

Sins of a Solar Empire: The Legend



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For sci-fi and Sins of a Solar Empire fans everywhere.

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PROLOGUE

10 000 Years Ago Kron - Vasari Occupied Planet Viturska Experimental Transport Lab

Senior experimentalist Shilakva awoke the same as he had awoken every day for the past 43 and a half years, with plenty of work to be done. Ever since he published his theories on the potential uses of tachyon particles for faster than light travel Shilakva had been employed by the Empire.

Since his employment, Shilakva also inherited numerous other projects, including the creation of Phase Space Stabilization Internetworking Devices, known colloquially as Phase Stabilizers. Shilakva had also worked on the miniaturization of phase engines and, eventually, their weaponization aboard missiles. All of this success, yet Shilakva's true purpose was yet to be realized. He sighed at the thought of his lack of success in his own field. He wondered if in a thousand years he would be remembered as a failed scientist, the creator of phase missiles, or not even remembered at all.

Shilakva lifted his head and donned his lab robes, his thin, spidery fingers clawing the robes onto his body, before he left his room for the laboratory. He entered the lab and was immediately in the shadow of his Tachyon Transportation System, a colossal device theoretically capable of tearing through real and phase space into what Shilakva called Tachyon Space, often abbreviated in official documents to T-Space, where the uneducated called it Third space (as real space and phase space where the proverbial First and Second spaces).

For seven years Shilakva had been tinkering, trying to get his device to work to no avail, but today was a new day. Shilakva activated the device, causing it to whirr as it tried in vain to generate a Tachyon Slipstream. Shilakva reviewed his mathematical model and noticed an order of magnitude was inexplicably dropped partway through, resulting in a calculated power requirement ten times less than what should have been had the magnitude not been dropped.

"It needs more power!" Shilakva hissed aloud in the empty lab as he ran to reroute lighting to his device. The extra power caused an even greater whine from the machine as Shilakva pulled up his information on the device. "According to my research," Shilakva quietly began, "a linear increase of power will create an exponential increase in the Tachyon Slipstream produced." Shilakva declared with excitement as he paused, pondering the implications of the power increase and magnitude error, "Terminal," he shouted, activating the lab's computer systems, "what's the distance to the nearest ship or structure?"

"Distance to nearest structure, is, one, point, four, krie^[G]. Distance to nearest ship, is, incalculable."

“Excellent,” Shilakva declared as he rerouted power from artificial gravity systems to the device.

That was when things went wrong, the machine roared to life as Tachyon particles followed by a white wave of light engulfed the entire station.

• • •

10 000 Years Ago
Ritharni - Vasari Occupied Planet
7th Fleet of Darkness

“Praetor^[G],” a low ranking officer aboard the mighty Vorastra Class Titan exclaimed with complete and utter disbelief, “there is an energetic anomaly at Kron,” he paused, receiving a transmission, “they say they’re under attack, structures are falling, the colony is in danger.”

“Kron?!” the Praetor replied, “but that’s one of our core colonies, how could it be under attack?” the rhetorical question lingered as the Praetor weighed his options, “What are their numbers?”

“We’ve lost contact with Kron. They weren’t on for long before they were cut off.”

“Open a channel to the Marauder *Jikantra*, tell them they’re going to Kron and are to report back the enemy’s numbers before returning to the fleet,” the Praetor ordered, maintaining a calm exterior despite his inner fear.

“Of course Praetor,” another officer declared, punching in the *Jikantra*’s orders with his long skeletal fingers, “The *Jikantra* has acknowledged your order Praetor, preparing to phase jump.”

“May the five makers have mercy on them,” the Praetor thought as the *Jikantra* disappeared into phase space.

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10 000 Years Ago
Phase Space
Antorak Class Marauder - *Jikantra*

“What’s our time to destination?” the *Jikantra*’s Praefectus^[G] asked the lower ranking officers.

“TTD is 10, 9, ...”

“Ready the fighter squadrons for launch,” the Praefectus ordered as the Marauder emerged from phase space.

The *Jikantra*’s two fighter squadrons launched from the hangar bay and split off to look for threats as the Antorak began scanning the area. “Praefectus, our scanners are clear,” one of the fighter pilots declared, “what are you reading?”

The Praefectus looked at the scanners in disbelief, “Nothing,” he solemnly replied, “No debris, no orbital structures, no signs of life on the planet, nothing. It’s all gone.” The Praefectus gathered his composure, drawing in a deep breath, “Contact the Praetor, tell him everything has been destroyed with no signs of the attackers.”

Just as the signal was sent the *Jikantra* was rocked by an unimaginably strong explosion. The bridge was in chaos as the Praefectus shouted, “What the hell was that?!” moments before a flash of white caused the auto tinting viewscreen to dim to maximum darkness

“Unknown Praefectus, but whatever it is, it’s brighter than the twin suns of Bogda.”

• • •

10 000 Years Ago
Ritharni - Vasari Occupied Planet
7th Fleet of Darkness

“I repeat, do you respond?” a low ranking communications officer aboard the experimental Vorastra asked of the *Jikantra*

“Patch me through to fleet command,” the Praetor ordered, “Command, this is the 7th Fleet of Darkness, Kron is under attack by unknown forces, we are moving to launch a counteroffensive in the hopes of deterring such unprovoked attacks in the future.”

“Confirmed 7th Fleet, report in as soon as you exit phase space,” the voice on the other end of fleet command replied as the Vorastra transitioned from real to phase space, en route to Kron.

Less than a minute later the 7th Fleet exited phase space above Kron, “Command, we’ve arrived.”

“Praetor,” a signals officer began, “no signs of hostile or allied ships. The system’s empty.”

“That’s impossible,” the Praetor began as a flash of white pulsed on the other side of Kron.

“Unknown energetic anomaly on the other side of the planet, it matches the previous readings we’ve sampled.”

“Command, this is the 7th Fleet of Darkness,” the Praetor started with noticeable fear in his words, “there is an unknown anomaly at Kron, moving to investigate.”

The 7th Fleet formed up on the Vorastra and prepared to circle the planet as another anomaly erupted, this time large enough to be seen from the other side of the planet.

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10 000 Years Ago
Vasari Occupied Sapce
Dark Fleet Command

Strange readings from Kron continued to intensify as the ships of the 7th Fleet of Darkness began losing contact with fleet command, “Order their retreat,” the Praetor of Darkness declared.

“No,” snapped the Praetor of Hallow, “They must stall the enemy as long as they can.”

“What are you saying?” the third and final Praetor in the room, the Praetor of Shadow, asked?

“We cannot fight this force,” hissed the Praetor of Hallow, “Our only option is to escape this force.”

“Are you suggesting that this is the enemy foretold in the chronicles?” the Praetor of Darkness asked with awe.

“That remains to be seen, but until we are prepared to combat the great enemy we must assume the worst and run,” the wiser Praetor declared before turning to the Praetor of Shadow, “Send your fleet ahead to clear the way for us.”

“Of course,” the Praetor of Shadow began, “The Fleet of Shadow will fulfill its destiny as was foretold in the chronicles.”

“Good, recall the rest of the fleet here,” the Praetor of Hallow continued, “and deploy the beacons.”

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1000 Years Ago
Vangelis - Trade Order Space
Colonist Shuttle

Ferdinand Aluxite peered out the viewport as the shuttle he was in slowly descended to the planet below. Merely three weeks ago his grandfather, Giovanni Aluxite, along with

the other barons of Rhyzov had agreed to pool their resources into a unified Trade Order, ending years of struggle between the factions. Giovanni was elected to lead the newly formed order and had since dispatched emissaries to the nearby planets in hopes of expanding the influence of the newly formed Trade Order. That's where Ferdinand came in, he lobbied for his grandfather to allow him to go with the emissaries and Giovanni begrudgingly accepted.

Now Ferdinand sat aboard his shuttle, waiting to land and disembark on the most advanced world the Trade Order had found yet. A desert world, Vangelis had pristine cities built out of a whitish blue compound and what appeared to be a large population. As the shuttle descended closer to the planet's surface, more and more locals began to gather, likely wondering what approached from the sky.

The shuttle landed with a sharp thud and Ferdinand readied himself to depart with the other traders who were feverishly looking out the viewports to see if the locals appeared hostile. The throng of human like creatures all appeared feminine, although not knowing anything about this race it was impossible to tell exactly. The natives of Vangelis all stood silent and unwavering as the shuttle's doors opened and the crew disembarked.

"We are traders, of the planet Rhyzov," the trader in charge declared to the mass of natives, "We must speak with your leaders, for we bring peace and promises of prosperity."

One of the natives stepped forward, her eyes completely white with the slightest tinge of blue that matched the blue accents of her white gown, "We are one," she said, without moving her lips.

"You," the lead trader stumbled for words, "you speak our language?"

"What are you talking about Captain?" another trader began, "She never said anything."

The Captain turned back to the woman before she *spoke* again, this time to everyone, "We have always spoken your language."

"But," the Captain paused, "how?"

"Our minds are one. Come, and we will discuss your offerings."

The lead native turned as the crowd cleared an aisle. Some of the women approached the traders to assist them with their baggage.

One of the women approached Ferdinand and took one of the three pelican cases he was dragging behind him, "Thank you," he said, patting the woman on the shoulder with his now free hand.

“Do not touch us,” she cried in rage, snapping Ferdinand’s hand from her body without even the slightest of movements.

Ferdinand turned towards the rest of the traders but none had heard her cries. Ferdinand did, however, notice that the entire communion of natives had their eyes fixated on him.

• • •

1000 Years Ago

Vangelis - Trade Order Space

Unknown Native Structure

After about 15 minutes of travel, they reached one of the large spires that dotted the planet’s surface, which prompted the lead local to turn, “Your world is not like ours.”

“I beg your pardon miss but, how can you possibly know what our world is like?”

“We have told you before Captain, our minds are one.” She paused, sensing the confusion in the men who stood in front of her before she continued, “We will show you, it is the way of the Unity,” she declared as the doors behind her opened, revealing a large foyer and another set of doors not far away.

They all walked in, out of the blistering heat, before the woman began, “For hundreds of your years we slowly grew more alert of our surroundings. As our technology and minds developed synchronously, we became able to augment our minds, allowing us to become one.”

“But why?” the Captain quizzically asked.

“Because it is the Unity’s calling.”

“Captain,” one of the other traders asked, “What are those things in her head?”

The Captain turned and looked, right above the woman’s ears were metal implants of some sort.

“They are the eyes and ears of the Unity,” the lead female began before the others joined her in saying “the Unity watches over us.”

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1000 Years Ago

Rhyzov - Trade Order Space

Council Chambers of the Trade Order

Being a member of the Council, Edward Vanifax had become accustomed to getting called to the Council Chambers without warning, however, to be called to the Chambers at the ungodly hour of 01:00 was ridiculous. Edward arrived and quickly took his seat to the right of Giovanni Aluxite, the only member of the Council who was alert. Despite the bloody past between the Vanifax and Aluxites, the two managed to set aside their differences in order to help create the Trade Order. Together, the two families controlled 63% of the Order. Nevertheless, Edward didn't believe that Giovanni Aluxite's 40% gave him the right to wake everyone so early.

"I'll be brief since it is early." Giovanni Aluxite began after all the Councillors arrived and took their seats, "As you all know, we recently began sending out emissaries to establish new settlements and forge new alliances. Some of you may recall the discussion we had in regards to Vangelis a few days ago, the desert world with what appeared to be an advanced population." Giovanni paused and took a deep breath, "Our emissaries have discovered that this civilization engages in self mutilation practices that lead to telepathic and telekinetic abilities. They merge themselves with machines in order to be able to communicate with one another directly and even read the minds of others. These," he paused, "aliens, can even lash out with their telekinetic abilities."

The Council broke out into a dozen smaller conversations amongst themselves, much to the chagrin of Giovanni, before Edward stood, "ENOUGH!" his voice boomed before he retook his seat.

Giovanni gave Edward a warm nod of approval and thanks before continuing, "In light of the behaviour of this race, I move for a vote to banish these aliens from Trader Space. All in favour?"

The majority of the Council quickly stood, signifying their support, the few who did not stand were stared at until they too stood.

"Very well," Giovanni continued, "I'll issue the order at once, these aliens shall be cast out of our space and never return. You may all return home. Thank you everyone."

CHAPTER 1

30 Years Ago - Oct. 20 Arietis II - Trade Order Space Bilbrandi Trade Port

“Oh man, I can’t believe those pirates actually followed us all the way here,” Tristan Stenson, a commercial trader shouted to his fellow traders with great excitement.

“They must’ve known Melanie was onboard,” Cedrick Johnson, another trader and a long time friend of Tristan, declared to a chorus of chuckles from the male traders.

“I swear I’m going to rip your,” Melanie Godwin began before an alarm sounded, throwing the entire trade port into chaos.

“What the hell is going on?” Tristan pondered aloud.

“Those damn Cobalts that we’re being taxed to buy for the police probably had another malfunction and now those four pirates are escaping,” Cedrick satirically hypothesised as they all went to the nearest viewport before the intercom crackled to life.

“This is a Code White^[G] alert, I repeat, a Code White alert,” the Bilbrandi Security Chief declared, “All ships are ordered to depart the station and set course for Galanthus.”

The three traders looked out the viewport as the alert message ended, only to begin again five seconds later, “Oh shit,” Melanie declared, her jaw practically scraping the floor. On the other side of the viewport were hundreds of unknown ships appearing out of phase space, destroying the other trade ports in seconds with their beams and what appeared to be energy missiles.

Tristan turned back towards the hangar, “Let’s get the hell out of here,” he roared as the three started in a full out sprint towards the docking bay. The slender Melanie darted out in front as the more, well rounded Cedrick quickly fell behind.

“I’ll have my ship warmed up and ready to go by the time you two arrive so just hop in. She’s faster than either of your guys’ chrome buckets.” Melanie told them, knowing that despite their pride, the two men knew it to be true.

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30 Years Ago - Oct. 20 Arietis II - Trade Order Space Cobalt Class Light Frigate

“Unidentified ships, you are ordered to cease fire, those are civilian targets. We have already sent you our language and alphabet. We will not engage if you cease fire at once,” the communications officer aboard the lead Cobalt of the Arietis II Police Force declared as 18 of the 20 Cobalts escorting the pirates planetside broke off in a pair of diamond nine formations towards the unidentified alien intruders.

“Are there any ships nearby that can assist us?” the Captain asked.

“Yes sir,” the sensors operator quickly replied, with a quiver in her lip, “There is a mining fleet in the Hapke Cluster, they’re en route sir, ETA is 5 minutes.”

“Very well,” the Captain solemnly declared, knowing that he would be sending every one of his 3000 crew personnel to their deaths, “Make sure all ships are transmitting recordings to Galanthus. I want the Order to know what it is they’re up against.”

“Aye sir,” the communications officer quickly relayed the message to all ships before opening a channel for the Captain to address his meagre police fleet.

“Ladies and gentleman,” he began, as the alien fleet approached to 7000 km, twice the optimum firing range for the lightly armed frigates, “History will not remember our names, but god damn it, those alien bastards killing our innocent civilians will remember our resolve.” He paused, as the two fleets approached, “All ships are cleared to engage at will.”

Just then, a siren began to blare in the Cobalt, “Sir, inbound missiles.”

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30 Years Ago - Oct. 20
Arietis II - Trade Order Space
Bilbrandi Trade Port

“It’s about god damn time you two made it.” Melanie declared with relief and rage as she lifted her freighter off the deck.

“Why the” Cedrick began, panting heavily from the run, “hell did,” he flopped to the floor, laying on his back, “you wait?”

“Just shut up and let me concentrate, otherwise this ride’s gonna be over real quick.”

The freighter left the trade port that was situated about 4000 km behind the line where the Cobalts were making their stand.

“Are they insane?!” Tristan asked in awe, “Why aren’t they retreating to Galanthus? They’ll be killed.”

“I’ll give you a rifle and a spacesuit if you want me to leave you to help,” Melanie snapped her reply as she always did when under a great deal of stress.

A large alien ship with a bulbous aft section unleashed a torrent of energy missiles that curved gracefully toward the Cobalts before crashing against the hulls of the dainty police frigates. The Cobalts began firing shortly thereafter and a moment later the alien fleet responded in kind.

“Did you see that Mel? Those alien ships, they shot clean through our guys’ shields.”

Melanie gulped as her fingers danced across the controls, plotting a course to Galanthus.

One of the Cobalts, internal atmosphere venting through the gaping holes on her starboard side, was tore apart from the decompressive forces. Another Cobalt that appeared destined for the same fate quickly fired its engines and made a slight adjustment towards one of the smaller alien ships that was raining green pulses on the police frigates. The Cobalt slammed into the alien craft, ripping through it before the two ships were destroyed, the debris created scattered across the vacuum of space.

Reinvigorated by the destruction of one of the alien ships, the remaining Cobalts looked to go out with something to show for it, as they all began their kamikaze runs. Unfortunately, as soon as they began their suicide runs a new type of alien ship started appearing near the police frigates, stopping them in their tracks before quickly escaping so as to avoid the debris from the impending death of their victims. In an instant, the entire police fleet was disabled as these disabling ships were constantly teleporting from the rear ranks to right beside the Cobalts, rendering them inoperable.

“Are those things performing phase jumps?” Melanie quizzically asked, “Because my drive is picking up a lot of distortions over there.”

Cedrick got to his knees from off the floor to peer out the viewport, “If they’re phase jumping that precisely,” he paused.

“We aren’t stickin’ around to find out what they’re doin’,” Melanie cut off Cedrick as her freighter entered phase space.

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30 Years Ago - Oct. 20
Arietis II - Trade Order Space
Vulkoras Class Desolator - *LarrTul*

“Move the fleet into bombardment range,” Praetor Var N’ok of the 15th[G] Fleet of Shadow ordered, “We must clear the way for the rest of the fleet.”

All the capital ships of the 15th Fleet encircled the planet as their bombardment beams heated up before firing on the helpless planet below. The smaller frigates and cruisers moved throughout the gravity well, destroying the remaining structures and slaughtering as many ships attempting to escape as they could.

The bombardment continued for a few more minutes when suddenly a group of non-Vasari ships phase jumped into the system, broadcasting incomprehensible messages similar to the ships that the 15th Fleet had previously destroyed.

“Group A, cease bombardment,” Var N’ok ordered as the ships of Group A turned to reform a line alongside the *LarrTul*, “Order the Jarrasuls to lockdown the planet, we will deal with these xenos.”

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30 Years Ago - Oct. 20
Arietis II - Trade Order Space
Marza Class Dreadnought - *Calisto*

“I repeat, cease your bombardment of the planet or we will open fire,” Captain Forli declared to no avail. The young Captain turned to his communications officer, “Keep resending that message along with our language and alphabet, understood?”

“Yes sir,” the officer quickly replied before keying in the necessary commands in order to loop the desired message.

“All ships, this is Captain Forli,” the Captain began to the four Kodiak Heavy Cruisers that were escorting the large Marza Class Dreadnought through the asteroid field on her mining run, “As you all know, our mining operation was beyond the borders of Trader Space. As such, it is imperative that we break through the alien lines and get to Galanthus. To that end, I am ordering all ships to set engines to maximum and break for the edge of the gravity well, we’ll draw their fire as long as we can.”

“But sir,” one of the Kodiak Captains replied, “you know that’s a suicide mission.”

“It’s the only way that anyone is going to make it to Galanthus. We need to cross this gravity well to make our jump. You have your orders, I expect you to execute them to the best of your abilities. Forli out.”

The Captain sat, just this morning he had received a message from his wife on Naeve. She had given birth to their first child, a son. As soon as Captain Josh Forli heard of his son’s birth he booked all his leave for the coming weeks. It’d be a five day trip to Naeve, which was on the other side of Trader Space, but he wanted to see his son. Now, he just wanted to see Galanthus.

“Load the cannons,” the Captain declared, “I’ll be damned if I’m going to die on my first day as a father.”

The distinct clang of the siege cannons being loaded could be heard in the bridge as the Kodiaks fired their engines to maximum, heading straight for the alien fleet and the phase lane to Galanthus that lay behind them.

“Lieutenant,” the Captain stated with confidence, knowing that despite his relative lack of age, the Captain was a mere 23 years old, he must command his ship with confidence in the hopes of his crew following suit, “See that egg shaped ship?” he half asked, half ordered, “Why don’t we fire a shell at that and see what these things can take.”

“Aye sir!” the Lieutenant replied with bravado, “Correcting heading, three degrees to port.”

“Three degrees to port,” another officer repeated a good distance away.

“Plus one point five degrees azimuthal,” the Lieutenant continued, again he was repeated elsewhere. “Prepare to fire,” the Lieutenant paused and looked to the Captain for his signal. Captain Forli gave the slightest nod, as a smirk crept across his face the Lieutenant turned back to the forward viewscreen and yelled, “Fire!”

The *Calisto* shook as the high explosive mining round darted from the Dreadnought to the ship Forli had identified as “that egg shaped ship”. The round reached the ship’s shielding and unleashed its terrifying explosive payload, creating a noticeable display of energy that quickly dissipated as the shockwave tore the ship apart.

“Fire at will Lieutenant,” Captain Forli declared as his smirk widened, “Just make your shots count, and keep us on course for our jump to Galanthus.”

“Aye sir,” the Lieutenant replied as he grew a smirk of his own, “Starboard, five point eight degrees.”

