

Mace replied, "What does that matter? We were a military

family. I'm from all over. What about you? Where does our illustrious King hail from?"

Stark brought his fingertips together, tapping them gently. "I'm a small-town boy, Mr. Hardy. I come from Nowhereville. A dying little town in the Midwest. I grew up rooting around in vacant buildings with my friends, bashing mailboxes as a teen because there was nothing else to do."

Mace shook his head. "I figured you for one of those disturbed kids who drew enjoyment from pulling the wings off flies. I know, or knew, lots of people who came out of small Midwestern towns. Good people. Unlike current company."

Humphrey said, "Shuttle should be with the *Petunia* , Mr. Hardy.  
"

Mace turned. "Thanks, Stark. It looks like a few more people just joined our little rebellion. That shuttle is safe."

Stark lowered his head, holding a hand up in the air.

Jasper said, "I know that's not a surrender. Looks more like he's... get us back to the *Petunia* !"

Stark raised his head. "Brilliant! You have someone who understands!"

Humphrey yelled. "Huge explosive flash coming from the direction of the *Petunia* !"

Mace stood. "Mr. Hobbs! Get us back there!"

The *Rogers* was turned. Minutes passed before comm range was reached.

Johnny tried hails to the megaship. "They aren't answering!"

Humphrey shook his head. "It's because they aren't there."

Johnny asked, "What?"

Humphrey replied, "They aren't there. Sensors show a large

debris field."

Mace took a deep breath. "We're idiots. Mr. Hobbs, take us back to those cruisers."

Minutes later, the dark silhouette of Malcolm Stark was once again on the display.

Humphrey said, "We have shuttles leaving four of the cruisers. Scans show no bios left aboard."

Stark laughed. "I've reconsidered your offer, Mr. Hardy. We are abandoning four cruisers for you to collect."

Jasper said, "We can't touch those ships. They could all be rigged."

Stark sighed. "I've tremendously enjoyed our little discussion today, Mr. Hardy. Given the somber expressions on your faces, I'd have to say you lost something of tremendous value out there. We detected quite the brilliant flash from here. It must have detonated something of size, like another ship perhaps?"

Mace looked sternly into the camera. "I will catch up to you, Stark. And when I do... "

Stark shook his head. "I so look forward to that in-person meeting, Mr. Hardy. Oh, and just to add to your melancholy mood, that shuttle actually *was* filled with men, women and children fleeing my reign. As were the other three. They chose their own paths. I simply chose the end of their paths."

The comm channel closed.

Liam turned. "Mr. Hardy?"

Mace lowered his head. "Take us back to Mars, Mr. Hobbs. From there make a roundabout run back to Proteus. We have some major thinking to do."

Jasper put his hand on Mace's shoulder. "He outfoxed us today. Doesn't mean we're beat."

Jane came up from the reactor room. "Don't take this all on yourself, Mace Hardy. We're a team. We're all responsible for whatever happens. You did what any of us would have done."

Mace sighed. "Then we need new leadership. We just lost four more crewman, four shuttles full of innocent people, and a ship with a wormhole generator. Not to mention our secret alliance and only supply chain."

Johnny said, "We have the *Rogers* . And each other. There's plenty of food back on Proteus. We may have lost our asses today, but we live to fight tomorrow."

## ▲ *What's Next?* ▲

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*T*his Human is asking for your help!

If you enjoyed this book, please leave a review on the site where it was purchased. And by all means, please tell your friends! Any help with spreading the word is highly appreciated!

Also, I have a free science fiction ebook short story, titled "THE SQUAD", waiting for anyone who joins my email list. Find out when the next exciting release is available by joining the email list at [comments@arsenex.com](mailto:comments@arsenex.com). I like feedback!

The following preview of the next book in the series is provided for your reading pleasure. I hope you enjoy!

(Flip the page!)

# HADRON

(Vol. 4)

## Revelatio n

### ▲ Chapter 4.1 ▲

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**M**ace sat in the dining hall, sipping on a beverage Tres had brought to him.

"Why don't we just go in and demand his surrender?" Tres asked.

Mace shook his head. "We don't know where he is."

"He has to be communicating, right? We should be able to detect that. Heck, we take out all the Mawga ships and those comms go away."

Mace set his cup on the table. "We take away the Mawga ships and the food goes away as well. Those people are all dependent on those nutrient bars... just like us. Besides, in another month they'll be popping out all those babies. We have the means to take out every Mawga ship, and to rule the skies, but we can't feed our people."

Tres tapped his fingers on the table. "You know, now that you mention it, what good would our alliance with the Dellus have done for us? We still would have had to deal with the Mawga or the Kaachi."

"True. But both of them answer to the Dellus. Gar assured me he could keep things moving with the Mawga. This whole thing has just been a disaster. We start to get our hopes up only to have them

dashed. We were without a planet before, but we suddenly had allies. Powerful allies. Now we're back to nothing."

Tres stood. "Not true. We have this ship, and it's much better than it was. And we have enough food to last us for years. And... we have the refiners needed to make more fuel. I'd say the best thing we have now we didn't have before is more time."

Johnny came in and sat .

Tres pointed. "Second shift is here. I've got some work to do in the kitchen. I promised a new drink to try to break everyone out of their funk. I need to get working on it."

Johnny nodded. "Good talking to you."

Tres smiled as he walked away.

Johnny looked over at Mace. "We need to break you out of your despair. You're bringing everybody down. As our supposed leader, you need to be pulling us all together."

Mace sighed. "Yeah, well, I think I missed the leadership class they taught that in."

"Don't worry, I've got just the thing to cheer you up."

Jenny Taub walked around the corner. "Johnny? You wanted to see me?"

Johnny gestured toward Mace with a wink as he stood and walked out of the room.

Jenny put her hands on her hips. "You leaving me in here with Sad-Sack?"

"Yep!" could be heard from down the hall.

Jenny sat. "Time for you to crawl out of that pity hole you dug for yourself, Mace. Aside from the benefit to yourself, you have a whole crew who are looking to you for leadership and guidance. The loss of the *Petunia* and her crew is a devastating blow to us all. But we



don't have the luxury of milling around feeling sorry for ourselves. We have a war to fight. We have a planet to liberate. You know, I lost my family in the great starvation. And now I have a new family. It's called the Human race."

The leader of the free Humans rubbed his forehead. "I know. I just keep running that whole scenario through my head over and over. I haven't slept in two days."

Jenny put her hand on his shoulder. "I think I know just what you need. You need a mini mission, something you can sink your teeth into to occupy your mind. We need to find you something that requires enough brain power that it breaks your chain of thought. And I think I might have just the thing for you. Come on, get up. Come with me. "

Jenny took his hand, pulling him up from the table. "This way."

Mace asked, "Where we going?"

Jenny wagged a finger. "Can't say. Don't want to spoil the surprise."

After a short walk, they rounded the corner into the reactor room, where Jeff was standing with his arms crossed, talking with David and Gnaga.

Jenny said, "Jeff, I have a new worker for you. He's very excited about your conduit enhancement project. Fill him in on what you've got so far."

Jeff said, "Mr. Hardy? I didn't know you had an interest in this."

Mace shook his head. "I don't."

Jenny grabbed him by the back of the neck and shook. "Come on, loosen up. Listen to what they're doing. You might bring just the perspective they need to solve their problems." Jenny let go. "Mr. Moskowitz, fill him in."

As Jenny turned to leave she received a half scowl from Mace.

Jane stopped her as she walked into the hall. "Thanks for doing this. I'll keep an eye on him and make sure he interacts."

Jeff turned back to the others, looking at the floor. "The conduit runs under here. The Freck had this plating up, so it's easy to get to. Mace, if you'd grab that star driver over there, we can pull these plates. Sometimes looking directly at a problem helps to stir thoughts about potential solutions."

Mace picked up the rotary tool. "What is it we're trying to do here, Doc?"

"We want to increase the size of those conduits. Gnaga thinks we might be able to integrate two of those cannons together to make a single, more powerful one. For starters, we'll want to bring more energy from the well to the weapon head."

Mace gave him a confused look. "This conduit isn't even going to a cannon. "

Jeff pulled back. Hmm... you're right. Gnaga? We should start with one of the cannon feeds, don't you think?"

Gnaga Klept took hold of his chin. "I think you may be right. Good call, Mr. Hardy."

Mace frowned. "Really? You expect me to buy into your poorly acted charade? As if I don't know what you're doing."

Jeff held up his hands. "What are we doing, Mr. Hardy?"

"We're playing 'Let's get Mace out of his funk by making him think he's contributing.' Sorry, Doc, I've been around the three of you enough to know you wouldn't be starting with conduit in the reactor room."