Onboard the Kodiaks, the trader crews were in awe of the destruction unleashed by the Marza. The entire alien fleet was solely focused on the *Calisto*, allowing the Kodiaks to continue unmolested.

The alien fleet quickly closed in on the *Calisto* and began to fire their energy missiles and beam weapons. Some of the flatter, beetle like ships approached the *Calisto* and engaged at short range, firing green waves of energy from the prow of their ships. The Marza then launched a volley of missiles. Designed to clear smaller asteroids, the missiles were surprisingly effective against the smaller alien ships. Then the *Calisto* fired its second shell of the engagement, this time ripping one of the large alien ships with a glowing blue ring in two. The only other ringed ship, seeing the destruction of its kind, quickly activated its own ring which had previously been idle. More Alien ships phase jumped into the gravity well as the Kodiaks charged their phase engines to make for Galanthus.

The *Calisto* lost its shields as the Kodiaks finally phase jumped out of the system. Nearly across the gravity well, the lumbering Marza had successfully soared through the alien lines but now had to run with its back to aliens. The smaller ships quickly darted after the *Calisto*, firing green pulses of energy at her engines but it was to no avail. The Marza Class was built too ruggedly for the small vessels which were quickly obliterated by the missiles aboard the *Calisto*, which leapt forth from their launch tubes and circled the trader vessel before impacting the small alien frigates.

“I want that phase jump calculated by the time we reach the end of the gravity well because we won’t have time to wait,” Captain Forli ordered, his smirk long since gone as his ship threatened to tear itself apart, “And reroute power from the shields to the phase drive. When we get to our jump point we’re gonna rip a hole into phase space so god damn fast those aliens won’t have time to blink their beady little eyes.” The Captain then realized that no one knew what the aliens looked like, all the Captain knew was they didn’t take kindly to high explosive amplified shockwave, M-type mining rounds.

“All power to jump drive,” One of the officers declared with a sense of enthusiasm as the *Calisto* disappeared into phase space.

CHAPTER 2

30 Years Ago - Oct. 21

Rhyzov - Trade Order Space

Council Chambers of the Trade Order

Augustus Aluxite, head of the Trade Order, sat in the Council Chambers, awaiting the arrival of the other Councillors. By now, Augustus expected that all of the Councillors had heard of what transpired at Arietis II.

Christopher Vanifax, Councillor of Adonis, arrived and took his seat alongside Augustus, “Please tell me you don’t intend to go to war over this,” he half asked, half declared.

“No,” Augustus replied, “We cannot hope to win against these aliens, and besides, they may not harm any of our other settlements.”

“And it’s not like Arietis was a key planet for our economy. If anything they were a drain on valuable resources elsewhere,” Edward continued.

“I agree,” Augustus stated before pausing, “I presume you will stand with me in voting against any military action that may be proposed by the others?”

“We can’t afford to go to war against an enemy that advanced.”

“Excellent,” Augustus said with a smirk as he turned his attention to the rest of the council, “Councillors of the Trade Order,” he began, “You have been called here today to discuss the attack on Arietis from unknown alien forces. Does anyone have any opening statements?”

Lucius Mannacher, Councillor of Galanthus, stood to address the congregation, “The colony of Galanthus moves for a declaration of war against the aliens,” he firmly bellowed, “I ask all those who support this to stand.”

The majority of the Councillors quickly rose, a few others pondered before choosing to rise until only Augustus and Christopher remained seated. Augustus peered down from his seat, situated above the main semi-circular floor of Councillors, before speaking, “Lucius, the Order has no interest in this war of yours.”

Lucius looked around the room before leaning onto his desk, his bald head reflecting the light that shone from above, “The Order appears to be in favour of doing what is right. We cannot allow aliens to bomb our planets and kill our civilians without punishing them.”

“The Order does not support your beliefs.”

“Then perhaps the Order should be disbanded!” Lucius boomed, anger bursting through the veins in his forehead. Lucius took a deep breath, calming himself before continuing, “Due to recent events and the inability of the Order to protect its citizens, the colony of Galanthus is seceding from the Order. I invite others to join me in establishing the Trader Emergency Coalition in an effort to stop the slaughter of our people.”

Lucius turned and briskly walked towards the exit as most of the Councillors representing the outer colonies joined him. When he reached the door, Lucius turned back towards Augustus, “For 1000 years you Aluxites, along with your Vanifax puppets have controlled the entire Order, the entire race. But mark my words Augustus, those days are over.”

Augustus stood, his blood boiling with rage, “You listen here Lucius, we have maintained peace for over a thousand years. Your Coalition is founded on war, what chance of peace do your citizens have?”

“I don’t know Augustus,” Lucius declared with pride, “but at least our citizens have a chance for survival,” he paused, “Our only option for survival is the Coalition.”

Augustus sat back in his seat as the Councillors of the newly formed Coalition left the room, “So this is how my Order ends,” Augustus quietly offered his thoughts aloud.

“It’s not your Order,” Christopher replied, “though if that’s how you think I’m surprised it lasted this long.”

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30 Years Ago - Oct. 21

Rhyzov - Trade Order Space

Lucius Mannacher’s Neruda Envoy

“Start running the recruitment ads I sent you earlier, I want people signed up as quick as possible,” Mannacher told his assistant back on Galanthus via his PVCD^[G] before turning to address his fellow founding members, “Anyone with military expertise I want over there,” Lucius pointed to a table on his right, the rest of you, look over these recruitment ads, if you like them, run them on your planets, otherwise, make them fit what you want,” Lucius ordered as he pulled up his pre-made advertisements for them to review.

Lucius Mannacher’s personal Neruda Envoy Cruiser had become the TEC’s base of operations for the time being. On his trip here, Lucius had prepared for potentially having to secede from the Order, as evidenced by his pre-made recruitment ads and the well laid out conference room.

Lucius approached the table of those with military expertise, “Aluxite must go,” he bluntly declared.

“Are you mad?” one of the men, Frederick Arn, asked.

“He has to, otherwise the Order will remain,” Lucius countered, “If we can cut away the power base of the Order the remnants will flock to us like flies to honey.”

“If we plan on eliminating the power base then Vanifax has to go too,” Patricia Provian, Councillor of Diomedes, offered.

“No,” Mannacher quickly replied, “Christopher is reasonable and will join our cause once we get rid of Augustus.”

The group sat with ponderous looks before one of the men asked, “How discreet do we want this? Are we trying to make an example of the Aluxites or simply create an unfortunate accident?”

“We can’t start a civil war out of this,” Lucius retorted, growing noticeably angry, “We must stand together if we are to have any chance against these aliens.”

“I have a few, *friends*, who know how to wire a phase drive the wrong way. You get them on his ship and I guarantee the next voyage will be its last,” another man offered as a sly smirk crept across his face.

“I know some people who run a repair company, they can get you on any ship you want,” Thomas Verlin, Councillor of Karlstad, declared from the other side of the room.

“See that it’s done, they likely haven’t much time,” Lucius gave a nod of approval as he looked down to the table. Seconds later he looked back up, “Well, go! We need this to get done.”

The man, startled, jumped from the table before turning to get details from Verlin before heading for the door, walking at a brisk pace.

“We’ll need to discuss how we’re going to get a fleet together that can combat this alien threat too so start thinking about that. In the meantime, I want all the police fleets within three jumps of Galanthus moved there immediately.”

“You bastard, trying to use us to cover your world,” Arn declared.

“Shut up Freddy,” Patricia declared, “Galanthus is the only border world Arietis had. It’s the next logical step. Besides, you’re not even within that zone.”

“Alright, alright,” Frederick quickly jumped to the defensive, “we may want to try and get some of the mining companies on board with this too. Their Kodiaks could prove useful in defending the carriers we get from the police forces.”

“Not to mention those new Cobalts are still getting all the kinks worked out,” Thomas Verlin scoffed, interrupting from the other side of the room once again, “What a waste of resource those were.”

“Well then I’ll put you in charge of designing our newest ship,” Lucius sarcastically declared.

“I’d love to,” Thomas replied in a snide manner, “after all, Karlstad is the premiere weapons development colony out there.”

Arn laughed, “Well he’s at least right about that.”

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30 Years Ago - Oct. 21
Galanthus - Coalition Space
Hithari Interstellar Spaceport

The spaceports of Galanthus were overflowing with traders as Cedrick awoke from his makeshift bed onboard Melanie’s freighter. By the time they arrived at Galanthus the trade ports were backed up, causing them to be diverted to the planet. Hotels were filling up fast and the rooms that remained were overpriced due to the high demand from rerouted and displaced traders. As a result, Cedrick, Melanie and Tristan decided to sleep aboard the freighter, and Cedrick’s back wished they would have chosen differently.

Melanie walked up to the door of the cargo hold that Cedrick and Tristan had been forced to sleep in and gave it a thunderous rap before calling out, “Wake up you two, I want to head into the city and see what’s going on.”

Cedrick leapt out of his *bed* and into his clothes in a matter of seconds, not wanting to be the one blamed for holding up Melanie. Tristan groggily followed suit, emerging from the hold a few minutes later.

The three disembarked the freighter and proceeded towards the exit of the docking bay. After passing through numerous security checkpoints the trio emerged at the spaceport’s foyer, where a large group of people gathered around the newsfeed.

Intrigued, the group shoved their way up through the crowd until they could see the screen, which read:

CITIZENS OF GALANTHUS

JOIN THE COALITION

-- TRADER EMERGENCY COALITION --

BRING A FRIEND - EARN HIGHER STARTING RANK

CONTACT YOUR LOCAL RECRUITMENT CENTER

ENLIST NOW! TEC NEEDS YOU!

Around midday on October the 20th, the colony of Arietis II was attacked by an unknown alien fleet, prompting a meeting of the Council of the Trade Order.

During their deliberations, a vote as to whether or not to fight these alien invaders was called by the Honourable Lucius Mannacher, Councillor of Galanthus. Unfortunately, the vote quickly deteriorated into a heated argument between the Councillors of the core worlds, namely Augustus Aluxite, and the outer colonies most at risk.

Unable to find a solution, Lucius Mannacher withdrew Galanthus from the Trade Order, prompting several other Councillors to do the same. In his next breath, Mr. Mannacher laid the foundation for the Trader Emergency Coalition, a new government designed to combat the alien threat and ensure the survival of our way of life.

All Trade Order Police Ships and their crews are now under the direct control of the Trader Defense Navy. Any personnel formerly of the Trade Order Police who have any questions should contact the nearest TDN Information Center.

Additionally, the Coalition is seeking volunteers to help in the fight against these barbaric invaders. All men and women interested in a rewarding career with the Trader Defense Navy should contact their local recruitment center. From now until the end of the month, any new recruit who also recruits a friend will earn a higher starting rank, up to the rank of E-3 SpaceFarer.

Melanie looked at her two friends, both of whom nodded, before she spoke, "I'm glad we agree that I get the free promotions."

"I never agreed to that," Tristan quickly replied as the trio headed off in search of a recruitment center which was within sight of the entrance to the spaceport.

In no time the trio had covered the distance, and, after a short wait, they were at the front of line.

"Here you are my lady," the man behind the counter politely said as he handed Melanie two recruitment papers before stamping another paper twice and handing it to her, "the first two are for your friends, this one signifies the two ranks for recruiting friends. When you're finished filling them out deposit them in the slot to your right. Pens are available at the tables. If you have any questions don't hesitate to ask our staff over there."

The three moved to the nearest free table and began to fill out their papers.

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30 Years Ago - Oct. 21

Rhyzov - Trade Order Space

Lucius Mannacher's Neruda Envoy

"We interrupt your regularly scheduled programming to bring you breaking news," A reporter declared, her eyes filled with untold secrets, "As our regular viewers know, earlier today the Council of the Trade Order was called together for an emergency session, during which several colonies broke off from the Trade Order. After wrapping up the emergency session, Augustus Aluxite left Rhyzov, bound for Adonis. When his ship attempted to enter phase space it suffered a catastrophic phase destabilization, destroying the craft and all on board."

Everyone on board Mannacher's ship exchanged looks of relief and sorrow over the situation.

"We have spoken to Christopher Vanifax about the events and he told us that 'the Order needs to re-evaluate where it stands'. When asked about whether or not the Order would merge with the newly formed Coalition he refused to comment. With the death of Mr. Aluxite the Order now has a power vacuum since his son, Octavius Aluxite, is 15 years away from inheriting his father's position as Councillor of Rhyzov."

"Terminal, off," Lucius ordered, prompting the screen to go blank before the intercom buzzed.

"Mr. Mannacher," one of the ship's officers called out across the intercom, "Mr. Vanifax requests to speak with you, channel 7."

Lucius grabbed his PVCD, entered his access codes and then signed on to channel 7.

“Ah, Lucius,” Christopher welcomed the much elder man.

“I’m sorry we had to meet under these circumstances,” Lucius sincerely replied.

“I’m sure you are,” Christopher scoffed before pausing, “I’m here on behalf of the Trade Order. We request to join the Coalition.”

Lucius was relieved to hear the news, “The Coalition accepts your request.”

“Oh, and one more request from the former Order.”

“Of course.”

“Try not to murder any more of us,” Christopher began, “because although we have joined your Coalition, we are only here for the good of our people. We need to appear unified for their sake and we can’t do that as long as you’re running around assassinating our figureheads.”

Lucius swallowed his self disgust before responding, “But you will support our stand against the aliens?”

“We wholeheartedly support the defense of what is rightfully ours,” Christopher Vanifax declared with vigour and pride.

• • •

30 Years Ago - Oct. 21
Galanthus - Coalition Space
Marza Class Dreadnought - *Calisto*

Josh Forli sat with the Captains of the Kodiak Cruisers that had been assigned to escort his Marza through the asteroid field, discussing the formation of the Coalition and their stance on the impending war while their ships underwent repairs. All the men shared a desire to serve and protect the Trader Worlds, but none of them wanted to lose their ranks, ships, and most importantly, their crews.

“Maybe if we bring it up with senior management they can make a deal with the Navy that lets us in with all we have,” a Captain of one of the Kodiaks suggested.

“I imagine they’re desperate for ships and trained crews, not to mention a war hero, eh Captain?” another man said, supporting the previous Captain’s idea while displaying his support of Captain Forli.

“Did you see what they did to Arietis?” Josh asked of his fellow officers, “There are no heroes from yesterday, only survivors.”

Just then, the intercom began to beep, signifying a pending message, “Captain Forli,” the communications officer of the *Calisto* interrupted, “Lucius Mannacher of the Coalition wishes to speak with you on channel 13.”

“Put him through,” Forli said as he and the other Captains turned to the screen in the briefing room.

“Good evening Captain Forli,” Lucius began.

“Mr. Mannacher,” Josh nodded, “to what do we owe this honour?”

“I was going to ask you the same thing,” Lucius replied, looking around at the other Captains.

“They were assigned to my mining operation sir. Kodiak Captains, we all fought our way through the alien fleet to get to Galanthus.”

“Excellent, I have an offer for all of you,” Mannacher began, “As you have no doubt heard, the Order has been disbanded and a Coalition formed in its place to combat this alien threat. Now, we are working on a deal with the mining companies to get some of their personnel and ships but that’s going to take some time and a lot of red tape still stands in the way of that agreement. However, if your men were willing to join we could get you processed right away.”

Forli looked at the other men before returning his gaze to Lucius, “We’ll need to take some time to discuss this amongst ourselves and with our crews.”

“Of course,” Lucius politely replied, “I’ll be at Galanthus by midday tomorrow. Can I expect an answer by then?”

“Yes sir,” Josh quickly answered, “Forli out.”

The other Captains looked at Josh before one of them finally spoke, “Captain, we’re all in.”

“Good, tell your crews they can join with us if they wish. If not, we’ll arrange for them to be sent to the mining office down on the planet.”

CHAPTER 3

30 Years Ago - Oct. 22 **Galanthus - Coalition Space** **Lucius Mannacher's Home**

Lucius Mannacher returned home to Galanthus after a tumultuous visit to the core of what was the Trade Order when he left, now known as the Trader Emergency Coalition. After forming the Coalition, Mannacher gave the Councillors their marching orders and had them return to their home systems in an effort to acclimatize the general population to the regime change. Lucius also wanted the Councillors to be able to voice their views on their own and not appear like the puppets they once were under the Aluxian Regime that had just fallen.

Mannacher activated his personal terminal and began sifting through the hundreds of messages that had arrived in the hours it took him to get to his house from the spaceport. There was one message that caught his eye from Captain Josh Forli. Intrigued by the possibility of having recruited combat proven personnel, Lucius quickly opened the message and read:

To the Honourable Lucius Mannacher,

After our brief discussion yesterday, my fellow Captains and I have concluded that we would like to join the Navy in an effort to prevent any further loss of trader life.

We do, however, have the following conditions:

1. All our crewmembers that do not wish to join will be transported to the mining office on Galanthus at no cost to them or the Mining Guild
2. All our crewmembers who wish to join may continue to serve with us at their current ranks and positions

Kindest regards,

Captain Josh Forli
Marza - *Calisto*

Lucius cracked the slightest of smiles as he read the Captain's message. Lucius was not a military expert but he knew that they would need every ship they could get their hands on if they were to survive extinction at the hands of these aliens.

Lucius entered Captain Forli's channel code on his PVCD as he went about his house, preparing himself some breakfast.

“Ah, Mr. Mannacher,” Forli acknowledged as he came into view on the PVCD.

“Good morning Captain Forli,” Lucius replied, “I’ve read through your message,” he began as he cracked two eggs and plopped them into his frying pan to be cooked over easy, “and I must say we have a deal.”

“Excellent,” Captain Forli replied with a slight shine of joy about his face, “We’ve already been spreading the word amongst our crews about the possibility.”

“And how have they responded?”

“Favourably, I’d estimate between the five ships we might have 500 people who want out.”

“Good,” Lucius declared as he flipped his eggs, “I’ll have some shuttles sent up to get everyone. In the meantime, I want you to move your ships to these coordinates to rendezvous with the fleet we’re amassing,” Lucius said as he punched in some coordinates for the Captain.

“Of course sir,” Forli replied, “we’ll be there within the hour.”

“Excellent,” Lucius happily declared as he got his eggs before realizing that he’d forgotten to make himself some toast, “Have a great day Captain, you know how to contact me if you need anything.”

“Thank you sir, you too. Forli out”

Lucius cursed as he threw two slices of bread into his toaster and began to think about the next issue he faced, the evacuation of Galanthus.

With the slaughter of billions at Arietis II fresh in the minds of everyone, Lucius hoped that he would be able to get the general population to evacuate. Although he didn’t like the idea of having 8 billion refugees displaced, he preferred it to having 8 billion dead civilians. Lucius decided that he would issue the evacuation order at noon as his toast popped.

Lucius grabbed the golden brown slices and quickly spread some margarine over them before breaking open his eggs with a fork and using his toast to soak up the still running yolk.

Mannacher pulled up the data on the fleet that had started to amass above Galanthus as he continued to eat his breakfast. Forli’s Marza and the four Kodiaks that accompanied it were joined by two dozen of the new Cobalt Class Light Frigates and a handful of Percheron Class Light Carriers. There were also two Sova Class Carriers in phase space en route and a third repairing asteroid damage to its dorsal hangar at a nearby colony.

Lucius finished his breakfast and brushed the crumbs from his hands as he looked at the final entry on the list. Two Cielo Class Command Cruisers were en route. A rare ship in the police ranks, some of the best commanders in the Police Force opted to operate Cielos because of their advanced communications suite.

Lucius recalled the horrific videos he had seen from aboard the ships that fought at Arietis II and hoped that the fleet being amassed could at least strike a morale victory, if not a military one.

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30 Years Ago - Oct. 28

Arietis II - Vasari Occupied Space

Vulkoras Class Desolator - *LarrTul*

Var N'ok looked on from the bridge of the *LarrTul* as more and more ships from the 15th Fleet of Shadow emerged from phase space above the once lush terran planet. For the past few days his Navigators had been performing reconnaissance on the adjacent worlds while the linguistics teams attempted to decipher the language used by the alien species. Feeling they had deciphered some of this alien language, the linguistics teams developed a crude piece of translation software to be tested in the next encounter, an encounter Var N'ok expected to take place in the coming weeks. Var N'ok knew that the aliens were gathering their forces nearby, and he intended to send a powerful message.

“Praetor,” Shar Kiri, Praetor of the Skirantra Class Carrier *Senvistra* announced over a secure channel, “what are your orders?”

“Ah, Shar Kiri,” Var N'ok began, “We need to remove the aliens from the adjacent planet and I want you to lead the assault.”

“Of course Praetor. When do we attack?” Shar Kiri asked his superior.

“Wait a few weeks,” Var N'ok answered, pondering the best time to strike, “We want to eliminate as many of them as we can.” Var N'ok paused before he continued laying out his plan, “You’ll be leading a smaller raiding fleet. This assault is as much about eliminating them as it is collecting intel on their capabilities. As such, you’ll be taking the Penal Wing.^[G]”

Shar Kiri nodded his approval over the channel before severing his connection. Based on the reports, the Penal Wing would be outnumbered and likely outgunned. Shar Kiri looked out the front viewscreen at the half dozen Skarovas Enforcers mixed in amongst the 30 or so Kanraks and Junsuraks, hoping that his minimalist fleet would be sufficient to eliminate the aliens.

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30 Years Ago - Nov. 1
Galanthus - Coalition Space
Marza Class Dreadnought - *Calisto*

Josh Forli sat in his quarters aboard the *Calisto*, preparing to contact his wife on Naeve for the first time in nearly two weeks. It was the first day since the annihilation of Arietis II that Josh had any amount of free time that coincided with reasonable hours back home on Naeve.

“Josh,” his wife, Alice, answered his call with relief and glee, “oh my god, what’s happened? Josh, there’s news that the Order has been disbanded and a new government formed after what happened on Arietis.”

“Alice,” Josh calmly replied, “how’s our son?”

“He’s doing well. He’s taking a nap right now, should be up soon though.”

“Does he snore like his mother?” Josh asked with a smirk.

“Excuse me,” Alice said before letting out a laugh.

“Safe to say I have a bit of explaining so I’ll get to it,” Josh began, “I guess I’ll start where it all began. We were mining beyond Arietis II when we picked up communications about an invading alien fleet and were ordered to get to Galanthus immediately. When we phased in over Arietis there was nothing but debris and these,” he paused in disgust and horror, “aliens.”

Alice sat in awe as fear washed over her face despite knowing that Josh had somehow survived.

“Luckily we managed to break across the gravity well and get to Galanthus,” Josh continued, “I think we only survived because they let us.”

“I don’t know about that,” Alice began, “you’ve told me some scary stories about rogue asteroids hitting the *Calisto* and not even leaving a mark.”

Josh cracked a slight smile at the thought of his old mining stories which now seemed boring alongside his latest tale. “She’s a pretty tough ship,” he remarked before continuing, “Once we made it to Galanthus we were contacted to join the Navy of the newly formed Coalition which has since replaced the Order and, well,” Josh paused, knowing this would be difficult for his wife to hear, “the other Captains and I have joined.”

Alice sat, not saying a thing as tears began to pool in her eyes.

“Alice, I saw what those aliens did and I don’t want that to happen to another world, especially one that you’re on.”

“But Josh,” Alice began, now crying, “I’m on the other side of the galaxy with your son.”

“It’s not much different than mining, in fact, I should get more leave now.”

Alice continued to sob as the baby awoke. Alice then laughed, “See Josh, your son doesn’t like this anymore than I do,” she declared before going to get their son, “Say ‘hi’ to daddy,” Alice said in her baby voice as she carried the baby into the room.

Josh smiled before asking, “What did you name our son my dear?”

“Josh Maxwell Forli,” Alice replied as she took Jr.’s hand and made a waving gesture to the screen, “I named him after an average asteroid miner, but now everyone’s just going to associate him with some war hero.”

The elder Josh waved back before blowing a kiss to his wife, “I have to go, I’ve got a meeting in a few minutes with some of the other Captains. I’ll contact you soon my dear.”

“I’ll talk to you later Josh,” Alice said before the communication ended.

Josh Forli rose from the chair in his quarters, brushed the wrinkles from his uniform, and strode off towards the bridge to perform a video meet and greet with the arriving Captains.

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30 Years Ago - Nov. 11
Galanthus - Coalition Space
San Meritas Naval Base

“Alright you maggots,” the drill Sergeant called out, “I have been informed by the higher ups that I will not be assisting you with your basic training,” he continued to shout as he paced back and forth in the barracks of the recruits, “But I am at ease knowing you scum balls will be on a planet so close to the sun that your eyelids would burn off it weren’t for the volcanic ash that constantly rained down.”

Cedrick gave Tristan a quick look as if to stay, “What have we let Melanie get us into this time?”

“Recruit,” the Sergeant yelled at Cedrick, “what is so god damn interesting that you would dare to take your eyes off of me for even a single god damn second?!”

Cedrick straightened up, preparing to reply before the Sergeant cut him off, “Did I ask you to speak?”

Cedrick opened his mouth but was once again cut off before he could speak, “Do you understand what a rhetorical question is?!”

An alarm buzzed as an announcement came over the loudspeakers, preventing Cedrick from getting himself into anymore trouble, “All recruits, report to the landing pad for departure, I repeat, all recruits, report to the landing pad.”

“You can be sure Petty Officer Hanson will hear about you,” the Sergeant paused, looking for Cedrick’s name on his uniform, “Johnson.”

The doors to the barracks started to open as the recruits formed up into marching order. Nine groups, six recruits wide and four recruits deep, marched out of the barracks and onto a bridge that led to the landing pad.

Melanie, who was in the midst of the second group, was just stepping off the bridge and onto the landing pad when, to her right, a Protev approached and began to spin around in order to land and pick up the recruits. The frigate neared the surface of the landing pad and touched down with a satisfying thud. The recruits never broke stride as they marched into the Protev and their awaiting futures in the Trader Defense Navy.

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30 Years Ago - Nov. 19
Galanthus - Coalition Space
Lucius Mannacher’s Neruda Envoy

Lucius Mannacher peered out the viewport of his Neruda Envoy as it prepared to phase jump away from Galanthus en route to Karlstad for a meeting with Thomas Verlin and several other Councillors to discuss how to go about modifying the trader vessels in order to create a capable naval force.

Despite the distance between the frontline at Galanthus and Karlstad, which was situated in the mid core, five jumps from Rhyzov, Karlstad was chosen because of the military industrial complex present and the large companies that took advantage of it.

Karlstad was situated in a highly pirated area which prompted traders of the area to take extra precautions and better equip themselves. The resulting abundance of weapons invariably led to the pirates gaining more weapons which caused the cycle to repeat, leading to a large demand for weapons around Karlstad.

The phase drive alarms sounded as the ship prepared to enter phase space while on the other side of the gravity well alien ships began to emerge from phase space, having come from Arietis II. Lucius couldn’t make out how many alien ships had emerged before his

Neruda transitioned to phase space. The only thing Lucius could make out from his viewport was the fighters being launched from the various carriers as the TEC fleet repositioned to attack the invaders.

Lucius was glad that the planet had been evacuated with the exception of some military assets which were no doubt being prepared for extraction now. Mannacher remembered how efficiently the aliens ravaged Arietis II. He hoped it didn't happen to his homeworld of Galanthus, but he expected that it inevitably would.

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30 Years Ago - Nov. 19
Galanthus - Coalition Space
Skirantra Class Carrier - *Senvistra*

The *Senvistra* and the supporting Penal Wing emerged from phase space and quickly surveyed the ships in orbit above the planet. Nearly a hundred strikecraft approached the fleet along with 40 large ships.

“Have the Junsuraks move to the front of the formation, I don't want those strikecraft to get through,” Shar Kiri ordered, “and have our fighters search out which of their craft are taking on a space superiority role and which are assuming a strike role. This is an intelligence mission after all.”

The Junsurak Sentinels moved in front of the main fleet in a semicircular arc five ships wide and two ships deep. When the strikecraft entered firing range phase missiles burst forth from their launchers onboard the Sentinels. The phase missiles quickly homed in on the incoming strikecraft, causing a good number of casualties on the initial wave. The strikecraft that did get through quickly broke off, some broke to engage the Vasari fighters while others made strafing runs on the *Senvistra*, firing their missiles before swinging around to set up a second pass, being mindful of their bombing runs so as to avoid the Junsuraks.

“Patterns acquired Praetor,” one of the lower ranking officers declared, “ordering the Junsuraks to engage the fighters while our fighter wings move to engage the bombers.”

“Excellent,” Shar Kiri replied, “Scramble the bombers, I want to see what their ships can take.”

A dozen bombers blasted out of the *Senvistra*'s hangar bay as the Junsuraks followed the hostile fighters, mowing them down with their relentless barrage of phase missiles.

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30 Years Ago - Nov. 19
Galanthus - Coalition Space
Marza Class Dreadnought - *Calisto*

“Sir, inbound strikecraft,” an officer aboard the *Calisto* called out.

“Carrier group, I need some fighters rerouted to swat those flies,” Forli ordered, “and someone make sure that command is getting data on these ships, we have a positive ID on their carrier, anti-strikecraft, space superiority and strike assets.”

“Aye sir,” another officer called out as she began compiling the data to be sent.

“All ships, set shields to maximum and maintain a tight formation, the Kodiaks will do the heavy lifting in close quarters,” Forli called out as the alien bombers deployed their missiles on their first pass.

One of the Cobalts took damage, minor shield and hull damage, as some of the fighters were recalled to handle the bombers. Seeing the TEC fighters moving to attack their bombers, four of the alien anti-strikecraft frigates followed, approaching the TEC fleet simultaneously.

“Blue Group,” Captain Forli called out, getting the attention of the Cobalts that comprised Blue Group, “When those frigates get in range I want you to engage them, but don’t go chasing them, let them come to us.”

“Blue leader, roger that.”

The TEC fighters closed in on the bombers and entered weapons distance before unleashing a torrent of autocannon rounds into the alien bombers. Moments later, the alien anti-strikecraft frigates entered the range of the Cobalts which broke to attack. In moments, the four alien frigates were overwhelmed by the 12 Cobalts of Blue Group and eventually destroyed as the main Vasari fleet entered weapons range of the *Calisto*.

“Fire all missiles!” Forli ordered, “send those alien bastards back to the hell they came from,” Forli bellowed as missiles shot out of their launch tubes and began to arc towards the alien fleet. Moments after the *Calisto* began launching her missiles, some of the smaller alien ships at the rear of the fleet began launching their own energy missiles.

“Long range assault ships,” one of the Cielo Commanders called out.

“Those energy missiles are coming right through our shields,” one of the Cobalt Captains shared with the others, “We need them taken out now!”

“Roger that, Brown group,” Forli called on the Kodiaks, “turn on the jets and destroy those long range assault ships ASAP.”

The Kodiaks acknowledged as their engines burnt a brilliant orange, propelling the Kodiaks through the enemy fleet until they were alongside the alien assault ships. Some of the larger, flat, disk shaped alien ships turned to engage the Kodiaks, firing green waves of energy from their prows.

“Focus missile fire on those short ranged heavy combat ships,” Captain Forli ordered, “We need to protect our Kodiaks,” Forli finished his order as the Cobalts began attacking the other anti-strikecraft frigates that were now in range.

With the tide of battle clearly beginning to turn in the favour of Captain Forli’s fleet, the alien carrier launched a wave of metallic objects that quickly dispersed through the alien fleet as the invaders turned to flee the gravity well.

“What are those?” Captain Paul Somers of the Sova Class Carrier *Mobius* asked.

“Unknown,” replied one of the Cielo Commanders, “they appear to be maintenance bots of sorts but we can’t confirm that.”

The alien ships reached the edge of the gravity well, a shadow of the fleet that had entered the gravity well moments before. Large rings of red panned out before the alien ships as they prepared to enter phase space. Captain Forli was beginning to think that they had won this battle when a large group of alien ships phased into the system and began firing on the TEC fleet.

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30 Years Ago - Nov. 19
Galanthus - Coalition Space
Vulkoras Class Desolator - *LarrTul*

The *LarrTul* emerged from phase space nearly on top of the *Senvistra* before opening fire on the defending fleet with her phase missiles and pulse beams. Unprepared for the trap, the defenders quickly turned to retreat from the now overwhelming alien forces.

“Send the Enforcers ahead to slow their retreat,” Var N’ok ordered as a dozen Skarovas Enforcers quickly chased after the fleeing defenders.

Three of the large carriers quickly entered phase space along with the six smaller carriers that had watched the battle from a safe distance. The large ship that had broken through Var N’ok’s line at the previous planet lumbered to its departure point while the same four blocky ships shot ahead as they did before. Var N’ok recognized the two dozen small frigates that were similar to the ones that had been destroyed with ease in the previous battle and ordered his Enforcers to concentrate their efforts on them.

The Enforcers encircled the trailing light frigate and quickly destroyed it with their wave cannons as the four larger frigates and two other frigates that were not present in the

previous battle phase jumped away from the planet. Moments later a few of the light frigates reached the edge of the gravity well and jumped away from the planet as the Enforcers closed in on the large capital ship and a few of the light frigates.

The capital ship began to fire its missiles as it attempted to deter the Enforcers but they soaked up the damage, although some had to withdraw in order to reintegrate before continuing their pursuit.

Now at the edge of the gravity well, the defenders attempted to phase jump away from the planet. The majority of the defenders escaped, but a few of the light frigates were destroyed before their phase engines were fully powered.

“Move the fleet into bombardment range,” Var N’ok ordered, “and call in the Karrastras.”

CHAPTER 4

29 Years Ago - Mar. 2 Praxedis - Coalition Space TDN War Room

After the loss of Arietis II and Galanthus, the Vasari had slowed their advance into Coalition Space as they established a foothold and base of operations in the sector, allowing the TEC to fortify their position on Praxedis, an ice world at the edge of the Ras Elased system.

One of the furthest colonized star systems from the core, Ras Elased was a cool red star nearing the end of its life. Due to its low temperature, Ras Elased had a CHZ^[G] that was very close to the star. On the edge of the CHZ closest to the glistening red giant was Arietis II, and near the far edge was Galanthus. The rest of the system was made up of a variety of asteroids, a gas giants and what the traders referred to as *The Frozen Crescent*.

Consisting of Praxedis and what astronomers believed to be the remains of a collision between two other ice giants, the *Frozen Crescent* was a mess of ice fields and comets in addition to Praxedis, which existed for the sole purpose of providing rare minerals to the core worlds.

Due to the abundance of anomalies in the region, the Trader Defense Navy had been able to go unnoticed for months, preparing for a time to strike or make an escape, whichever presented itself first.

In order to prepare for any potential fighting, the Coalition was sending as many ships to Praxedis as it could, most of which were not initially designed for combat. The only true military vessels in the TDN were the Cobalts, Cielos, Percherons and Sovas from the old Trade Order Police. There were designs in progress but none were beyond prototype stage, which meant that the bulk of the TDN's military assets had to be repurposed from civilian designs.

The best conversions were without a doubt the Kodiak and Marza. The Kodiak Heavy Cruiser used by the TDN was extremely similar to the mining variant. The only external difference was the addition of two 288 mm autocannons, one on each side, to augment the firepower provided by the 288 mm autocannon turret. Internal modifications were understandably more extensive, with fire control computers, communications systems, nearly everything, needing to be upgraded to military specifications.

The Marza Dreadnought was similarly taken from an asteroid mining background, although it had even more extensive modifications. A capital grade laser bank was crudely installed underneath the port side missile launch tubes, adding forward and port firepower to an already devastating ship. As with the Kodiak, most of the Marza's

electronics systems had to be retrofitted in order to achieve smooth interoperability with more recent TEC ships.

In addition to the mining ships, numerous other ships were receiving upgrades in order to create an effective fighting force. The Hoshiko Class was armed with a heavy laser cannon, similar to that of the Cielo while the eccentric Hokoets tinkered with the repair drones, attempting to weaponize the extremely effective robots.

The Dunov, the symbol of the economic prosperity of the old Order, was refitted as well, gaining a variety of weapons emplacements and swapping its cargo hold for one of the largest antimatter fission reactors.

Not even ships of the colonists were spared, as the Akkan, the primary tool of colonists, was heavily armed with a plethora of new weapons and systems, including an upgrade to its fighter bay at the cost of some living space, which military personnel found to be excessive even with the reduction. No one in the TDN asked to be placed on an Akkan, for fear of being thought of as a weak individual, but everyone wanted to get placed on one.

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29 Years Ago - Mar. 4
Rodari - Coalition Space
TDN Training Facility

“It is with great pride, that I name you all the first graduates of the Trader Defense Navy Basic Training Program,” Petty Officer Hanson finished his speech to the crowd and the freshly trained recruits, including Melanie, Cedrick and Tristan.

Despite the terrifying conditions on Rodari, a volcanic planet that was extremely close to the blue giant Pollux, there was still a relatively large and prestigious crowd in attendance, which the three friends fought through in order to find each other after the ceremony.

“Tristan,” Melanie said with a grin as he approached her, “Congratulations, I saw you were top of your class in the live fire boarding exercises.”

“Thanks Melanie, I really...”

“You mean SpaceFarer Godwin?” Melanie said with a smirk, “You know how to address your superiors SpaceFarer Recruit Stenson.”

Melanie burst into laughter at the look on Tristans face as Cedrick arrived and asked, “So, where is everyone being stationed?”

Melanie quickly spoke up, “I’ve been offered a position with the 1st Strategic Bombardment Fleet. Apparently they got some new ships coming down the pipe.”

Everyone nodded and gave their congratulations before Tristan spoke up, “The Poison Darts of the Trader Marine Corps said they have a spot for me.”

“Didn’t the Poison Darts board some pirate ships in the Capella system a few months ago?” Cedrick asked in awe.

“They sure did,” Tristan replied, “the information they obtained lead to quite a few arrests and a destroyed pirate outpost.”

“Those bastards have so many outposts around Karlstad, what’s it matter if they have one less?” Melanie asked.

Tristan glared at her before Cedrick spoke up, trying to defuse the situation, “The 3rd Field Repair Section enlisted me.”

Melanie switched targets for her verbal assault from Tristan to Cedrick, “You’re a Hokoe?”

“You know it,” Cedrick replied as his eyes began to light up, “I was always working on my ship, trying to get the most out of it.”

“I imagine you’ll have a great time with your fellow nut jobs,” Tristan declared to a chorus of laughter.

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29 Years Ago - Mar. 5
Karlstad - Coalition Space
TDN Military Lab

“Before we begin, I’d like to welcome you all to Karlstad once again,” Thomas Verlin declared to the other Councillors of the Coalition before he began, “Now, as you all know, we’re here to decide whether or not the battleship design proposed by our friends at Karlstad Offensive Limited is worth proceeding with to the prototype stage. So, without further ado, I’d like to turn things over to Ms. Alicia Peters.”

Alicia stood with the strength of a woman in a male dominated field and began, “Thank you Tom. We at Karlstad Offensive feel we have a supremely capable vessel that will more than satisfy the requirements for a frontline combat ship,” she said as she pulled up a schematic on the projector, “Our design has autocannon turrets on all sides, a double deck hangar bay and high powered laser cannons in addition to a variety of other offensive and defensive systems that require more detailed explanation,” Alicia paused, “but first, are there any questions.”

Frederick Arn, Councillor of Novalis, rose to ask his question, “Will this be a more defensive ship or will it be able to lead fleets into hostile space?”

Alicia grinned, “It wouldn’t be a Karlstad Offensive design unless it could take the fight to the enemy,” she waited for other questions, which never came, before continuing, “As I said, there are many other technologies that require in depth explanation. We’ve been working in conjunction with Palatia Laser Corporation on a new form of laser beam weapon that we’re extremely excited about based on our initial tests. We’ve also gotten Gauss Weapons Group to help design a rail gun capable of firing projectiles at near lightspeed, which our tests indicate is sufficient to bypass standard shielding.”

“What do you mean by *standard shielding*?” Patricia Provian asked.

“Well obviously we haven’t been able to test on alien shield systems,” Alicia kindly replied before returning to the battleship design, “We’ve also got over two dozen flak pods in the design to provide some anti-strikecraft capabilities, and,” Alicia paused for dramatic effect before continuing, “we have developed a shield system that is capable of disrupting the alien missiles that have been reported to bypass our current shielding.”

Everyone perked up, intrigued by the possible breakthrough, before Lucius asked, “How has this been accomplished?”

“I’m afraid that’s a Karlstad Offensive secret for the time being,” Alicia replied before asking, “So, where do we stand on entering the prototype stage?”

The Councillors on hand all looked at each other before Christopher Vanifax spoke, “Could you please give us a few minutes Ms. Peters?”

“Of course,” she replied before leaving the room.

Once she left, Christopher spoke again, “It appears to be a survivable ship.”

“I agree, this ship looks like it could be what we need to turn the tables on these alien bastards,” Frederick Arn passionately declared.

“Does anyone have any reason not to go ahead with this?” Thomas Verlin asked. After a few seconds went by without a noise he continued, “I’ll tell them to begin construction of two prototypes.

“Very well,” Lucius acknowledged the decision, “I was told today that our frigate prototypes should be here in a few days for us to evaluate and determine whether or not to begin LRIP, so we’ll get together again then,” Mannacher finished before the Councillors rose to return to the oceanic planet of Karlstad from the orbiting military lab.

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29 Years Ago - Mar. 7
Praxedis - Coalition Space
Marza Class Dreadnought - *Calisto*

“All ships, prepare to phase jump,” Captain Forli began to his fleet, which mainly consisted of carriers.

The small fleet jumped into phase space, en route to the Phemios Ice Field to strike what intelligence believed to be an alien scouting fleet. The fleet popped out of phase space just outside the ice field before the fighters and bombers launched from their carriers.

The alien fleet, which was in the center of the ice field when the TEC fleet arrived, consisted of one of the ringed capital ships seen during the Battle of Arietis II and four smaller frigates.

“Green Group, stay on the peripheral of the field, I don’t want you guys to get caught in the middle of any shooting,” Captain Forli ordered the four Percherons that comprised Green Group before turning his attention to the two Sovas, the only other ships in his fleet, “*Ithica*, break to starboard and swing in to engage the alien capital ship. *Mobius*, attack straight on. I’ll take the *Calisto* to port and try to keep them from retreating,” Forli finished his plan before continuing with other details, “Once we get inside that ice field we won’t have communications so use your judgement on when to retreat. If we let those aliens out of the ice field to call reinforcements we’re done. Forli out.”