"Good then." Jeff smiled. "We have an understanding. You, Mr. Hardy, are going to help us solve our problem. And you're going to help us because it's *our* problem. So, are you on board with us?"

Mace gestured toward the nearest cannon turret. "Sure, why not."

Maybe I do need something else to focus on."

Jane grinned as Jeff and Mace left the room.

Three floor plates had been removed when Jasper poked his head into the gun turret. "Mace, may I have a word?"

Mace stepped over the holes in the floor, moving to the doorway. "What is it?"

"Well, I've been thinking about those two shuttles we converted. They're just sitting in the bays. What if we took one of them and made it a scout ship. With those reactors on there, we could pipe that energy to the gravity drive, making it into a fast ship. We don't need all the transducers powered for that.

"I just think it might do us good to have a ship that can go, park, and watch the comings and goings from Earth. It's small, too, so it might not even get noticed. We could maybe even fly in from behind the Moon and then park on its surface."

"That's a great idea, Mr. Collins. Get with Mr. Montak and have the Mawga give you whatever assistance you need. And do that to both shuttles. We might want to put them on a rotation of sorts. Come see me again when you have them ready. "

Jasper nodded. "What you got going on here?"

Mace looked back at the disheveled turret room. "Jeff has some ideas about increasing the power output of our cannons. Step one is to see that they can draw more power from the well. We're attempting to add conduit to the feed circuit. If that works, we'll focus on some updates to the cannon. We'll have to disassemble the other one to get the parts we need."

Jasper frowned. "So we'll be without both main cannons while this is going on?"

Mace shrugged. "Not like we have anyone we need to fight right now. We could take out Stark's ships with the old cannons if needed."

Jasper took a deep breath. "I guess. I just don't like us not having an offense up and ready. One of those big ships could come jumping through a wormhole at any time."

Mace patted Jasper on the shoulder. "We still have the faster ship. We could run away."

Jasper crossed his arms. "And lose all our food supplies in the process."

Mace nodded. "OK. Point taken. We'll try to minimize our time with these guns down. In the meantime, see what you can do with those shuttles. Having some eyes out there would only be good for us."

Over the day that followed, the extra conduit was laid and integrated with the cannon feeds. A moderate level of testing confirmed the needed power levels would be available to the weapon. Disassembly of the second powerful cannon was begun.

Mace shook his head. "My hands are too big to get in there. The Fleck assembled this thing with their tiny hands, not these big clod-busters."

Gnaga stood behind Mace. "Step aside, Mr. Hardy. I can reach it."

The bolt in question was removed, allowing the power converter head to be exposed .

"That's the mechanism we're looking for," said Jeff. "It takes the plasma energy and somehow encapsulates it into a gravity wave. That gets passed directly to the emitter."

Mace asked, "And what are we planning to do with it, Doc?"

Jeff inspected the unit. "We're going to pull it and take it to the other turret. Then we'll have to mount it in parallel with the other head. Gnaga has worked out a timing circuit that we believe will allow the two heads to release their plasma rounds at the exact same instant.

"If that happens, we're hoping the resulting round will carry twice the punch. It all seems to work out in our simulation models. Reality, however, may prove different. Now, we just need to figure out how to pull this."

Mace flipped two latches. Reaching up, he yanked the unit from its housing.

Jeff held up his hands. "Please, Mr. Hardy, be careful. We don't want to damage it."

"I'm good, Mr. Moskowitz. Just tell me where you want it."

"Take it to our lab. Gnaga is constructing a frame to hold it. And as I said, please be careful. We can't risk damage to something we have no way of repairing."

The power head was dropped off at the lab. Mace walked the halls to the gravity drives, where Jenny Taub was sitting watching the monitors.

"Miss Taub, I just wanted to come in to say thanks. Having a project was a good idea. I feel like the vise that was squeezing my brain has been loosened, at least a little."

Jenny smiled. "If you ever find yourself stressing over something you have no control over, having a tough project to work on is almost a requirement. You and I have both seen combat. We both know the stress that comes from trying to get unwound after a mission. Having something to keep your mind occupied is where it's at. And please, call me Jenny."

"OK, Jenny." Mace nodded. "Anyway, thanks again for the assist. "

"You know, if you're ever feeling out of sorts, or down or blue, I'm here to talk... 24/7."

Mace tapped his knuckles on the doorframe as he returned a smile. "Thanks. I'll keep that in mind."

Another long walk had the former Army Ranger walking onto the bridge. "Gentlemen, tell me what you know."