As Forli finished relaying his orders the TEC fighters entered weapons range of the frigates and began firing their dual wingtip autocannons. The 83 mm rounds quickly whisked away the shields on the small frigates before tearing into the hull, eventually destroying the four frigates before the alien capital ship could launch three fighter wings to engage the trader strikecraft.

Impossibly outgunned, the alien fighters quickly succumbed to the overwhelming numbers of the TEC fighters as the bombers pounded away at the ringed alien capital ship before the *Mobius* came into firing range and began to fire its prow laser cannons before turning to present its portside.

The alien ship quickly began to fire its beams and missiles at the *Mobius* before the *Ithica* and *Calisto* arrived to engage the alien vessel. The *Calisto* began to fire on the alien craft, unleashing a barrage of missiles and bullets before something happen to the lumbering Marza.

“Captain,” one of the officers aboard the *Calisto*’s bridge called out, “It appears as though we’ve entered phase space.”

“What?” Forli asked in awe, “How is that possible?”

“Unknown,” the same officer replied, “we’ve lost sight of all signs of the battle and our phase sensors are indicating zero phase velocity. Wait a second,” the officer paused, “we’re detecting enemy missiles.”

“How are there missiles in,” Captain Forli paused for a moment, “So that’s how those bastards are shooting straight through our shields. Those missiles can make precision phase jumps.”

Just as the Captain finished his thought, the *Calisto* emerged from phase space to see the enemy capital ship battered and bruised as it attempted to retreat.

“End this,” Forli ordered before the *Calisto* unleashed a terrifying amount of missiles on the alien ship, breaking it in half.

Victorious, the TEC fleet left the ice field to return to Praxedis and prepare for whatever may come next.

“What happened to you guys in there?” Captain Somers of the *Mobius* asked Captain Forli.

“We believe the alien ship managed to force us into phase space,” Captain Forli began, “luckily nothing serious came of it, only minor shield damage was received. However, we believe we know how their missiles are bypassing our shields.”

“Looks like the tide may be starting to turn,” Somers replied with a hint of enthusiasm as the TEC fleet shot into phase space.

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29 Years Ago - Mar. 10
Lycomede - Coalition Space
Secure Military Gravity Well

The shuttles carrying the Councillors exited phase space above Lycomede, a barren and desolate world which served as a testing site for military products. Civilian interest in planets as inhospitable as Lycomede was low, and since there was only one phase lane to Lycomede, it was easy to enforce a blockade.

“Ladies and gentlemen this is Commander Tai of the Trader Defense Navy, I’d like to welcome you all to Lycomede before we begin today’s trial runs,” the Commander welcomed the Councillors, “We’ve got three new ship designs to display to you today that we certainly believe fit the requirements we at the Navy have demanded.”

The shuttles approached a frigate with pods on the port and starboard side as well as a flat dish above the rest of the ship.

“First up,” the Commander began, “we have the Javelis Long Range Missile Frigate from our friends at AxiTech.”

“Didn’t they design our new bombers?” Frederick Arn asked.

“They did,” Commander Tai answered, “So we have high expectations for this ship. As its name indicates, the Javelis is capable of firing missiles up to 9800 km. As we requested, its radar allows for fire and forget operation, enabling the ship to cycle between targets with ease.”

Commander Tai finished his overview as the ship turned towards a group of targets that were about 9000 km away. After a second, 10 missiles shot out from the missile pods, five from each pod, and they quickly arced towards their targets. When the missiles were about halfway to their target another volley was launched, this time at a different target, one that was moving in an erratic pattern, before the Javelis turned towards its final target and fired again as the first wave of missiles detonated near the first target, turning it to rubble. In a matter of seconds the second wave gracefully approached the moving target and destroyed it, although one of the missiles missed and looped around for a second pass before detonating. Finally, the third wave impacted on the final target, ending a successful test.

The Councillors looked at each other before Verlin spoke up, “It would certainly give us a range advantage.”

“And the economy on Diomedes could use the jobs this would create,” Patricia Provian voiced her support for the design, which was rare for the woman commonly known as *Pacifist Pattie*.

“AxiTech is stationed on Rhyzov,” Christopher Vanifax remarked.

“Yes but that radar is made by Diomedes Dynamics,” Patricia replied, “and right now our whole system is in the midst of a recession.”

Lucius knew that any decision would be as much about military needs as it would be about economic needs. The fall of most planets in the Ras Elased system, the main trading partner of the planets in the Markab system, of which Diomedes was one, meant that the entire system was in the midst of economic turmoil.

“Up next,” Commander Tai unknowingly interrupted the Councillors, as the previous conversation happened off the communications channels, “We have the Garda Flak Frigate, which is designed to fill the vacant anti-strikecraft role in our fleets. It’s four autocannons and advanced targeting systems allow it to engage high speed, low profile targets on all sides.”

Moments later the flat ship, with four autocannons on its dorsal side, fired up its engines and headed into a cluster of small targets and began firing, punching holes in the targets

with ease. Moments later a dozen targets were fired on trajectories past the Garda, which quickly tracked and destroyed the high speed targets.

“Our final ship,” the Commander began, “is the Krosov Siege Frigate, which we unfortunately can’t demonstrate today because our Osprey ship-to-surface torpedo supply was depleted, but I assure you it will perform its role admirably should the time come to bomb the alien planets.”

“Bomb them?” Patricia frantically asked the Councillors, “Those are our planets, we have no need to bomb them.”

“I don’t think we can ask them nicely to leave our planets and expect to get any results,” Frederick Arn began, mocking Patricia, “besides, if we ever plan on taking back the Ras Elased system we’ll need to drive those aliens off our planets.”

“Does anyone have any reason not to begin low rate initial production of these ships on a trial basis?” Lucius asked his fellow Councillors, none of whom replied, “Very well, I’ll send word that we want a fleet prepared in orbit above Rodari with as many of these new ships as can be made.”

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29 Years Ago - Mar. 14
Praxedis - Coalition Space
Sova Class Carrier - *Mobius*

“Captain Forli,” Paul Somers, Captain of the *Mobius* began, “we’ve just received orders from high command, we’re to evacuate the Ras Elased system.”

There was a long pause before Forli replied, “How are we supposed to do that? There’s an entire alien fleet between us and Ras Elased.”

“Our naval astronomers say there will be a temporary phase lane created between the comet of Zenbei and Makino of the Pollux system due to a planetary alignment.”

“How long do we have until this lane opens?” Forli asked.

“They estimate it will open in about an hour and close for another 23 and a quarter years a few hours later,” Captain Somers answered.

“Very well,” Captain Forli began, “ready the fleet, we leave at once. We don’t want those aliens to know how we escaped and we sure as hell don’t want to get trapped on the wrong side when that phase lane collapses.”

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29 Years Ago - Mar. 20
Lycomede - Coalition Space
Secure Military Gravity Well

Commander Hui Tai of the Trader Defense Navy Special Weapons Test Command rolled out of bed at 02:00 Lycomede Standard Time to the sound of an incoming transmission.

“Voice only,” Commander Tai requested of the terminal, not wanting to present himself at this early hour.

“Good morning Commander Tai, this is Fleet Admiral Condoza, are you alone?”

Hui couldn’t imagine who would be around at the ungodly hour it was but decided it was best not to resort to sarcasm when addressing the TDN’s only five star admiral, “Yes sir.”

“Good,” Condoza began, “We’ve recently relocated all our assets from the Ras Elased system to the Pollux system where we plan on regrouping to make a stand. With the new battleship program underway I was hoping you could take the first ship off the line to Rodari with a full crew and assume command of the 7th Command Section.”

Hui Tai wasn’t sure if he was fully alert based on the hour and what he thought he heard, “Sir, aren’t there more personnel higher ranked that should assume that role?” the young Commander asked.

“You’ve been working at Special Weapons Test since it went online two years ago, I wouldn’t want anyone other than you taking that new battleship into the fire.”

“Thank you sir.”

“You score a victory for us and I’ll consider that thanks enough,” Admiral Condoza replied, “Our intelligence believes that the Pollux system is where the aliens will head after they’ve fully secured the Ras Elased system and from the star they’ll likely jump to Rodari so as soon as that battleship is complete I want you en route to Rodari. We expect those aliens will arrive sometime between December and March.”

“Yes sir,” Commander Tai replied, “that should give us some time to amass a fleet of our own to stop them.”

“That’s the plan. I’ll update you on the contents of your fleet as I know more as well as any supporting fleets. Fleet Admiral Condoza out.”

CHAPTER 5

29 Years Ago - Dec. 21

Rodari - Coalition Space

Marza Class Dreadnought - *Calisto*

For months Captain Forli had waited above Rodari while the TDN sent as many ships as it could to prepare for what would be the biggest engagement yet. Initially it was more of the same, some Cobalts, Percherons, the odd Cielo and various crude conversions. Lately, however, newer designs were streaming in.

Garda Flak Frigates were spread amongst the fleets to provide anti-strikecraft capabilities while Javelis Long Range Missile Frigates joined support fleets to provide supporting fire from a safe distance.

Attempting to create a more cohesive force, the TDN reorganized its assets into small fleets, resulting in Captain Forli gaining command of the 1st Strategic Bombardment Fleet, which consisted of the *Calisto* and the four Kodiaks of Forli's old mining fleet. Josh Forli's fleet also had 10 Cobalts and another 10 Gardas to go with an ever increasing number of Krosos, which Captain Forli ordered away from the frontlines since they would only be a liability.

Across the gravity well, Captain Paul Somers of the *Mobius* commanded the 4th Carrier Group which had the sole purpose of providing strikecraft and not getting caught in the middle of the fighting.

Captain Forli's intercom buzzed, signalling the daily meeting with high command.

"Good morning ladies and gentlemen," Fleet Admiral Condoza began, "I trust you have all been settling in amongst your new fleets without any difficulty."

"Yes sir," one of the newer Captains proclaimed.

"Good," Condoza replied before continuing with the latest intelligence the TDN had to offer, "Our latest reports haven't changed our outlook. We still expect the aliens to arrive in the Pollux system in mid January."

Captain Somers interrupted, "How can we be sure they won't bypass the Pollux system and strike someplace else?"

"The aliens are thorough," Fleet Admiral Condoza replied, "They spend a great deal of time gathering all the resources they can, be it from our more pristine worlds or the hazardous ice fields."

"And what is the status of our once *pristine* worlds?" Captain Forli asked.

“The aliens appear to cease bombardment when they can easily subjugate the remaining population. We still have contact with small resistance groups on most of our planets.”

“And?” another of the newer Captains asked.

“And”, Henry Condoza began to show signs of displeasure, “they say that the aliens are reluctant to kill our people but that slavery is extremely common,” the Fleet Admiral paused, “But make no mistake, any who act out of line are killed. So long as people don’t act out and weren’t in the midst of the bombing regions, they should be alive and well on the planet.”

Many of the Captains from the Ras Elased system were noticeably relieved by this information.

“If no one else has any questions,” Condoza paused, “then you are all dismissed until tomorrow. Have a good day.”

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29 Years Ago - Dec. 25
Naeve - Coalition Space
Josh and Alice Forli’s Home

Alice awoke Christmas morning as she often awoke, to the sound of her son, Josh Forli Junior crying. She quickly picked up her son and calmed him before heading to their Christmas tree for Junior’s second Christmas. Alice began talking to Junior in her baby voice as they opened the presents.

About halfway through the Christmas presents the intercom began to buzz, causing Junior to resume crying. Alice answered the call to see *Santa Claus*.

“Ho, ho, ho,” Josh Forli, dressed as Santa, called out to his wife and son.

“Why hello Santa,” Alice replied, waving Junior’s hand and smiling, “We see that you managed to find us again this year.”

“Yes, you both seemed to behave quite well.”

Alice continued to smile as Junior stared at the jolly person on the screen.

“What did you get for Christmas?” Josh asked Junior.

Junior let out an indecipherable but evidently happy noise as he reached for something, which Alice swiftly picked up and handed to Junior before turning to Josh, “We like this rattle that daddy sent, don’t we Junior?”

Again, Junior happily babbled before speaking one of the few words he was capable of “Dad.”

Josh smiled at the sound of his son saying ‘Dad’ before Alice laughed and said, “That’s right, Dad sent that for you. We’ll have a lot of fun with that.”

“Well it looks like I’ve been outdone this year,” Josh replied.

“I don’t know about that Santa,” Alice said with a smile.

“Ho, ho,” Captain Forli laughed, “Well, I’m afraid my elves won’t let me talk any longer, but you two be good and I’ll be back before you know it.”

“Bye Santa,” Alice said, waving Junior’s hand, “What do we want for Christmas next year Junior?”

Junior looked at Santa before saying, “Dad.”

“I’ll see what I can do son,” Josh replied before the call ended.

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29 Years Ago - Dec. 28

Arietis II - Vasari Occupied Space

Vulkoras Class Desolator - *LarrTul*

Var N’ok sat on the bridge of the *LarrTul*, reviewing his battle plans for when they jumped to the adjacent system. Since the Vasari arrived over a year ago, their linguists had managed to decipher some of the language used by the defending xenos. The Traders, as they referred to themselves, were preparing their ships at a volcanic planet in close proximity to the blue star it orbited.

Var N’ok’s intercom buzzed as Shar Kiri, Praetor of the *Senvistra* arrived for the briefing, “Welcome Shar Kiri,” Var N’ok welcomed his fellow Praetor before beginning his plan, “Praetors and Praefecti, it will soon be time for us to move on and strike these Traders again.”

“Are we taking a full fleet this time?” Shar Kiri angrily asked.

Var N’ok shot a glare through the screen to Shar Kiri before continuing, “The *Toruvak* will enter the system and approach the volcanic planet these Traders defend before activating its phase stabilizer, allowing the main fleet to phase into the system.”

“What shall we do after the main fleet arrives?” Praetor Ilaka Korsul asked, seeing that his Antorak Class Marauder, the *Toruvak*, was not part of the main fleet.

“Praetor Var N’ok,” Shar Kiri began, “I recommend the *Toruvak* stay with the fleet, in case we must retreat.”

“Retreat?” Var N’ok confusingly asked, “You have seen how these Traders run from our firepower, what chance do they have?”

“They should not be underestimated,” Shar Kiri retorted, “they decimated our Penal Wing.”

Omi’ka Serak, Praefectus of one of the Kortuls, laughed, “The Penal Wing,” he began, “is made to be decimated.”

All the Praetors laughed before Var N’ok spoke, “Very well Shar Kiri, we will keep the *Toruvak* with us so that you will feel safe. It will also allow us to begin lockdown quicker once we have cleared out the Traders.”

“You will regret taking these Traders lightly Praetor N’ok,” Shar Kiri replied.

“I highly doubt that,” Var N’ok answered before dismissing everyone and returning to his plans.

Countless Lasuraks would be defended by a dozen Skarovas Class Enforcers while all the Junsuraks, Kanraks and Ravastras would stick close to the *LarrTul* for the main combat. There were also plenty of Serevun Overseers and Stilakus Subverters that would support the fleet by repairing the fleet and disabling the Traders, allowing for easy targets. As the Traders would say, it would be like “shooting animals in a container,” or something along those lines.

Var N’ok laughed at the language of the Traders and its complexities before comforting himself with the thought of ridding the galaxy of their kind.

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28 Years Ago - Jan. 2
Lycomede - Coalition Space
Secure Military Gravity Well

“All hands, prepare to exit the yard,” Commander Tai ordered his crew aboard the first KOL Class Battleship produced, the *Vanifax*.

The ship was named after Derek Vanifax, a Councillor who lived about 750 years ago. Derek, like all of the name Vanifax, was forced out of power on Rhyzov due to the majority held by the Aluxites, forcing a move to the neighbouring planet of Adonis.

Equally hospitable, Adonis was extremely underdeveloped for centuries, until Derek Vanifax used his wealth to grow the colony into a booming world. Cautious not to spoil the beautiful world he had inherited, Derek Vanifax kept agriculture a large priority, creating an economy centred around the food trade, which only grew as the old Trade Order expanded to more inhospitable planets that were incapable of growing their own food.

Commander Tai didn't know much about Derek Vanifax, but based on his reputation for allowing the Order to expand into the unknown, he felt the name suited a brand new ship quite well.

"We're out of the yard sir," one of the officers on board the bridge called out.

"Very well, plot a course for Capella," Commander Tai ordered, "We rendezvous with our fleet there before continuing onward to Pollux to reinforce our forces at Rodari."

"Aye sir," another officer acknowledged the orders before the bridge came alive with the chaos of a new ship being used for the first time.

"We'll need to test all vital systems en route to Rodari," Commander Tai called out, "So power the shields to maximum, I want to make damn sure they work."

"Yes Commander," an officer declared as she raised some levers and keyed in some commands, "Shields rising over all sections."

"Excellent, fire control, squeeze off a few rounds on all batteries and verify the rail gun charges to full power."

The *Vanifax* shook as the flak pods fired, followed by the distinct shudder of autocannon rounds. The sight of the glowing tracers arcing through space raised the hairs on the back of Commander Tai's neck, knowing that the shots would soon be for real.

"Romeo Golf^[G] fully charged Commander," a weapons officer declared.

"Simulate firing of Romeo Golf on my mark," Commander Tai waited a second, thinking about how he first referred to the rail gun by its colloquial name, not its phonetic military designation, "Mark."

"Simulated firing is a success Commander."

"Excellent, begin communications check, and perform radar scans on all frequencies."

"Yes Commander," three officers declared in unison as they went about their new orders.

"Plotting jump coordinates," a crewmember called out as the KOL prepared for its inaugural phase jump.

“Status on communications?” Commander Tai asked, not wanting to be unable to report back on the status of the jump.

“Green.”

“Radar?”

“Uniform Lima, Orange,” one of the radar technicians began, surveying the data streaming onto the console from the diagnostics and tests, “Lima, Green. Mike, Green. Hotel, Green. Uniform Hotel, Green.”

All frequencies except ultra-low checked out, good enough to continue, maybe even repairable given the length of the trip, “Initiate jump,” Commander Tai called out as the ship disappeared from real space into the overlapping space-time folds of phase space, “What’s wrong with the radar?”

“I won’t know for sure until I go down and take a look, but my guess is one of the safety relays latched when we were testing all the systems. It’s a pretty big drain on the system testing everything at once.”

“If I wanted to know what you *guessed* I’d ask for your input on my lottery numbers,” Commander Tai declared with a hint of anger, “I want you to get your ass down there and figure out exactly what the hell is wrong and get our radar operational.”

“Yes sir,” the technician replied as he turned to exit the bridge.

Hui Tai breathed a sigh of relief as the technician left. It wasn’t like him to get so upset over such a small thing. Then again, it wasn’t like him to be taking a totally untested design to the frontlines in order to augment a weak defensive fleet that would likely be attacked by an overwhelmingly powerful alien threat.

“What’s our ETA to Capella?” Commander Tai asked as the *Vanifax* exited phase space over Karlstad.

“25 minutes sir.”

“Excellent.”

“Sir,” the same officer began, “Our fleet won’t entirely be there when we arrive.”

“What do you mean Lieutenant? Where the hell will our fleet be?” Commander Tai asked with both fear and rage.

“There’s been a labour dispute at the shipyard on Inari.”

“I’m not an arbitrator damn it, all I want to know is where my god damn ships are and when they’ll arrive?!”

“The last Cielo is due out of the yard on Landau tomorrow morning sir.”

Landau would put the ships two jumps further away than planned, not to mention the fact that they were already three days behind schedule. Hui Tai rose from his seat, wondering whether or not he was the right man for this job as he turned to exit the bridge and return to his quarters.

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28 Years Ago - Jan. 8

Pollux - Coalition Space

Vulkoras Class Desolator - *LarrTul*

“In position Praetor,” Praetor Korsul of the Antorak Class Marauder *Toruvak* called out to Var N’ok.

“Excellent,” Var N’ok replied, “All ships, ready phase engines,” Praetor N’ok paused for a moment, allowing the ships to prepare to make the transition into phase space before giving the signal.

“Phase drive operational,” one of the members aboard the crew declared as the Vasari fleet disappeared en route to the volcanic planet.

The *LarrTul* emerged to see the *Toruvak* approaching, swarms of Trader strikecraft circled above it as the Trader fleet moved in to engage the ever increasing number of Vasari ships.

“Praefectus Serak,” Var N’ok called the attention of the Praetor of the Kortul Class Devastator *Voskul*, “move to the starboard flank behind the *Toruvak* and engage the Trader capital ship while we form up before moving in to engage.”

“It shall be done,” Omi’ka Serak replied as the *Voskul* swung out behind the *Toruvak* before raising her shields in a surge of power moments before firing her pulse beams.

The rest of the Vasari fleet quickly formed up around the *LarrTul* before moving in on the Traders. The Lasuraks stayed at the rear of the fleet, guarded by the *Toruvak* while the Junsurak Class Sentinels raced in front of the *LarrTul* in an effort to prevent any strikecraft from breaking through and attacking the larger ships. The Skarovas Class Enforcers formed up alongside Var N’ok’s Desolator as the *Senvistra* moved behind the *LarrTul*, alongside the Kanraks, Serevuns and Stilaki.

“All ships,” Praetor Var N’ok began, “Advance.”

The ships moved forward in unison and began to fire on the Trader ships as missiles began to rain down on the fleet, devastating the Ravastra lines that ran between the *LarrTul* and the *Senvistra*.

“Deploy the nanites,” Shar Kiri ordered moments before the Skirantra Class Carrier unleashed a swarm of repair nanites, preventing the Ravastras from succumbing to the relentless barrage of missiles being launched from behind the TECs main line.

A flight of three Vasari bombers swung around behind the *Toruvak*, preparing to make a bombing run on one of the block shaped Trader cruisers. They quickly accelerated and acquired a lock on the cruiser, quickly approaching firing range before the bombers were engulfed in a hail of Trader projectile fire.

“Break off,” the lead bomber pilot called out as his wing was tore off by the gunfire.

The other two bombers quickly broke to evade the fire but it was to no avail. The Trader ships had a solid lock and quickly destroyed the bombers. One of the bombers had its bomb bay hit, causing its phase missiles to tear through into phase space, resulting in the bomber disappearing before reappearing across the gravity well moments later.

The Enforcers at the front of the fleet began to fire their wave cannons, raining waves of green energy onto the anti-strikecraft frigates dispersed throughout the Trader fleet as some of the smaller Trader frigates began to fire their lasers on the Junsuraks. The Stilaki then phased up to disable the light Trader frigates before the Kanraks focused their fire on the disabled ships, quickly destroying them.

“Praetor Var N’ok,” a Praefectus aboard one of the Serevun Class Overseers called for Var N’ok’s attention, “Hostile fleet detected, incoming from the star.”

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28 Years Ago - Jan. 8

Rodari - Coalition Space

KOL Class Battleship - *Vanifax*

“All ships, stay together,” Commander Tai ordered before opening a channel to the entire TEC fleet, “This is Commander Hui Tai of the KOL Class Battleship *Vanifax*. Captain Forli, we’re moving to engage the aliens from behind, we’ll catch them in a crossfire.”

“Thank god someone finally showed up,” Forli replied with overwhelming relief.

Commander Tai’s fleet quickly approached the alien lines, fanning out to get firing solutions on as many alien ships as possible.

“Romeo Golf!” Commander Tai called out before the rail gun unleashed its inaugural round, devastating one of the alien missile frigates.

“Sir, inbound fighters at ten thirteen.”

“Ready the flak,” Commander Tai calmly ordered, “Wait until the lead fighter fires, we want to catch as many of those bastards as we can.”

The lead alien fighter fired its missiles before the KOL fired its flak pods, causing the remaining fighters and bombers to break off as the missile frigates began to fire on the *Vanifax*.

“Power up the shields,” Commander Tai ordered, “I hope this blocks those missiles,” he thought.

“Aye sir.”

The missiles approached the shield, which was now oscillating back and forth from the ship in an attempt to disrupt the shield bypassing missiles. The missiles quickly approached the *Vanifax* and smashed into the shield, never getting by to the hull.

“All missiles impacted the shields Commander.”

“Excellent, fire all weapons. Send those bastards to hell.”

The KOL began to fire all its batteries as the chaotic battle spiralled out of control. The alien ships which spewed forth green waves were caught between the *Vanifax* and *Calisto* as the KOL manoeuvred in such a manner so as to line up the rail gun. In no time a slug leapt forth, accelerating to near light speeds before cruising through the shields of the alien ship, ripping into the hull. The decompressive forces caused by the hole in the hull ripped countless alien crewmembers out into the vacuum of space.

The Cielo Class Command Cruisers in Hui Tai’s fleet moved up and began firing on the anti-strikecraft frigates in the alien ranks as the Kodiaks fired their engines to maximum, chasing after the alien capital ships.

At the edge of the gravity well the alien capital ships sat, preparing to phase jump, as the alien carriers leapt from the system. Moments later, the alien missile frigates began to jump as the *Vanifax* fired another tungsten slug, destroying one moments before it could jump.

The beams on the front of the KOL then began to engage one of the alien frigates capable of disabling the TEC ships. The beams quickly melted through the exposed hull after the KOL’s autocannons had whisked away the shields.

The *Calisto* moved up to the retreating alien fleet, firing its missiles as it approached. The smaller alien frigates quickly succumbed to the combined fire of the *Calisto* and the Javelis frigates supporting Captain Forli’s fleet. Bombers rained missiles down on the

large cruisers as they stopped at the edge of the gravity well and rotated towards their desired heading.

The large alien capital ships all phased out of the system, except the one with the blue ring, as the TEC fleet tightened their noose further, “Why the hell won’t that ship retreat?” Forli asked.

“Unknown,” Commander Tai replied, “Let’s focus all our firepower on it and force it out to see what happens.”

Immediately after Hui Tai finished speaking the entire TEC fleet began to fire on the alien capital ship in a dazzling display of red lasers, golden tracers, amber missile trails and the KOL’s orange beams before the shields surrounding the ringed alien capital ship evaporated. As soon as the shields were gone the ship powered its phase engine and disappeared.

The few remaining alien ships frantically turned and took off towards another edge of the gravity well. The TEC strikecraft relentlessly ran down the remaining alien aggressors before they could reach their destination and retreat to the star.

With all the aliens destroyed, the TEC ships regrouped to lick their wounds, “Why didn’t those last few frigates jump like the rest of them?” Captain Somers of the *Mobius*, who had watched the battle from a safe distance with his carrier fleet, asked.

“That ringed shipped appears to be capable of allowing phase jumps between gravity wells which aren’t truly connected in phase space,” Commander Tai theorized.

There was a long pause before Commander Tai continued, “Well it would explain why they always send those ships in before their main fleet arrives.”

“Why the hell don’t they have you in a lab with all the other eggheads?” one of the Captains asked.

Commander Tai laughed, “That’s where I was until they needed someone to test this new Battleship in combat.”

“I’d say it worked,” Captain Forli replied as the *Calisto* entered within range of the repair bay, “If it weren’t for your arrival we would have been the ones retreating.”

CHAPTER 6

28 Years Ago - Feb. 12

Praxedis - Vasari Occupied Space

Jarrasul Class Evacuator - *Ruskovak*

Since the Vasari arrived in this sector of space over a year ago, Praetor Sh'arn Rakoran had seen very little fighting. After one of the Evacuators was destroyed in the initial fight, Var N'ok had ordered all the Jarrasuls to stay off the frontlines until they were secured. For this reason, Sh'arn's role was diminished to a mere lockdown role.

Now Praetor Rakoran sat aboard the *Ruskovak* above the ice planet of Praxedis as smaller shuttles were ferried down to the surface, resupplying the few planetary structures the Vasari had built.

For millennia the Vasari had been enslaving races for labour, biological testing, and more. For the sake of their safety, they often ruled from orbit, however, personnel were needed on the ground to instil fear, ensure orders were being followed and, most importantly, remove any subjects that were not sufficiently loyal to the Vasari cause.

But such a task was not for a Praetor like Sh'arn to worry about. Such duties were the responsibility of Slavers, of which Sh'arn only wished she were. Praetor Rakoran wanted to see these xenos die, she wanted peel all the resources off their thriving worlds while they still lived. Unfortunately, the decision was not hers to make, which meant that the Traders would continue to be enslaved rather than destroyed.

"No," Sh'arn thought to herself, "not Traders. These are xenos, no more. We can't afford to give them such distinguishing characteristics. These are xenos, and I am sworn to kill all xenos that stand between us and the salvation of the stars."

Disrupting her thoughts, a lower ranking crewmember aboard the bridge called out, "Scanners are going crazy, we've got a phase anomaly down on the planet."

"Is that even possible?" Praetor Rakoran asked to no one in particular, "Open a channel to the *LarrTul* and *Toruvak*," she declared moments before a channel was opened, revealing the face of Var N'ok and Ilaka Korsul, "Praetors," she began, "we've detected a phase anomaly on the surface of Praxedis. It may be a scanner malfunction but I ask that the *Toruvak* be sent here immediately in order to investigate further."

Var N'ok furrowed his brow in concentration, attempting to decipher what could possibly be causing the anomaly, "Whereabouts on the planet is this anomaly?"

"The disturbance is intermittent but it appears to be originating from a crevasse on the equatorial tundra."

Praetor N'ok's eyes lit up hearing that, "Praetor Korsul," Var N'ok began, "you will make best speed to Praxedis and thoroughly investigate this disturbance."

"Of course sir," Ilaka Korsul replied before his screen blinked away, likely due to phase jump preparations.

Sh'arn began to wonder what Var N'ok was keeping from her. Until now, Praetor Rakoran didn't believe that Var N'ok could react to anything with such haste. Seeking answers, she asked, "What do you believe it is?"

"I beg your pardon," Var N'ok replied.

"You know something you're not sharing."

"All I know is if I am correct this will aid our cause immensely. If I am incorrect then we will be no further behind," Var N'ok paused before deciding to continue a little further, "and if you ask anymore questions you won't live to see whether or not I am correct. Am I understood?"

"Yes Praetor," she replied before the transmission ended.

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28 Years Ago - Feb. 14
Praxedis - Vasari Occupied Space
Antorak Class Marauder - *Toruvak*

The *Toruvak* exited phase space above the giant frozen orb of Praxedis, home to an apparent phase anomaly, or so Ilaka Korsul was tasked with determining. When the *Ruskovak* identified the anomaly Praetor Korsul had been sent immediately, something that unnerved Ilaka Korsul.

"Begin planetary scan," Ilaka ordered his crew.

Minutes passed without any sign of the anomaly as multiple scanner passes were performed.

"Are we getting any readings?" Korsul asked, wondering if it was merely a malfunction of the *Ruskorak's* scanners which had created the anomaly.

"No," one of the crewmembers solemnly replied.

"Very well," Praetor Korsul began, "open a channel to Praetor N'ok"

"Wait," another crewmember bellowed, "phase anomaly detected. Location corresponds to that given by the *Ruskorak*. Phase signature growing."

“My screen!” Ilaka bellowed, wanting to see the scanner readings.

The details quickly appeared on the Praetor’s command screen. A small phase signature could be detected in the crevasse, no larger than a Jikara. Suddenly, the phase signature increased its size tenfold before sharply disappearing.

“Phase spike!” the same crewmember called out, “looks like a phase jump.”

“Impossible,” Ilaka Korsul replied, knowing in system phase jumps created intense vacuums due to the resultant loss of matter to phase space.

“Second spike!”

Ilaka Korsul looked back to his screen as the second phase spike dissipated, “a re-entry?”

“Patterns indicate it is possible.”

Praetor Korsul stood and began to pace about the bridge, wondering how something could be performing phase jumps from within a planet’s atmosphere let alone within its surface.

“Get me Var N’ok,” Korsul ordered before his crew leapt into action, bringing Praetor N’ok to life on his screen, “Praetor,” Ilaka Korsul began, “we have confirmed the presence of the anomaly. It’s signatures are similar to those of phase jumps, both incoming and outgoing,” Korsul paused, gauging Var N’ok’s reaction, “I request a half dozen Slavers to enforce the subjects in an excavation.”

“Of course Praetor,” Var N’ok replied.

Ilaka Korsul rose from his chair once again and walked towards a small briefing room adjacent to the bridge, where he activated the screen to talk to Var N’ok in private.

“A change of scenery,” Var N’ok began, “what troubles you Ilaka?”

“Could it be the great enemy?” Korsul quickly answered.

“If it were the great enemy,” Praetor N’ok paused, “we would be dead by now.”

Ilaka Korsul drew in a deep breath, “I suppose that is the most comforting answer you could offer. Thank you Praetor, whatever it is we’ll find it.”

“I look forward to hearing what you find,” Var N’ok replied with a smirk as his image faded from Ilaka Korsul’s screen.

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28 Years Ago - Feb. 15
Galanthus - Vasari Occupied Space
Slave Encampment Γ-63

Slaver Bo'lak Jisura packed the few belongings he had from his quarters on Galanthus. Late yesterday he had been reassigned to Praxedis to lead an excavation, a task which would undoubtedly lead to the deaths of many slaves. Although Bo'lak didn't particularly like the Traders, he didn't have any reason to hate them like some of the other Slavers, or worse, the Experimentalists.

Some of the experiments Bo'lak had seen disturbed him, fusing nanites with Traders in an attempt to create sentient nanites, self-healing soldiers with capabilities beyond anything ever encountered. Such experimentation was supposedly reserved for only those slaves who were uncooperative, but Bo'lak had seen many of his *best* slaves taken for experimentation.

Bo'lak suspected it was an attempt to get him to speak up about the mistreatment of the slaves. For years he had been accused of going easy on the slaves, even aiding them. Slaver Jisura had always argued that he did not aid them, he merely respected them in an effort to get the most out of them.

Bo'lak had always opted to run smaller slave camps so that the minimal rations they received could be better distributed. Jisura attempted to learn the names of all his slaves and forge uneasy alliances, for which he was often awarded by the increased productivity displayed by his camps. Unfortunately, his antics quickly caught the attention of his superiors, who would quickly relocate him to another camp, oftentimes taking all his previous slaves for experimentation. Slaver Jisura couldn't help but feel responsible for their deaths. Had his actions not been so overt they may still be alive.

Bo'lak pulled himself back to the present, knowing there would be time for reflection later, now he had to pack his things for his departure. Jisura looked at the manifest once again, surveying the names of the others who would join him. It was a good list of Slavers, all of them got the best from their slave camps, whether it was through mutual respect like Bo'lak, fear, torture, or worse.

"I was given command," Bo'lak thought aloud, "and the rest of them will respect my command," Bo'lak continued, knowing he would not allow the others to threaten the trust he would eventually build with his new slaves.

Jisura continued reading the document until he reached the Experimentalist. His eyes widened as he read:

Experimentalist:
Hankiri Shola

Renowned for his brutal experiments, Hankiri Shola was responsible for a number of gruesome creations which gained him praise by those high up in the Empire. Perhaps his most notable creation was the flesh eating nanite employed by numerous Slavers.

The device worked by attaching to a host and gaining base line statistics for three days before it began to attack its host. It would go easy at first, gauging how long recoveries took and how vital signs were affected. Eventually, the nanites would learn where the proverbial edge was, and push the host to the limit. Then, when death was beginning to set in, the nanite would cease its activities and allow the host to heal before repeating.

Since their creation, flesh eating nanites had been commonly used on the first rebellious slave in each camp as a warning to any others who may oppose Vasari rule. Bo'lak instantly knew that he would have a tough time enforcing his practices in this slave camp, an issue that would be further compounded by the inclement weather on the surface of Praxedis.

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28 Years Ago - Mar. 7

Ras Elased - Vasari Occupied Space

Vulkoras Class Desolator - *LarrTul*

Var N'ok sat on the bridge of the *LarrTul*, his ship flanked by the *Toruvak* and *Senvistra* in addition to hundreds of smaller ships which all floated in space above the red giant of Ras Elased. Since the discovery of the anomaly on Praxedis the Vasari had been planning for an attack on the Traders in an attempt to create a diversion while simultaneously establishing a foothold in the neighbouring Pollux system.

This time, however, Var N'ok planned to attack Salopia, a greenhouse planet in close proximity to the star of Pollux. After being routed at Rodari, the Vasari now had to consider the Traders a threat, even if it was a minimal one.

“All ships, prepare to enter phase space,” Var N'ok called out to the fleet before they transitioned to phase space, appearing above Pollux an instant after their jump.

The ships quickly rotated into position for their jump to Salopia. Having planned the first jump well meant that the Vasari fleet was already in position to make the second jump. The ships were above Salopia less than a minute after leaving Ras Elased, displaying just how exposed both sides truly were, which further demonstrated the need for a diversion.

The small contingent of frigates above Salopia quickly moved to attack the Vasari fleet alongside the only Trader capital ship as the xeno carriers repositioned near the edge of the gravity well while simultaneously launching their fighters, preparing for their inevitable retreat.

“*Voskul* taking up position at the fore,” Praefectus Serak declared as the *Voskul* drifted in front of the *LarrTul*, several Enforcers followed the massive warship as the *Senvistra* scrambled all of its bombers to engage the approaching Trader frigates.

The *Voskul* dumped all of its excess power into its weapons as the Trader fleet approached. The barrage of pulse beams and phase missiles emanating from the Kortul was both brilliant and terrifying. The pulse beams traced glowing green lines from the side of the Devastator to the handful of frigates that circled while the phase missiles arced towards the lumbering Trader capital ship.

The *LarrTul* approached the oblong Trader vessel that was turning to broadside the Vasari fleet.

“Power up disintegrator,” Var N’ok ordered before the nanite beam began to form at the prow of the ship.

Seconds later the nanite beam extended to the Trader ship, leeching energy and extracting metals from the hull of the Trader vessel that the nanites would return to the *LarrTul*. Moments later, about halfway through the disintegration process, the Trader ship shot a magnificent blue burst at the *LarrTul*, disabling all systems on the mighty warship.

“Status?!” Var N’ok yelled loud enough that communications systems weren’t needed.

“All systems are down Praetor.”

“An astute observation,” Praetor N’ok snapped back, knowing full well that all systems were down.

“It appeared to be some form of ion weapon,” the same crewmember as before replied with a more satisfactory answer than his previous one.

Just then the systems came back online. As the viewscreen recalibrated to reveal the unfolding battle Var N’ok could see the Trader ship that had disabled the *LarrTul* retreating.

“Enhance!” Var N’ok called out as a crewmember frantically typed the command into her console.

The pattern of markings across the side read *Bravick*. Var N’ok took note, preparing for their next meeting, one he would not allow to pass without disintegrating the *Bravick*.

“Mop up the remaining ships and destroy all the structures,” Praetor N’ok ordered, still gazing at the pattern that read *Bravick*, “and call in the *Ruskovak* for lockdown.”

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28 Years Ago - June 21
Praxedis - Vasari Occupied Space
Equatorial Tundra Excavation Encampment

“Sir,” one of the slaves called out, despair filled his voice, “We’ve been out here in this cold for days.”

“I know exactly how long you’ve been out here,” Hankiri Shola snapped back, “And until you dig through this ice plateau you will remain here.”

Experimentalist Shola turned to survey the progress being made by his other subjects, which were showing greater signs of success. Hankiri had created two new forms of nanites for testing.

One type of nanite attached to its host and modified the neural receptors, blocking out temperature related sensations. This version was minimally effective as the sub zero conditions still took their toll on the subjects, it just wasn’t noticeable for the first couple of days.

The second nanite attached to the host and raised the core temperature to counteract the frigid conditions of the external environment. The test subjects in the second group were noticeably more efficient, particularly on this, the fourth day of testing.

The previous nine phases of testing had shown similar results before the subjects of group two began to show signs of internal overheating, an unfortunate side effect, but one Hankiri Shola lost no sleep over. The extra warmth was something these slaves didn’t deserve, but Hankiri was relieved by the thought of seeing Slavers use these to enslave races on more frigid worlds like Praxedis.

That is, Hankiri was relieved by the thought of seeing *some* Slavers use these. The thought of Bo’lak Jisura getting his hands on this technology disturbed him. Experimentalist Shola knew all too well that Bo’lak would likely share the nanites with some of his slaves for less harmful purposes.

Although Hankiri couldn’t prove Bo’lak treated his slaves with more care than was allowed, he had heard the rumours, and he knew that Bo’lak would threaten his experiments.

As the thought of Bo’lak finally left Hankiri’s mind, Slaver Jisura entered the lab, letting in a gust of frigid arctic air from outside of the laboratory in the process.

“Good morning Hankiri,” Bo’lak declared.

“Ahh, Slaver Jisura,” Hankiri replied, “I was just thinking about you.”

“Oh?” Bo’lak Jisura responded in shock, “Why is that?”

“Well I’ve been working on heating nanites,” Experimentalist Shola began, forgetting about his grudge against Bo’lak as his experimentation consumed him, “knowing you were out in the cold I couldn’t help but think such a thing would be useful.”

“It would be excellent,” Bo’lak replied with amazement, “How are your subjects doing? Will they have their section dug out in another two or three months?”

“That depends Slaver Jisura,” Hankiri began, “One of the groups is showing signs of slowing due to exposure while the other group should begin overheating within a day or two.”

“I’ll ready some more slaves for you then?” Bo’lak asked, suspecting this was a test on the part of Hankiri.

“That would be most appreciated,” Hankiri Shola gratefully replied.

Bo’lak turned to exit the lab, disgusted with himself for giving Experimentalist Shola all the slaves he desired. He turned back to take one last gaze out the laboratory’s window that looked out over the tundra worksite that had been setup for the Experimentalist. A group of Traders stood, slowly working, their tools frozen to their hands from days of labour in the cold. The other group frantically worked without showing any signs of being exposed to the elements.

“There’s potential for a better fate here,” Bo’lak thought to himself as he peered across the horizon to the main excavation site two and a half miles away.

Initial geological scans indicated there was a cavern below the ice shelf where the phase signal was emanating from. The thinnest ice was at the main site while another thin layer was where the experiments were being conducted. Slaver Jisura hoped to be through the ice in three months at most, then they could begin the descent to the phase anomaly that lay somewhere in the ice caverns below.

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28 Years Ago - Sept. 5
Salopia - Vasari Occupied Space
Vulkoras Class Desolator - *LarrTul*

After the resounding success of the attack on Salopia, the Traders quickly evacuated Makino, not wanting to risk their colony being cut off by the Vasari advance. This allowed the Vasari to easily capture the resources it had to offer before amassing a large fleet on Salopia for any future offensives.