Johnny asked, "Does this mean you finally have your head screwed back on straight?"

"It's better. Sorry for dragging everyone down with me. Mr. Mallot, anything on the sensors?"

"Nothing but stars and that big methane planet out there, Mr. Hardy. All is quiet."

Hans turned from his station. "When might my cannons be returned?"

Mace replied, "There's a power converter head that has to be mounted and then some sort of synchronization circuits connected. After that they can begin testing. If all goes as expected, you'll either have a cannon with twice the power or nothing but those old cannons. As to when exactly they will have it ready to test, I can't say. Anyone here talked to Jasper?"

Johnny chuckled. "Old coot has some secret project he's working on with Bontu in bay one. I tried to sneak Derwood in there with a camera, just to be nosy, but we got caught. He's overridden the video monitors so we can't see what he's doing. What's so secret that it has to be hidden?"

Mace shook his head. "No big secret. He's just having some fun with you. He's switching the reactors on the shuttles to power the drives instead of all those transducers. He wants fast shuttles that we can start using as scout ships to monitor the comings and goings on Earth."

"Not a bad idea. Speaking of that, we're just sitting out here doing nothing. Why don't we go park this bucket where we can observe? If they spot us, so what? We just back up and move to a new location."

Hans said, "I don't have my cannons. "

Johnny replied, "If we're just going to observe, we don't need them."

Mace stroked his beard in thought. "How are we set for rations?"

Jordan Crawford replied, "We just topped them off this morning. At regular consumption rates, we now have food to last us for ninety-six days. That's up from eighty-nine. My goal is for one hundred twenty."

"How are you managing to stretch that out?"

"Mostly it's just cramming boxes of those bars into every available space. If it's not in use, I'm making use of it."

"Wise moves, Mr. Crawford. Mr. Hobbs, please set a course for Earth space. Find us a spot where we can sit and watch. And Mr. Mallot, in your spare time, assemble a team and take on the task of figuring out how to minimize our signature.

"If you can make us stealthy we might just be able to sit and watch Earth without them knowing we're there. And see what you can do for the shuttles in that regard. If we want them as scouts we don't want them to be noticed, either."

Mace glanced over at Johnny, who had a wry smile on his face. "What?"

"Just glad to have you back in the game. We have a war to fight, and our odds of winning go up dramatically if we have a leader who's engaged."

"You people need to get better at picking your leaders. Maybe next time pick someone who doesn't lose your whole planet."

The *Rogers* lifted from the surface of Proteus. Hours later, it was parked at maximum sensor range from Earth. Six of the eight damaged Mawga cruisers remained where they had been disabled. One was having repairs done in the massive repair bay the Mawga had delivered. Another was parked beside it.

Johnny said, "Three days and they're still working on the first ship. I have to wonder how efficient that repair bay is."

Humphrey replied, "They have the port drive removed completely. And they're working on the same drive on the second ship. "

"You think we destroyed the drive and they're salvaging one from the other ship?"

Humphrey nodded. "That would be my guess."

Johnny leaned back in his chair, looking over his shoulder. "You know, we could make a run in there and take out that repair dock. It could take them months to restore those other ships without it. Especially if more have damaged drives."

Hans said, "Still don't have my main cannons, Mr. Tretcher."

Johnny shrugged. "Well, what could we do with the cannons we have? That repair dock isn't heavily shielded."

Mace said, "Part of our strategy is to not kill Humans."

Humphrey turned his chair. "Scans say there's nobody on that facility over four feet tall."

Mace replied, "You can see that from this distance?"

Humphrey pushed the data to the wall display. "The dock is broadcasting status feeds down to the planet. I just tapped into one of those. It has standard Mawga encryption, something Admiral Gar gave me the keys for. We can decode and listen to any Mawga transmission now."

"When did this happen?"

"Maybe two days before the *Petunia* was destroyed."

Mace held up his hands. Why didn't we use this before now? We might have intercepted Stark's plans for those shuttles. The *Petunia* could have just backed away."



Humphrey shook his head. "Sorry, Mr. Hardy, I didn't get it installed until earlier today. Haven't had the chance to tell you about it."

Mace looked back at Hans. "Mr. Mueller? You think you could destroy that dock if we take you in close enough?"

Hans looked over his console. "It may take us a few minutes, but yes. Our standard cannons should be sufficient."