Var N’ok was pleased with the swift progress they were making, despite the setback on Rodari earlier in the year. Since the hour was late, Var N’ok returned to his quarters and

changed from his command robes to his sleeping robes before his personal intercom buzzed.

“What is it?” Var N’ok snapped, upset by the disturbance at such an hour.

“It’s Slaver Bo’lak Jisura,” a crewmember from the bridge spoke over the intercom.

“Tell him I’ll contact him in six hours.”

“He says it’s important Praetor.”

Var N’ok sighed.

“He says, if he were to wait to contact you, you would have him killed for not contacting sooner.”

Var N’ok straightened, “Put him through,” he ordered, “and make sure the channel is secure.”

“Yes Praetor N’ok,” the crewmember responded before Bo’lak could be heard.

“Praetor, we’ve found it!” Slaver Jisura enthusiastically declared.

“The anomaly?” Var N’ok asked in awe.

“Not just an anomaly Praetor,” Bo’lak began, his voice growing more quiet with each word, “It took us some time, it kept transitioning to and from phase space.”

“What is *it*?” Var N’ok asked, his patience eroding as his anticipation intensified.

“It appears to be an ancient phase drive sir. Faster than anything we’ve seen before.”

“How can you be sure?”

“When we approached it was making jumps every few minutes. Before we figured out how to secure it we placed trackers on it, in case it returned someplace else,” Bo’lak paused momentarily, “the device created its phase rifts near instantaneously and made its way beyond recorded range in mere seconds.”

“How mere?” Var N’ok asked, wanting to know just what exactly this device could provide.

“Unknown. It only made that jump once and we weren’t prepared to calculate. It seemed to perform most of its jump to an asteroid in your system.”

“Send me the coordinates,” Var N’ok swiftly responded, knowing he wouldn’t be able to sleep tonight, not after this news.

“Yes Praetor,” Bo’lak quickly answered as he uploaded the coordinates.

“Your work is to be commended Slaver Jisura. Turn the device over to the scientists and clean up the excavation site. You’ll be scouring the surface of that asteroid after we force the Traders away,” Var N’ok declared as the transmission ended.

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27 Years Ago - Jan. 16

Rhyzov - Coalition Space

Council Chambers of the Trader Emergency Coalition

“Order!” Christopher Vanifax called out to the Councillors.

“Thank you,” Lucius graciously declared to Christopher after the Council Chambers had quieted. Lucius nodded to Patricia Provian, who swiftly rose from her seat to address the congregation.

“Fellow Councillors,” she began, “I have called you all here today to discuss the war and the growing calm on the frontlines. Since our victory at Rodari last year the aliens have become more passive, having launched only one attack. The loss of Salopia was deemed by the Navy as ‘a logistical oversight’ as most of Salopia’s fleet was en route to Dresda for resupply after the recall of phase drives aboard the main resupply ship grounded the Navy’s fleet resupply ships,” Patricia paused, having laid the groundwork for her proposal, “Due to the calm I move to reinstitute the Independent Trade Agreement to allow the worlds of the Coalition to trade their goods as they see fit.”

“And what happens when we need more ships?” Thomas Verlin quickly countered, “What shall we do when our factories run low on metals?”

“Then we will rescind the Agreement,” Patricia snapped, knowing that Verlin would never support such a move as Karlstad was one of the world’s profiting most from the war.

“I support the Councillor of Diomedes’ proposal,” Frederick Arn declared, standing up.

“You would Arn,” Thomas Verlin scoffed, knowing Novalis was so far removed from the frontline that there was no danger to them.

“Well,” Lucius interrupted in an attempt to keep the heated exchange from spiralling out of control, “Let us put it to a vote.”

The Councillors in support of the motion quickly rose, outnumbering those opposed nine to one.

“Over 75% in favour,” Christopher Vanifax declared, surveying the Council Chambers.

“Proposal passed,” Lucius Mannacher’s voice boomed as he stared directly at Thomas Verlin, “as of this moment, the planets of the Coalition may trade goods as they see fit until the Independent Trade Agreement is repealed.”

CHAPTER 7

26 Years Ago - Aug. 9 **Rezia - Coalition Space** **TDN Military Lab**

Since the aliens invaded nearly four years ago, a lot had changed. The colonies of the Ras Elased system had all fallen as the invading aliens swiftly devastated the meagre defenses the frantically formed Coalition presented, all the while new weapons were developed to aid in combating the alien onslaught.

Eventually new battleships and frigates arrived on the frontlines, helping to stop the proverbial, and literal, bleeding as the Traders fortified their position in the Pollux system. Recently, the aliens had made their way into the Pollux system, first taking Salopia before eventually forcing the Traders off Dresda after a year of hit and run attacks took their toll. Since the loss of Dresda both sides began to dig in, neither side wanting to risk committing all of their assets to a large offensive push.

The lull in fighting had allowed the Traders to decipher the language used by the aliens, resulting in a massive intelligence boon. The Vasari, as the aliens called themselves, were an old race that had been travelling through space for over 10 000 years, all the while enslaving inferior races and perfecting their war machines.

The Vasari appeared to be unaware that their language had been deciphered as they continued to transmit on unencrypted channels, likely for the sake of speed, clarity and power. This meant that the Traders could track their plans, including their plan to lockdown Tauris Major, the largest asteroid in the Tauris Cluster.

The Vasari desire to lockdown Tauris Major wasn't entirely known, all that could be said for certain was that locking down the asteroid was a high priority, which meant their desire could be exploited, if it were timed.

The pending mission was exactly what Fleet Admiral Condoza had arrived to discuss in person. The Navy needed to break the stalemate and show the Vasari that the Traders meant business. A strike was equally important to draw the Vasari scouting fleets away from the nearby Markab system, as the TDN couldn't allow the battlefield to expand to a second system without their paper thin ranks being stretched even further.

The aging Admiral entered the briefing room which was packed with military personnel of nearly every rank. Without a word, Condoza took his seat as everyone quieted, "Good morning ladies and gentlemen," Condoza began, "As you all know, the Vasari are interested in Tauris Major for some reason, so we're going to make them fight for it."

Henry Condoza paused for a mere moment, long enough to gauge the reaction of everyone but short enough to keep people from feeling like they were being studied thoroughly.

“The plan,” Condoza resumed, “is to send the *Bravick* to Tauris Major, escorted by the 3rd Field Repair Section. They will head towards the asteroid and make it appear as though we plan on establishing a military colony there, which should draw the Vasari away from Dresda. Once the Vasari have left Dresda we’ll make our move.”

“So Dresda is the only objective?” Captain Little of the Akkan Class Battlecruiser *Bravick* asked, not wanting to lose any men on Tauris Major unless it was required.

“That’s correct Captain Little, Tauris Major is of no value to us other than as a diversion. Vice Admiral Eskelinen will lead the 1st Strategic Bombardment Fleet to Dresda alongside several smaller battle groups. We want to project enough of a presence over Dresda that the Vasari won’t want to come back for a fight.”

Captain Forli sat, both relieved and enraged. Until now, he had been in command of the 1st Strategic Bombardment Fleet, a task more suited to an Admiral than a mere Captain. As a matter of fact, Captain Forli looked forward to serving under Vice Admiral Eskelinen, who had a reputation for being an excellent leader.

The part that enraged Josh Forli was the fact that the TDN planned to bomb Dresda, once home to billions of Traders. Based on their intelligence, it was extremely likely that the surface was mostly Traders that were enslaved, but without going down to the planet it would be impossible to tell.

“I would like to stress once again,” Condoza continued, breaking Captain Forli’s train of thought, “that we do not wish to bomb our former colonies. However,” the balding Admiral paused, he had been through quite a bit in his 40 plus years in the service, but never had he authorized the bombing of a planet, only pirate infested asteroids, “the amount of time it would take to secure the planet with a ground campaign would be too great and therefore we must bomb that which was once ours. I can only hope that we never have to do this again,” Henry Condoza finished before dismissing everyone.

Vice Admiral Jussi Eskelinen rose from his seat and briskly walked towards Fleet Admiral Condoza, snapping a quick salute before he began “Don’t worry sir, I’ll make sure we only target alien infrastructure on Dresda.”

Condoza signalled for Eskelinen to follow him into a smaller, more private room, before sharply replying, “No, we’ve been over this before. We need to blast the surface until it’s so unrecognizable that any surviving Vasari will surrender rather than try to fight. This is our first bombing, we need to make damn sure we do it right.”

Vice Admiral Eskelinen gulped before agreeing to the gruesome but necessary order and exiting the room to find Captain Forli standing, searching for someone.

“Ah, Captain Forli, can I help you find someone?” Jussi Eskelinen asked, hoping the young Captain could raise his spirits after the discussion with Condoza.

“Actually, I was looking for you Vice Admiral,” Captain Forli said through his salute.

“At ease Captain,” Vice Admiral Eskelinen replied, “What business do you have with me?”

“I just wanted to say that I look forward to operating under your command and that if you have any problems with personnel in the fleet to let me know. We’ve all been through hell together over the past few years so I may have grown soft on them but I may be able to offer a familiar voice if needed.”

Eskelinen laughed, “From what I heard Captain, you were the toughest son of a bitch these men and women ever had.”

“I beg your pardon,” Forli began to reply with a smirk, “I was merely toughening them up because I knew the Vasari wouldn’t let up on us.”

The two men exited the briefing room, continuing their discussion with broad smiles stretched across their faces despite the grim task that lay before them.

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26 Years Ago - Sept. 11
Makino - Vasari Occupied Space
Kortul Class Desolator - *Voskul*

Praefectus Omi’ka Serak sat aboard the bridge of the *Voskul*, one of many Vasari ships in orbit above the ice planet of Makino, when Var N’ok hailed the *Voskul* and *Senvistra*.

“I have new orders for you two,” Praetor Var N’ok began, “We believe the Traders are preparing for an attack on one of our colonies so I’m sending both of you to Salopia to reinforce your fleets before heading to Dresda where you will hold position until further orders.”

“Do we have any idea where or when they will attack?” the lower ranking Praefectus Serak asked.

“No,” Var N’ok replied, “but based on their affinity for terran worlds, we expect they’ll attempt to take Dresda.”

“And what if they have discovered the Relic on the asteroid?” Praetor Shar Kiri pessimistically asked.

“If they knew what lay beneath the surface of that desolate asteroid they would not have given it up so easily,” Var N’ok snapped back, his patience with Shar Kiri was growing thin after the years of struggle with the Traders.

“If they do attack the asteroid,” Omi’ka Serak began, attempting to diffuse the noticeable tension between the two Praetors, “we’ll be a mere jump away and can easily stop them.”

“Precisely,” Var N’ok agreed, relieved that there was at least one who understood his logic, “Take what ships you want from Salopia, just make sure you’re at Dresda by the New Year.”

“Of course Praetor,” Shar Kiri replied, intending to make good use of the promise of as many ships as he desired, “We shall leave at once.”

The intercom blinked the images of the two Praetors away as Praefectus Serak ordered the *Voskul* to form up alongside the *Senvistra* before departing for the greenhouse world of Salopia. Omi’ka Serak then began to plan what his fleet would consist of as the intercom interrupted his thoughts, this time it was only Praetor Kiri.

“Praefectus,” Shar Kiri began, “I intend to get as many ships as can be built between now and the New Year and I request you do the same.”

“Of course,” Omi’ka Serak replied, knowing that Shar Kiri believed the Traders a formidable foe, whether it was due to fear or respect Serak didn’t know.

“Excellent, I’ve devised an initial fleet plan but since you’ll be doing most of the fighting I thought you should look it over. I’ve already contacted the shipyards of Salopia and informed them I want 15 Transporters and two dozen Assailants for my section of the battle group. The rest is your call, but my,” Shar Kiri paused, thinking of the proper word, “*minimum requirements*, are there for you. Good day Praefectus.”

Omi’ka Serak scoffed at the thought of even fearing such an inferior race before he looked at the proposed fleet. 20 Enforcers alongside the *Voskul* flanked by 20 Skirmishers and 24 Sentinels with a few Overseers mixed in with a dozen Subverters. A formidable fleet indeed, but Serak wanted to send a message to the Traders, Shar Kiri and Var N’ok. A message that would strike fear into the Traders, invoke faith in Shar Kiri and display the Vasari strength to Var N’ok.

Serak wanted this war to end, he wanted to move on before the great enemy arrived. Above all else, he wanted to see the mighty empire he was told about as a child to be restored. Omi’ka wanted to visit a thousand worlds, all ruled by the mighty Vasari. He wanted to arrive to undeveloped planets as a god, and to enslave more advanced races as a demon.

In order to do all those things, Praefectus Serak knew that the Vasari must move on and prepare to face the great enemy. Otherwise, the great enemy would catch up and take the

Vasari by surprise, leaving them in a two front war. Therefore, Omi'ka Serak asked for twice as many ships as Praetor Kiri requested. Praefectus Serak was determined to steamroll any Trader force that came into Vasari Occupied Space, as a warning to the Traders and a rallying beacon to the Vasari.

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26 Years Ago - Dec. 14
Rezia - Coalition Space
Krosov Class Siege Frigate

For months now Petty Officer First Class Melanie Godwin had been beaming with excitement, preparing to retake Dresda, the planet she was born and raised on. She fondly reminisced about the lush terran world she grew up on, particularly the small island just offshore from Dresda's capital city where her parents lived.

But Melanie felt more than excitement. The Petty Officer also felt anxiety and fear over what she may see upon arrival. Melanie feared that the Vasari had altered the world beyond all repair, destroyed the beautiful scenes she clung to in her fondest memories.

In the months since she learned of her pending mission, Melanie ran through her entire life on Dresda, recounting several highs and, unfortunately, an equal number of lows.

Melanie remembered travelling once a year with her father's parents off the island to the capital, where they would go see all the wondrous sights the city had to behold. Every year for nearly 15 years the three had managed to find something unique and fun to do, whether it be touring old buildings, taking in a sports game or theatre play or just relaxing at restaurants, pubs, or anywhere else they could find.

Melanie also remembered her first trip into space with her boyfriend at the time, a trip her father strongly objected to. Being from the island, the Godwin's were a lower class than those who lived on the main continent, and as such, space travel was a luxury they simply could not afford. However, on one of Melanie's trip to the capital, she met her boyfriend, Erez.

The two instantly connected, prompting a number of awkward meetings between Melanie and Erez's parents, including Erez's politician father, and Melanie's modest parents and the more prim and proper Erez. The younger Erez made it a point to visit Melanie once a month, eventually taking her to space for the first time.

Erez wanted to surpass his father in the political world, having plans to go to law school before entering politics in an attempt to become a Councillor in the Trade Order. A brilliant young man, Erez was accepted into one of the finest law schools in the Order on Adonis, in the core of Trader Order Space. One day, Erez boarded a spaceship bound for Adonis, and like five other passengers onboard that ship, he disembarked in a long black bag.

One of the dock workers, fresh off a celebration of his 25th year at the docks, crashed a refuelling vessel into the side of the civilian transport, killing six passengers in the section above the aft fuel tank.

Traumatized by the incident and unable to go anywhere on Dresda without being reminded of Erez, Melanie sold all the jewellery and possessions Erez had ever given her and got a ticket aboard the next freighter to Novalis, all the way across Trade Order Space in the Algol system.

Somewhere along the way, one of the chefs became ill and had to disembark, leaving the kitchen short staffed and desperate. Melanie quickly snatched the role and began working as a chef on freighters before leveraging numerous other odd circumstances until she found herself on the bridge and, eventually, in the Captain's chair of her own freighter.

After a few years of operating large freighters Melanie ran into two men, Cedrick and Tristan, who offered her a position in their small freight company. Melanie enthusiastically accepted the offer to get a ship that was entirely hers and quickly became friends with the two men, the only two men she truly called friends since the death of Erez. Everyone else she had met just seemed to be passing by.

Melanie snapped back to the present as Krosov 3, the frigate she was stationed aboard, shuddered as a cargo ship docked, likely carrying food. She hoped that the Vasari hadn't built much on the surface of Dresda, because Melanie didn't want to have to destroy her childhood and adolescent memories. She didn't want to have to destroy her boyfriend's grave or her parent's home.

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25 Years Ago - Jan. 29

Dresda - Vasari Occupied Space

Skirantra Class Carrier - *Senvistra*

The past few weeks had seemed much longer as Shar Kiri and his fleet had sat idle above Dresda, waiting for a potential attack by the Traders, all the while glad that other Vasari were starting to see the Traders for the threat they truly were.

Var N'ok had allowed Praetor Kiri and Praefectus Serak to take as many ships as they could gather, which pleased Shar Kiri greatly. Wanting to test Omi'ka Serak's thoughts on the Traders, Shar Kiri let him decide the fleet composition. Praefectus Serak didn't disappoint, taking double the number of ships that Shar Kiri had suggested.

Praetor Kiri only wished he could have been on hand to see the look on Praetor N'ok's face when he was informed of the decision. Shar Kiri thought that Var N'ok was growing detached from the war, spending too much time behind the front line and not enough time in the thick of the fighting. Kiri knew that Praetor N'ok searched for ways to simply go

around the Traders but that would require sending a Marauder through the systems occupied by the Traders, with little odds of success.

Shar Kiri's train of thought was broken as the intercom buzzed to life, "All units this is a priority transmission, Traders have exited phase space at Tauris Major. All ships are to make best speed to Tauris Major immediately."

Praetor Kiri quickly ordered his fleet to form up before they entered phase space, en route to thwart the Trader attack. Shar Kiri knew that the Traders had found out about the Relic on the asteroid, they had been scouting it and the surrounding planets too heavily not to have found out about it.

The *Senvistra* exited phase space, flanked by the Lasurak Class Transporters, all of which launched their fighters and bombers, and the Kanrak Class Assailants. Not even a half second later, the *Voskul* emerged and quickly raced toward the long, rectangular Akkan Class Battlecruiser that was charging toward the asteroid of Tauris Major. The 40 Skarovas Class Enforcers quickly followed as the Sentinels and Skirmishers followed suit.

The *Voskul* entered weapons range and unleashed a burst of green pulse beams destined for the antimatter reactor onboard the Akkan. The other Trader capital ship, a Dunov Class Battlecruiser, approached the Akkan, which was now under siege from the Enforcers as well as the *Voskul*. The Dunov approached until the two ships were nearly touching, and then, in a burst of white energy, the Dunov's shields flared as it restored power to the Akkan's shields.

Seeing the awesome display, the *Voskul* began to divide its fire, using its port side batteries to engage the Dunov while its starboard batteries fired on the Akkan. The Skarovas Class Enforcers similarly divided in an attempt to bring down both ships in good time. Both Trader ships lost their shields as nearly two dozen flat, disc shaped ships, moved up from the rear ranks alongside the Trader missile frigates to the midst of the fighting, firing their lasers as they approached.

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25 Years Ago - Jan. 29

Tauris Major - Vasari Occupied Space
Hoshiko Class Robotics Cruiser

"Target the Akkan with our next repair bot," Cedrick ordered, now a Petty Officer Third Class and man in charge of the repair bot launch bays aboard Hoshiko 9, "Deploy bot!"

The repair bot shot out of the launch tube and autonomously guided itself towards the *Bravick*, which was now venting its atmosphere through a half dozen holes in its hull. Cedrick returned his eyes to the console to gauge the battle and identify where the next bot would be needed as one bot returned.

The bot was quickly slammed into its recharge station by the automated arms. The antimatter reactor onboard the Hoshiko Class Robotics Cruiser needed to recharge the bots after each use due to the power drain from high speed field repairs.

“Johnson,” the Captain called out to Cedrick across his personal earpiece intercom, “We’re running low on excess power from the reactor, you boys are gonna have some long recharge times for those bots ahead of you.”

“Aye sir,” Cedrick replied, knowing there was nothing he, or anyone else, could do to increase the reactor output.

The repair bot that had been repairing the Akkan returned to the Hoshiko as a Ravastra unleashed a burst of glistening pulse gun fire on the Cruiser. The Hoshiko shook as her shields flared, absorbing the energy as some of the Javelis Class Long Range Missile Frigates diverted their attention to the Skirmisher that was engaging Cedrick’s Hoshiko.

In an instant there were about 30 missiles arcing towards the ugly alien frigate. The missiles slammed into the shields before ripping through the hull, destroying the frigate in the blink of an eye.

Seeing the awesome firepower capable of being unleashed from the missile frigates, four wings of Vasari fighters swooped in towards the LRMs before firing their phase missiles, devastating the port side missile pods on one of the frigates before completely destroying it on their next pass.

Damaged beyond all repair, at least while in combat, the Akkan broke off from fighting and attempted to escape the gravity well, followed by the LRMs who belonged to the *Bravick’s* fleet, leaving the Dunov and Hoshikos to hold the Vasari as long as possible.

“We just have to hold out for,” the Dunov’s Captain called out as static erupted on the channel.

Cedrick snapped his eyes from his console to the viewport and saw the Dunov take a crushing blow from the Kortul that had been in the fight since the beginning.

“Charlie,” Captain Little called out to the Dunov’s Captain, “Break off damn it, you’re no good dead. I repeat, break off!”

“Neg scrrrrrrr ive,” Captain Charlie Rogers replied amidst a sea of static, “All ships scrrrrrrr position, I scrrrrrrr hold scrrrrrrr.”

Cedrick swallowed as his eyes welled with tears. He looked about the launch bay at all the men and women who served under him, all those he was supposed to protect. Realizing this was no time to break, not after all the fighting he had been through, he

stood up a little straighter than he ever had before and took off at a sprint faster than when the Vasari had attacked Arietis and he had to run for Melanie's ship.

He quickly approached one of the repair bot programming consoles and downloaded the alpha version of the sabotage bot code he and his crew had been working on, "I'm not going down without scoring at least one kill," he thought as the download completed and he sprinted back to the launch console he had initially been standing at.

He scanned for targets near destruction, selecting one which was sufficiently weak and close. Cedrick launched the bot and opened a channel to Rodari, "Petty Officer Third Class Cedrick Johnson reporting initial testing of alpha sabotage bot code," he began, wanting to log the exploits of his crew for years to come.

The crew in the launch bay, long since sitting, merely waiting for their imminent deaths, rose and approached the viewport to see a Sentinel turning in an attempt to escape the battle as the bot closed in. The bot latched on to the aft of the Junsurak and began its work, stopping the frigate in its tracks as its engines were disabled before it began rerouting power to sensitive areas, resulting in catastrophic damage to the ship. The bot detached and returned towards the Hoshiko moments before the Sentinel fired her engines and erupted, being consumed in a massive explosion caused by the defects left from the *repair* bot.

"Code appears to work, however, more extensive testing is req..."

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25 Years Ago - Jan. 29
Dresda - Vasari Occupied Space
Krosov Siege Frigate

The first target appeared on Melanie's eyepiece, she recognized it as the middle of the largest ocean on Dresda, "That's a strange target," she thought, "must be calibrating our accuracy."

Without too much thought she yelled, "Papa, November!" moments before a nuclear warhead was launched from the portside torpedo pylon. The launch shook the entire Krosov as the torpedo fired its booster rockets and approached its target, a near direct hit, off by less than 250 metres.

The portside crew began to load the next torpedo as the second target appeared. An odd structure on the main continent, likely Vasari in origin as Melanie had never seen anything like it on any Trader world let alone Dresda. Eager to show the Vasari what they would get if they kept attacking her worlds, Melanie yelled, "Sierra, November!"

The Krosov shook once again as a torpedo leapt forth from the starboard pylon. The torpedo quickly made its way to the Vasari structure and engulfed it in a bright orange mushroom cloud of radiation.

“Good riddance,” she thought, as the third target appeared on her eyepiece. It was the island she had grown up on, about 20 minutes from her parents’ home, in the parking lot of her mother’s favourite, and her father’s least favourite, grocery store.

“Commander,” she began across the intercom, “confirm target coordinates of four four decimal niner eight by minus six three decimal five one.”

Melanie awaited a reply, hoping it was merely an error on someone’s part before her Commander replied, “Confirmed Petty Officer First Class Godwin. Target coordinates are four four decimal niner eight by minus six three decimal five one.”

“Well check with the Vice Admiral damn it!” she yelled in rage, “there are no Vasari targets at the designated coordinates, only civilians.

“I’m sorry Petty Officer, those are the coordinates, direct from Vice Admiral Eskelinen aboard the *Titunev*.” The Commander paused, “I’m giving you knew targeting solutions Petty Officer,” the Commander declared as a new target appeared, this time it was one of the northern ice caps.

Furious, Melanie took her time before accepting the target, watching to see who would accept the previous order she had been given. In no time, a torpedo was inbound for her home island. Melanie traced the torpedo path back to a KOL Class Battleship, the *Titunev*.

“That bastard,” Melanie thought as she opened a channel to the *Titunev*, forgetting all about her new target which she had yet to fire on, “Vice Admiral Eskelinen, this is Petty Officer First Class Melanie Godwin of Krosov 3, your intel is bad, I repeat, those are civilian targets.”

“Petty Officer,” Eskelinen began, “my targets have been given to me by Fleet Admiral Condoza himself. I’m sorry.”

“You lying son of a bitch,” she yelled across the intercom, “I joined to save my people not bomb them like the aliens I swore to fight,” she began to cry, “and yet,” she continued, sobbing, “You fire on them like they’re nothing. My parents and friends and family are on that planet, on that island.”

“Could someone please escort Ms. Godwin to the brig until this is over,” the Commander interrupted as he severed all outgoing communications, knowing this incident may cost him any chance of promotion if he didn’t act immediately.

Two men approached Melanie and grabbed her by the arms. She wrestled her right arm free and turned to punch the man holding her left arm in the nose, causing it to spurt blood across the floor, “I can show myself the way without you bastards having to carry me,” she declared, her tears still flowing as her anger intensified.

She turned for the exit, removing her eyepiece and throwing it at the floor with all her might, smashing it into a dozen pieces which scattered themselves across the floor in a chaotic pattern. A pattern Melanie imagined was as chaotic as the asphalt which once lined the streets where she had grown up. As chaotic as the graveyard where Erez would have been buried before his tomb was tossed from the ground by her torpedoes.

“No,” Melanie thought, “not *her* torpedoes. Her torpedoes had crashed into the ocean and devastated a Vasari structure. *Their* torpedoes were the ones killing all she knew and loved. Destroying the scenes from her memories, scenes she would never be able to revisit in person.

CHAPTER 8

25 Years Ago – April 12

Rhyzov - Coalition Space

Council Chambers of the Trader Emergency Coalition

“Attention,” Lucius Mannacher stood, his voice booming across the chamber, “As you all know,” he began as the room quieted down, “I’ve called you all here to vote on the proposal put forth by the Navy.”

In near perfect unison, the Councillors shuffled through their papers, searching for the proposal. Thomas Verlin quickly found his and scanned through the document, which read:

Dear esteemed Councillors of the Trader Emergency Coalition,

It is with great pleasure that I reiterate the recent success of the Trader Defense Navy (TDN) against the invading Vasari forces in the Pollux and Markab systems. The recent successes of our defensive strategies have prompted us in the TDN to consider taking measures to minimize the effects of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) in an attempt to prepare for when we are ready for a counter attack.

As such, we in the TDN think it would be best to decommission all non-military Commissioned Officers (COs) who have served since the beginning of the war. We intend to also provide leave to all Non Commissioned Officers (NCOs) at a rate of one (1) month (thirty (30) standard days) per year of service since the Vasari invasion.

We feel these measures will not adversely affect our ranks as the recruitment campaigns have been a resounding success, providing hundreds of new COs and even more NCOs every quarter.

With all of the above in mind, we in the TDN request you vote on the proposed plan.

Kindest regards,

Fleet Admiral Henry Condoza

Verlin scoffed at the proposal, wondering how they could win the war with so many people on leave, or worse, decommissioned.

“Freddie,” Thomas called out to Frederick Arn, “You read that yet?”

“Unbelievable,” he replied, shaking his head in dismay, “We pay them an honest wage and give them full military pensions and now they want to get indefinite vacations.”

Lucius Mannacher stood to address the congregation that had now read the proposal put forth by Admiral Condoza, “What are everyone’s thoughts on the proposal?” he asked the Councillors.

“I’m disgusted,” Frederick began, “They signed up to fight and we pay them to fight, rather handsomely I might add.”

“They’re going through hell and you know it,” Patricia Provian began.

“Don’t try and get all self-righteous with us,” Thomas Verlin quickly retorted, “Ever since Diomedes found itself on the frontlines you’ve been hounding me to force Gauss Weapons Group to speed up their defense platform development.”

“I have not,” Patricia roared back her lie, knowing that her homeworld of Diomedes couldn’t hold the Vasari at bay if they didn’t get orbital defenses soon.

Frederick Arn laughed before he turned to Lucius, “You can’t win a war unless you can beat the enemy in some manner. Since we can’t compete on a technological level, we need to outnumber these aliens.”

“I must agree with Mr. Arn,” Christopher Vanifax declared.

“We can’t keep sending men and women into combat when they clearly aren’t fit,” Lucius answered, attempting to gain some sympathy.

“Not our problem,” Arn snapped, “they signed up to fight this damn war and I won’t send a penny of money from Novalis to the Navy if this goes through.”

With things quickly spiralling out of control, Christopher rose from his seat, “I agree with you both,” he began, attempting to establish a common middle ground both men could accept, “We can’t decommission everyone the Navy wants to, it simply isn’t practical.”

A grin began to emerge across Arn’s face, a grin like a child would have after having been defended by his mother despite doing something wrong.

“But we can’t send unfit personnel into combat, it’s wrong and counterproductive.”

“Then what do you suggest?” Thomas Verlin asked, his interest was noticeable.

“All Commissioned Officers who have served since the start of the war and have not taken a single second of leave will be decommissioned. We can recommission them when we need them but until then they deserve a bit of time off,” Vanifax paused to survey the

Councillors, none of whom seemed too upset, “Additionally, any member of the Navy suffering from PTSD is to be granted leave indefinitely. Everyone else will continue to serve.”

All of the Councillors turned towards Arn, the most vocal opponent of the Admirals proposal.

“It would limit the number of losses,” Arn stated, answering all the eyes that were focused on him, “I support the amendments to the proposal put forth by Councillor Vanifax.”

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25 Years Ago – April 14
Calliope - Coalition Space
Marza Class Dreadnought - *Calisto*

Josh Forli sat in his quarters aboard the *Calisto* as he packed his few belongings, preparing to depart for Naeve. In the five years since the Vasari invaded he had never been anywhere that wasn’t in the middle of combat, until now. Like so many of his fellow officers, Captain Forli was being decommissioned.

Josh looked down the long hallway outside of his room and felt both joy and sorrow. Captain Forli was relieved that he would get to go home and finally see his son but he worried about what would happen to the *Calisto*, his true first child. However, Forli had spoken with Fleet Admiral Condoza who ensured Josh that the *Calisto* would be in good hands under the command of Captain Jean Matisse, a police veteran who was due for promotion sometime in the near future.

The intercom buzzed to life, “Captain, err, excuse me,” the officer paused before continuing, “Josh Forli to briefing room Bravo, I repeat, Josh Forli to briefing room Bravo.”

Josh grabbed his suitcase and strolled to the briefing room to meet the new Captain before departing.

“Ah, good morning Captain Forli,” Captain Matisse declared as Forli entered the room.

“Thank you sir,” Josh replied, extending his hand.

Jean Matisse firmly gripped Forli’s hand and gave it a swift shake before the two men sat down, “You’ve served admirably for someone of civilian background.”

Josh wasn’t sure if Jean’s remarks were sincere or snide, which must have been noticeable.

“I don’t mean any disrespect when I say that Captain,” Matisse attempted to cover up his lack of clarity, “I should have said that without you we would have our backs to the wall on Rhyzov no doubt.”

“I’ve been blessed with a great crew that was able and willing to do most of the work,” Josh replied.

“So I’ve heard,” Matisse acknowledged, “I look forward to serving with them.”

Forli smiled, he loved a Captain who thought of it as working with his crew as opposed to commanding his crew and having them work for him.

“I know this is your ship, has been since she entered service with the miners let alone the Navy,” Matisse paused, “I’ll be sure to keep you posted on how she’s holding together. Of course, you’ll probably be a few months behind since I’ll need to wait until things are declassified before I can fill you in.”

“Any news is better than no news,” Forli replied with a smile.

“And I’ve already informed the Admiral that I’m only Captain of this ship until you’re recommissioned, unless you don’t want it back should you be forced back into action.”

“It would be an honour to come back to this ship,” Forli declared before offering his blessings and bidding farewell to his crew.

A half an hour later a shuttle left the *Calisto* bound for Naeve and the troubles of parenting that lay ahead.

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25 Years Ago – July 14
Hecuba - Coalition Space
TDN Rehabilitation Facility

A few weeks ago Melanie arrived on Hecuba a broken woman. For so many years of her life she had been strong and independent, but now, after seeing her homeworld mercilessly bombed, she was as shattered as the cities she once lived in.

The TDN had recently decided to grant indefinite leave to all personnel who were suffering from PTSD, of which Melanie was deemed one, according to the Navy’s doctors.

Now Melanie spent her days locked in rehab on Hecuba, a beautiful oceanic world full of wonders, wonders Melanie would never get the chance to see so long as she remained a prisoner of the rehabilitation facility.

“Visitor for Petty Officer First Class Godwin,” the intercom screeched through the empty halls.

“Who the hell would visit me?” Melanie wondered as she rose from her bed to be escorted to the visiting area.

Melanie entered the room to see a strong man standing tall in his Marine Corp dress uniform. The man turned and shot a glowing smile to Melanie before saying, “It’s good to see you again Melanie.”

“Tristan,” she replied, her face beaming with joy, “how have you been?”

“I’ve been holding out,” Tristan answered, not knowing where to steer the conversation as Melanie was obviously in a fragile state.

“Well you’ve been doing better than me,” Melanie declared through a forced laugh, “I had troubles over Dresda.”

“Based on the reports I can’t imagine it was easy on anyone.”

“Some of them didn’t mind their orders,” Melanie answered with sincerity and calm, “Some of them had no troubles whatsoever.”

Not wanting to dig too deeply into what happened, Tristan began to steer the conversation elsewhere, “I’ve been on a few missions with the marines,” he began, “not as interesting as what you’ve been up to but after being a commercial freighter for so many years it’s always fun to get a few shots in on the pirates.”

“I bet,” Melanie enthusiastically replied, “Those bastards gave us some trouble back in the day.”

Tristan laughed, “They sure did,” he declared, before he began his story.

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27 Years Ago – May 12
Obrant - Coalition Space
Freight Container

The marines of the 21st Poison Darts floated in a freight container in orbit above Obrant. They were waiting for the pirate forces to come and pick them up, expecting to get untold riches as opposed to the finest the Marine Corp had to offer.

For years the marines had been using such underhanded tactics to board and commandeer pirate ships as they waited a long overdue ship of their own, a ship the Order said was 10

years out, but with the new Coalition formed three years ago, any hope was pushed back another decade or more.

SpaceFarer Tristan Stenson floated alongside Petty Officer First Class Davis Hanson, the man who had run basic training for Tristan and his friends on Rodari. Outside of basic training, Hanson was very kind, helping to ease Tristan into the Poison Darts.

The container shook as a ship latched on, prompting one of the marines to run a pre-programmed shock profile analysis program to determine the type of ship that just picked them up. Moments later the marine gave his signal, a throat slashing gesture, pirates.

The marines checked their weapons one last time, even though they had already done so numerous times, as they floated into position around the airlock link between the container and the ship. The marines placed an explosive charge on the door, knowing they only needed to create a slight chink in the door to tear it apart from the pressure difference between the unpressurized freight container and the ship with its standard atmosphere.

The small charge lit the dark room moments before the ship's atmosphere began to vent into the room, launching the door across the container. Without hesitation, the marines swiftly hovered around and through the door, up into the artificial gravity provided by the pirate vessel.

The marines scanned left and right before they moved to the ends of the hall, securing the corridor. Tristan was one of the first aboard the pirate ship, followed by Hanson. The two quickly ran to the right end of the hallway and prepared for the inevitable arrival of the pirates.

Just then, the freight container the marines rode in on detached from the ship, prompting the automatic bulkhead failsafes to shut the access hatch the marines had blown open.

"How many?" one of the marines asked over the marine SSRL.^[G]

"Six," another marine answered as the ship began to turn.

"Oh shit," the marine in command of the Poison Darts, Second Lieutenant Kingston bellowed, "They're gonna swing around and blast the container," he paused momentarily as he formulated a battle plan.

"Weapon's stations are too far sir," Hanson offered, "Our only chance is to storm the bridge."

Second Lieutenant Kingston knew the bridge was their only option, but he also knew it would be hell to break into, especially with over a dozen pirates coming at them from their flank, "Take point you two," Kingston roared his order to Hanson and Stenson,

“Ashley, Carter,” the commanding officer continued, “You two watch our flanks, keep any Papa’s^[G] off our backs.”

“Aye sir,” Petty Officer Third Class Ashley answered as Tristan Stenson and Davis Hanson slithered around the corner and moved up the next corridor.

“Check your corner,” Hanson ordered the younger Stenson who was a step ahead on the left hand side of the hallway, where another corridor intersected the hall the marines were advancing down.

Tristan wheeled around the corner and saw two pirates approaching, rifles drawn. SpaceFarer Stenson squeezed off two flechette rounds, dropping the first pirate before he adjusted his aim left and squeezed another round off, dropping the second pirate in a single shot.

“Clear!” Tristan yelled across the SSRL as Davis quickly passed the hallway.

Tristan turned and followed suit as the other marines advanced to the sound of gunfire coming from the flanks.

“Ashley?” Second Lieutenant Kingston called out.

“I count 15 on our flank sir,” Petty Officer Dwight Ashley answered amidst gunfire, “But we can hold ‘em sir.”

“I’m sending Seppälä to assist.”

“Negative, the situation is under control sir.”

Davis and Tristan approached the bulkhead that had been shut to seal off the bridge as Lieutenant Erik Kingston let out a bewildered sigh. Kingston knew he needed more men on his flank, but he also knew that to storm the bridge they’d need all the men they had.

“This operation has been FUBAR’d^[G] since those six were spaced,” Kingston thought to himself as one of his marines began slicing through the bulkhead.

The marine finished slicing the door as a group of pirates came around a corner that led to the bridge and opened fire.

The marine that had been slicing the door moments earlier was hit in the back, between the shoulder blades as Tristan swiftly ducked to the right while Davis leapt to cover to his left, where the other marines were.

Tristan peeked out and fired on the pirates before yelling across the link, “Blow the door!”

“Are you nuts Stenson?” Kingston answered, “We don’t need to fight on all sides.”

“We need to stop them from firing.”

“I’ll provide covering fire,” Hanson declared as he peeked out and sent a five round burst down the hall, killing one pirate, wounding another and forcing the remaining pirates to rethink their approach.

“Prepare to breach and clear,” Lieutenant Kingston ordered before he fired the explosives that had been placed on the door by the marine who had since been killed.

A flash of light was emitted from the explosives that sat at the top of the door as the bulkhead burst into the bridge, slamming onto the floor. Seeing what the marines were attempting, the pirates being shot at by Petty Officer Hanson emerged again and began firing in an attempt to keep the marines off the bridge.

Tristan popped a smoke grenade and lobbed it through the door and onto the bridge as he activated his IR visor and swiftly moved onto the bridge. Frantic, the pirates on the bridge turned to the doorway that had been blasted open and began to fire, not knowing what may come through the smoke.

Tristan took a shot to his left shin as he felt his tibia shatter. Knowing he was the only one who could prevent the death of the six marines in the container, he continued on, sweeping his rifle from right to left and squeezing off rounds with frightening precision.

As the smoke screen began to dissipate the pirates caught sight of the lone marine and their shots became more focused. Tristan took a round to his left bicep, tearing the muscle from his bone. The marine dropped his rifle in pain and reached for his sidearm with his right hand. A bullet impacted in the middle of SpaceFarer Stenson’s chest, knocking the wind out of him but doing no severe damage thanks to his extensive chest armour.

Tristan levelled his pistol and emptied his clip into the window at the front of the bridge. The window spider webbed from the impacts but didn’t shatter. A pirate approached Tristan and struck him with the butt of his rifle, knocking the marine to the ground. Tristan quickly rolled right, drawing his knife and rising to his knees in one swift motion. Stenson drove the knife into the arm of the pirate, causing him to drop his rifle, which Tristan quickly retrieved.

The cagey marine used the knife to pull himself up as his left leg was unable to give him the drive needed to rise. Tristan levelled the rifle on the shoulder of the pirate, Stenson knew his left arm would be unable to control the rifle, and unloaded the rest of the clip into the glass, breaking through and venting the bridge.

The pirates shot out the window into the vastness of space, quickly losing the air they required before the failsafes could lock the ship up and restore pressure. Utilizing the

distraction created by Tristan, the other marines quickly secured the bridge and subdued the pirates in the corridor outside.

“Ashley, status report?” Kingston asked.

“Still holding,” Ashley replied, “but Carter’s down.”

“Seppälä, get your ass on down to help him out,” the Lieutenant bellowed as he strolled onto the bridge and looked at Tristan who pushed Davis away in order to support himself and snap off a salute when he saw the Lieutenant.

Tristan stumbled under his own weight due to the injury to his left shin but he stayed on his feet, “Apologies sir.”

“Apologies?” Kingston asked, “for your piss poor salute?” a rare smirk crept onto the Lieutenant’s face, “you’ve always had shit salutes son, but you’re a damn good marine.”

• • •

25 Years Ago – July 14
Hecuba - Coalition Space
TDN Rehabilitation Facility

“And that’s how I got my Kronac’s Cross,” Tristan finished his story about the glistening cross that adorned his uniform, “not to mention my Crimson Heart and the two Sabres,” Tristan continued, bringing attention to his Silver and Bronze Sabre in addition to the Crimson Heart medallion the were also on his uniform.

“All I got for my services was a psych evaluation,” Melanie laughed, “But I’m glad you’re okay,” Melanie continued with a smile aimed at masking her emotions, “and I’m even more glad you came to visit me,” she finished as a tear crept out from her eye and traced a glistening trail down her cheek.

CHAPTER 9

25 Years Ago – Oct. 29

**Tauris Major – Vasari Occupied Space
Northern Polar Excavation Dome**

The slaves of Bo'lak Jisura's camp began to slow as the day progressed, making it increasingly difficult for him to keep the other Slavers from resorting to deadly tactics to get the results the Empire so desperately desired.

"Keep moving!" Walena Kravos, one of the many Slavers working under Jisura commanded with noticeable rage.