Jasper walked onto the bridge. "Was listening over the bridge video feed. Montak and I have one of the shuttles ready to try out. It still has the heavy duty grappling on it. Seeing as how the Mawga don't have any ships they can fight with at the moment, maybe we take one of those shuttles in, grab that space dock, and drag it out of there. The drives of that shuttle won't push it very fast, but we don't need fast right now. And in the end we'd have our own repair dock."

Mace stood. "Can anyone think of why we shouldn't try this?"

Johnny asked, "What do we do with the Mawga who are on there?"

"We use them to teach us how to run that rig, and then we put them on shuttles back to Earth." Mace spun back around. "Another brilliant idea, Mr. Collins. We don't have to fire a shot, nobody gets hurt, and we have a repair dock of our own."

Jasper grinned at Johnny. "Hear that, ape-man? Brilliant."

Johnny smiled as he shook his head. "I can't argue with you on this one. In fact, I might just have to join your fan club if this works out."

Jasper stood in silence, not sure of how to respond.

"Mr. Mallot, set up a sensor feed to shuttle one. Mr. Collins, I'm assuming you'd like to pilot this mission?"

Jasper nodded. "I would."

Shuttle one, the *E.A. Collins*, left the bay, zipping through the

void of space between the *Rogers* and the Mawga repair dock. As it pulled alongside the giant machine, the grappling extended and took hold. The first attempt at moving the dock resulted in nothing more than a slow spin.

Jasper came over the comm. "We have a problem. The mass of that thing is too big. The drives of this shuttle can't handle that lateral force."

Jasper laughed.

"What is it?" Mace asked.

Jasper replied, "Hold on... I'm patching through a video feed from one of my port cameras."

The display wall image changed to one of a clear window into a hallway on the space dock. Half a dozen Mawga workers could be seen banging on the transparent window material .

Jasper continued to laugh. "Idiots are banging on the window and yelling like it's going to scare me away. I tell you, Mr. Hardy, if we Humans could get our act together, we would rule this galaxy."

Mace replied, "Well, first we have to figure out how to make you effective. I want that dock moving."

Jeff opened a comm to the bridge. "Mr. Hardy, he needs to move that shuttle to a point along its center of gravity and grapple there. With the mass of that station distributed evenly, the shuttle should be able to push it in a straight line. And I would suggest that straight line not be directed back out at our base. Take it somewhere first, and then move it to wherever we permanently want it."

Jasper said, "We aren't all idiots like the Mawga, Mr. Moskowitz. I wasn't trying to push it toward Proteus."

Jeff began to say something. Johnny cut him off. "Don't get pulled into one of his arguments, Doc. Just let it go."

Mace said. "Make the necessary adjustments, Mr. Collins.

Regardless of the condition of Stark's fleet right now, I'd rather we be out of there as fast as possible."

Jasper replied, "Agreed. Moving to a new piece of framework now... grappling... and we're on the move. I'm passing the nav data to the screen."

Mace turned to Liam. "Mr. Hobbs, given his acceleration, can you give an estimate of how long it will take to get that dock out of sensor range?"

Liam typed away on the console in front of him. "Three hours maybe. He should be at his top maintainable speed just before that. One thing for him to keep in mind is it will take him an equal amount of time to bring that dock to a stop."

Johnny chuckled. "I can't believe we're stealing that thing. Stark has got to be pissed about now."

Mace said, "We don't have it yet. At least not until we're well out of range. "

Humphrey Mallot yelled, "I have a wormhole opening at five hundred thousand kilometers! Almost right on top of Jasper! And it's huge!"

Mace yelled into his comm: "Jasper! Release that dock and get your ass out of there! Mr. Hobbs, take us to maximum sensor range from that wormhole!"

Cruiser after cruiser flew through the portal opening, forty-six in all. Following just behind was a Muhatha-class dreadnought, the largest of the Union ships, this one broadcasting the Targarian banner, another Galactic Union founder, and an opposing species to the Dellus.

Jasper shook his head as he looked into the comm camera. "I got nowhere to go, Mr. Hardy. Just save yourselves."

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Once again, this Human is asking for your help! If you enjoyed the book, please leave a review on the site where it was purchased. And by all means, please tell your friends! Any help with spreading the word is highly appreciated! I have a free science fiction ebook short story, titled "THE SQUAD", waiting for anyone who joins my email list. Also, find out when the next exciting release is available by joining the email list at [comments@arsenex.com](mailto:comments@arsenex.com). Visit the author's website at [www.arsenex.com](http://www.arsenex.com) for the rest of the series and other works!

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