One of the slaves stopped and turned to face Walena, the burly Trader male was easily 6'2" but still was a foot shorter than Walena, "You think we can be herded like cattle?" the man rhetorically asked.

Walena took a step towards the man and reached forth with her spindly fingers, wrapping them around his throat and pulling him up to her eye level, "Just be thankful we don't slaughter you all like you do to the cattle," she began with disgust, "be grateful that we don't destroy your land to build our own cities," she continued, "You are our beasts of burden because you cannot be tamed."

Walena tightened her grip, forcing the man to gasp for air despite the rich artificial atmosphere that permeated the space inside the excavation dome, "In a galaxy of loyal dogs you are the rabid wolves that still prowl the forests. Do not dispel our generosity," she continued, "Or we may resort to your tactics of invasiveness and slaughter," Slaver Kravos concluded as she threw the man five metres away.

"I swear to god I'll kill every one of you aliens," the man declared as he struggled to regain his feet.

Walena laughed as Bo'lak approached, no doubt in an attempt to save the xeno from a slow and painful death, "Tell me human," Kravos began, "when one of your enslaved species kills one of you, is that creature not hunted and killed?" she paused for him to consider the query, "or perhaps the entire species is hunted?"

"That's enough," Bo'lak interjected, attempting to dissuade Walena from inciting a riot.

"Is it really? Do you know what these xenos have done to the inferior species on their worlds for the past few thousand years?" Walena began, stringing along pretentious questions as she so often did when she knew that, although she was morally in the wrong, she still held the high ground, "They have killed more species in this sector of space than we can ever hope to," she glared back at the Trader, "and yet they call us the monsters," she concluded as she left for the end of her watch shift.

“Back to work,” Bo’lak ordered, restoring order to the slaves, knowing that Praetor Rakoran would be arriving in a few months and would not be pleased with the progress at this rate.

Bo’lak’s intercom beeped moments before Experimentalist Shola began to speak, “Slaver Jisura,” he began, “the second batch of nanites is complete.”

“Excellent,” Bo’lak declared, disguising his sarcasm with false excitement, “when can we begin testing?”

“As soon as I have enough subjects to create a control and test group,” Hankiri began, his sentences becoming faster as his enthusiasm intensified, “If my theories are correct then these nanites will aid in restoring normal blood flow to the extremities in low gravity environments.”

“And if they’re incorrect?”

“Well,” the Experimentalist paused, “The nanites could prevent blood flow to the upper extremities and thus starve the brain of oxygen,” Hankiri paused, thinking of other potential outcomes, “Or they could have an inverse affect and cause the blood to pool in the head.”

“How could you be off by so much as to cause an inverse affect?” Bo’lak asked.

“If the nanites are introduced to the host in an improper manner they may not correctly understand up and down as the host does. Either way, I think we’ll have more success with the third batch I have planned,” Shola declared with pride.

“And what might the third batch entail?” Jisura queried with both intrigue and fear.

“The problem with low gravity environments is that the heart is too strong and pumps blood too far and too fast. If we introduce nanites to limit the strength of the heart’s push then we can simulate standard gravity.”

“Is that not a riskier solution?”

“It is,” Hankiri began, “but was inter-dimensional travel not a risky solution to interstellar travel?”

“Keep me updated of your finding Experimentalist,” Bo’lak declared, ending the conversation before Hankiri could attempt to draw anymore parallels between his barbaric *research* and the more prestigious research into phase space.

• • •

24 Years Ago – Feb. 6
Kaburaki I – Coalition Space
Sova Class Carrier - *Mobius*

Captain Paul Somers stood aboard the bridge of the *Mobius* looking out on all the other ships in orbit above the gas giant of Kaburaki I. The Captain wondered where he would be sent next as the Vasari had slowly established a foothold in the Markab system by launching a half dozen hit and run attacks on Liberia before a final push drove the Traders off the planet.

The Pollux system was in the midst of constant skirmishes as well, with Rezia, Rodari and Tauris Minor hosting countless small engagements. The Traders had ceded control of Rodari due to the chaotic battles and minimal civilian population that would need relocating but Rezia could not be sacrificed, which meant Tauris Minor was also of importance in order to keep the supply lines open to and from Rezia.

“Captain Somers,” an officer aboard the bridge called out as he snapped off a salute.

“At ease,” Paul Somers replied, “what have you got?”

“Orders from the Admiral sir,” the officer began, “we’re to reinforce Diomedes ASAP.”

“Very well, inform the fleet of our orders, we leave in 20 minutes.”

“Yes sir,” the officer strode off and quickly relayed the Captain’s orders to the crew aboard the bridge, who notified the fleet of their new orders.

Captain Somers continued to gaze out the bridge as the dozens of fighters flocked to land on their respective carriers while the *Bravick* headed across the gravity well with her fleet.

“They must be getting sent to Helenos,” Paul thought as one of the fighters emitted a brilliant orange explosion out of her engine.

Static erupted across the intercom before the pilot came through, “Lancehead 4 requesting emergency clearance to land.”

“Roger that Lancehead 4,” the controller aboard the *Ithica* called out since it was the closest carrier, “You have your pick of the hangars aboard the *Ithica*. All other ships maintain holding pattern.”

“I’m lining up on hangar 3,” the pilot replied as he attempted to manoeuvre the engineless fighter into the hangar bay.

“*Ithica* control copies Lancehead, fire brigades will be standing by.”

Lancehead 4 found its way into the hangar aboard the *Ithica* before it sputtered one last time, igniting the volatile gases present above Kaburaki I. The explosion ripped the hangar bay to pieces and sent chunks of metal flying off the *Ithica*.

“*Ithica* control what’s your status?” Captain Somers called out.

“Hangar 3 is completely destroyed but the ship is otherwise unharmed.”

“God damn it,” Somers bellowed as he turned from the viewport, “Return to the Gethsemane shipyard for repair then join the fleet above Diomedes. Somers out.”

The *Ithica* turned towards Gethsemane as the remaining fighters docked aboard their carriers that were forming up alongside the *Mobius*. The two mighty Sovas lumbered away from the gas giant Kaburaki I, reaching the edge of the gravity well as the *Bravick* and her fleet exited into phase space in the direction of Helenos.

“Phase jump on my mark,” Captain Somers called out across the bridge as the fleet began to create their ripples into phase space, “Mark.”

• • •

24 Years Ago – May 29
Pasiphaë – Holy Advent Space
Basilica de Soror Illus

Illus the Wise stood in the grand basilica on Pasiphaë as the morning sun rose, shining through the brilliant stained glass windows. The myriad of colours cast across the walls was stunning to say the least, and the slender woman enjoyed every moment she spent basking in the glory of the most holy of churches in Advent space. But Illus the Wise was not at the basilica to enjoy the sights, today she had arrived to discuss the future with the other sisters of Illus.

An extremely religious society, three members of the Advent were selected by the collective soul of the Unity to serve at a young age. The three chosen were designated Illus the Wise, the Sacred, and the Vengeful.

After nearly 700 years of feminine rule, the three began to be collectively known as the Sisters of Illus, however, men were allowed to rule if the Unity desired. The first and only male ever to be chosen an Illus was 1000 years ago, before the Great Expulsion occurred.

“It is good to see you,” Illus the Sacred telepathically spoke to Illus the Wise as the holiest of sisters walked past the pulpit.

“Likewise sister,” Illus the Wise politely responded as Illus the Vengeful entered the basilica and passed through the sanctum to the other two sisters who were standing in the nave.

“A beautiful day,” Illus the Vengeful declared as she peered into the minds of her two sisters, attempting to understand the reason for this meeting.

“Indeed,” Illus the Sacred agreed before turning to Illus the Wise, the one who had called this gathering.

“They have been discovered,” Illus the Wise flatly stated to the others.

“It is not yet time,” Illus the Sacred began, “the future is ours, but for now, we must wait and let destiny unfold.”

“We cannot sit idly,” Illus the Vengeful replied in rage, “we must move swiftly and strike our oppressors.”

“They are building for a great war,” Illus the Wise offered more of her knowledge to her sisters, “But our scryers cannot see what they are fighting.”

The three stood in collective mental silence, something extremely unusual for a group of telepaths. After a minute, Illus the Sacred spoke, “Speak your mind,” she graciously declared to Illus the Vengeful, sensing that she was keeping something from them.

“If they are in the midst of a war then we will need greater tools of conversion in order to destroy the heretics,” she paused for a moment, “But if it is the Unity’s will, then we will wait and prepare for the cleansing.”

“We must put our faith in the Unity or we will become the monster that must be delivered to gates,” Illus the Wise answered her sister.

“Be at peace my sisters,” Illus the Sacred stated reassuringly, “All shall join the Unity in time.”

• • •

24 Years Ago – July 4
Tauris Major – Vasari Occupied Space
Northern Polar Excavation Dome

Bo’lak Jisura paced back and forth as the slaves continued to dig into the metallic surface of the largest asteroid in the Tauris Cluster. For the past two weeks Slaver Jisura had been reassuring Sh’arnn Rakoran that the artifact was close, but each day she grew more and more impatient with the lack of progress.

Every morning when he awoke, Bo'lak expected to see the terrifying frontal maw of the *Ruskovak* powering up to rip the asteroid apart in an attempt to find the artifact. Luckily, Bo'lak's fears had yet to come to fruition, something he was immensely thankful for.

A sharp ping rang out through the dome with a noticeably different tune than the sounds that had been so abundant for the past year and a half, causing everyone to turn towards the unusual sound.

Bo'lak broke into a full sprint to reach the Trader who made the decisive impact, "Where?" he asked.

The Trader drove his shovel into the ground, recreating the sound.

"Jisura to Rakoran," Bo'lak began, "We've hit the artifact."

"About god damn time," Sh'arn replied.

Bo'lak turned to one of the other Slavers, "Get Experimentalist Shola over here to help us figure out what this thing can do."

The Slaver acknowledged before turning to carry out his orders as Bo'lak got down on his knees and began to unearth the artifact, urging the slaves to do the same.

The slave who had been on Walena's nerves for the past few months dropped alongside Bo'lak and began to clear off the artifact, pulling back the dirt, inadvertently scraping his nails across the unknown alien device.

A glowing blue light pulsed as the Trader pulled his now blue hand away from the artifact. Everyone stopped and turned as the glow spread across the Trader's body before unleashing a pulse of energy, knocking everyone off their feet. When everyone regained their feet the slave was nowhere to be found.

"Jisura, what the hell's going on down there?" Praetor Rakoran asked, "We're picking up strange energy profiles."

"Unknown," Bo'lak replied, "The artifact just unleashed an energy pulse that killed one of the slaves."

"Very well," Sh'arn declared, "Keep us informed of the dig."

Praetor Rakoran began to walk away from the viewport to return to her command chair. She sat down without making a sound before one of the officers on the bridge called out, "Antimatter spike from the dig site!"

"What happened to their reactor?" Sh'arn asked.

“That’s not their reactor, the signature is too big.”

“What do you mean *the signature is too big*?” Sh’arnn angrily quizzed the officer, “Their reactor is one of the largest we have.”

“I mean it’s bigger,” the officer flatly answered, “Antimatter output is greater than anything we have records on.”

• • •

24 Years Ago – Dec. 9
Diomedes – Coalition Space
Sova Class Carrier – *Mobius*

Captain Paul Somers checked his watch despite having numerous displays on the bridge with the time. “Five minutes until the end of my shift,” he thought to himself, “Thank god, I haven’t slept in over 36 hours.”

“Captain,” Lieutenant Commander Kendra Poole, second in command on the *Mobius*, called out as she approached Captain Somers, “Why don’t you go get some rest,” she politely stated, “You’ve been up here for over a day.”

“I’ll be done my shift in five minutes.”

Lieutenant Commander Poole laughed, “What are you honestly going to accomplish in five minutes?”

Captain Somers shot her a glare.

“I mean, what are you honestly going to accomplish in five minutes sir?”

Paul couldn’t help but smile at the younger officer’s light heartedness despite the dire situation they had been in ever since she joined the Navy a few years ago.

“Very well,” Captain Somers declared, rising from his command chair, “I’ll be in my quarters, contact me if you need anything.”

“Nothing’s happened for over nine months,” Kendra began.

“I know,” Paul answered, “I just don’t want you to wreck my ship,” he finished as he left the bridge and headed to his quarters, receiving hearty salutes from all those he passed in the corridor.

When he finally reached his room Paul removed his PEC^[G] and unbuttoned his collar before he picked up the picture of his wife and two children. It had been years since he had held any of them as he had in the picture.

“I hope you’re all safe and sound on Landau,” he spoke to the picture before he set it back down and continued to prepare for a few hours of sleep.

Paul finally crawled into his bed, its sheets as cold as ice. The Captain curled into a ball in an attempt to warm himself and a small portion of the bed up to acceptable sleeping levels.

After a few minutes of shivering the Captain was at a comfortable temperature and sprawled into a comfortable position moments before an alarm began to sound.

Captain Somers reached up and swatted the wall based comm terminal on, “Bridge,” he commanded moments before Kendra’s face appeared on screen, “What the hell’s going on Lieutenant Commander?”

“Vasari ships just emerged from phase space,” she calmly declared to the Captain before turning her attention to someone else on the bridge, “Launch all fighters, have them create a screen 4000 clicks out from us, I don’t want any bombers getting through.”

“Yes ma’am,” the officer replied.

“How many of them are there?” Captain Somers asked as he began to get back into his uniform.

“They’re still coming, but right now we’ve got a pair of caps, 40 or so combat frigates and another 20 plus supporting ships.”

“I’m on my way,” Somers answered.

“Aye sir, bridge out,” Lieutenant Commander Poole answered before deactivating the terminal and turning her attention towards the battle about to erupt, “I want the Kodiaks to stay close to the Perhcerons and keep the aliens off them,” she bellowed, “and get the *Ithica* to form up on us, have the Cobalts come in behind, we’re going for those capital ships.”

• • •

24 Years Ago – Dec. 9

Diomedes – Coalition Space

Vulkoras Class Desolator – *LarrTul*

“Enemy fleet breaking to attack,” one of the officers aboard the *LarrTul* declared as the two carriers fired their engines and headed towards the *LarrTul*.

“Tell the Kanraks to prepare to fire,” Praetor N’ok replied, pausing for moment while the Traders approached and entered firing range, “Clear the way!”

The Kanraks fired their phase missiles in unison as the *LarrTul* unleashed a barrage of pulse beams on one of the Trader capital ships. Moments later the Trader frigates were within firing range and began to fire on the *Toruvak*.

“What’s your status?” Var N’ok asked Ilaka Korsul about the condition of his Antorak Marauder.

“Still holding,” he sharply answered, “But if this keeps up we’ll be phasing out for a few seconds to divert their attention.”

“Understood,” Var N’ok agreed before he looked at the scanners to see what could be done by the rest of the fleet to assist the *Toruvak*, “Subverters,” he called the attention of the support cruisers, “see what you can do about those frigates.”

“They won’t know what hit them,” the lead cruiser responded as the Subverters charged their phase engines before blinking away from the fleet only to appear beside the attack frigates an instant later, disabling the frigates. Unable to move, the Trader frigates quickly succumbed to the phase missiles being launched from the Kanraks.

“Bring us about to target the lead ship,” Var N’ok ordered as the *LarrTul* repositioned to face the lead vessel head on.

“Hostile fleet detected,” one of the Overseer commanders called out.

“Stall them,” Var N’ok ordered before returning his attention to the enemy capital ship, “Maximum firepower!”

• • •

24 Years Ago – Dec. 9
Diomedes – Coalition Space
Sova Class Carrier – *Mobius*

“Shields dropping rapidly,” Lieutenant Commander Poole called out as the Vasari capital ship fired an immense pale blue beam at the *Mobius*, “hull integrity falling as well.”

“God damn it,” Somers called out, “Where the hell is the *Bravick*?”

“She’s en route sir,” Poole replied.

“Open a channel to the *Ithica*,” Captain Somers began, “tell them to regroup the fleet in sector...”

“Sir,” Lieutenant Commander Poole began, calling attention to the *Ithica*, “she’s moving between us and the alien fleet.”

“Don’t be a fool,” Captain Somers muttered under his breath as the *Ithica* began to block the beam that had been tearing into the *Mobius*, “What’s her status?”

“She was battered and bruised before she jumped in front of us,” Poole began, “Sir, I don’t think the *Ithica* can survive it, she’s gonna blow.”

• • •

24 Years Ago – Dec. 9
Diomedes – Coalition Space
Akkan Class Battlecruiser– *Bravick*

Brad Little stood aboard the bridge of the *Bravick* as it emerged from phase space, flanked by 40 Javelis Long Range Missile Frigates and a handful of Cobalts.

“This is Captain Bradley Little of the *Bravick*, we’re moving to engage the hostiles from the flank.”

“About god damn...”

Static erupted across the comm channel as a large explosion illuminated the viewscreen, forcing the auto-dim normally reserved for stars to kick in.

“Captain Somers?” Captain Little called out, having recognized the voice that had been previously cut off after the explosion, “Captain Somers, do you copy?”

“We’re holding together,” Somers replied, the distinct sound of hull breach alarms ringing throughout the background, “The *Ithica*’s been destroyed.”

“Solid copy *Mobius*,” Captain Little replied before opening a channel to the LRMs that flanked the *Bravick*, “Engage all hostile threats, drive those bastards back.”

“Confirmed,” the lead Javelis responded, “Range locked in.”

A dazzling array of missiles leapt from the missile pods aboard the Javelis frigates. The missiles streaked out a few hundred kilometres before they acquired their targets and guided themselves in, engulfing the Vasari frigates in brilliant orange explosions.

The Vasari fleet began to turn, attempting to retreat from the gravity well. One by one the alien ships reached the edge of the gravity well before glowing orange discs emerged in front of their ships. Seconds later the Vasari ships tunneled into phase space and disappeared from Diomedes, bound for the ferrous planet of Liberia.

“Status report,” Captain Little called out to his fleet.

“No issues on our end Captain,” one of the officers replied.

Captain Little wasn’t surprised, they hadn’t been in the thick of it like the *Mobius*.

“This is Captain Somers to all fighter squadrons, sound off.”

The fighters began to report in as Captain Little tried to figure out how many squadrons his ship could support if Captain Somers’ fleet didn’t have enough hangar space.

“Captain Little,” Captain Somers voice came across the comm, “Do you have room for an extra fighter squadron?”

“We can squeeze them in,” Captain Little replied, “What’s the squadron?”

“Not a true squadron,” Somers began, “remnants from Lancehead, Diamondback and Habu squadrons.”

“Roger that, who’s flight lead?”

“Lancehead 4.”

“Solid copy Captain Somers, we’ll give them a good home,” Little replied before he found his new squadron on the scanners, “This is Captain Little to Lancehead 4, do you copy?”

“Aye Captain Little, what are your orders?”

“Land at once, and then prepare for debriefing, I’ll meet you all in 30 minutes.”

CHAPTER 10

23 Years Ago – Apr. 11 **Naeve – Coalition Space** **Josh and Alice Forli's Home**

Josh Forli awoke at 5 am Saturday morning to a distinct clomping sound walking along the hardwood floors on the main floor of the house.

“Josh,” Alice groggily began, “What’s going on?”

“The hardwood floors I put in last summer are getting ruined,” he replied as he climbed out of bed and went downstairs.

“Hi dad!” Josh Jr. happily declared to his father as he searched through the cupboards for some cereal.

“All ready for the big game today?” Josh asked his son through a yawn.

“Yep.”

Josh chuckled at the sight of his son, scrounging through the cupboards in his football kit, or as the citizens of the core worlds called it, his *soccer gear*.

“What are you looking for bud?”

“Cereal,” Jr. replied in one word as he so often did.

Josh got down to assist his son and quickly found the cereal box tucked away in the back of the cupboard. He pulled the box out and poured two bowls of cereal before getting the milk from the large white fridge sitting around the corner of the counter from the stove.

“Want some chocolate milk to drink?” Josh asked.

“Mom said I can only have it on *special days*,” Jr. declared in the voice he used to imitate Alice.

“Well what’s more special than your first football match?” Josh asked as he poured two large glasses.

Jr. took a hearty swig of chocolate milk as Alice walked into the kitchen and asked, “What are you two up to?”

“Both Josh’s put their glasses down behind the cereal box and turned towards Alice, guilty milk moustaches adorning their faces.

“We made you breakfast,” Jr. declared as he pushed his bowl of cereal down the island towards his mother and smiled.

Alice returned the smile and took a spoonful of cereal. After she finished her first spoonful she readied another before asking, “Don’t I get any chocolate milk too?”

“It was his idea!” Josh stood and pointed to his son.

“What?!” Jr. replied with shock after being thrown under the bus by his own father.

“Well I think it’s a great idea,” Alice declared with a smile, “After all, ‘what’s more special than your first football match?’”

• • •

23 Years Ago – Apr. 11
Naeve – Coalition Space
Community Football Pitch

The Forli’s arrived at the football pitch just under 20 minutes before the game, much to the chagrin of the anxious Josh Forli Jr. who had been concerned about the lack of haste his parents had shown.

“Better get over there and meet everyone on your team,” Alice declared as Jr.’s eyes lit up before he broke into a sprint towards the other kids in matching orange jerseys.

“Do you think he’s excited?” Josh sarcastically asked before the two parents shared a laugh as they approached the bleachers in search of seats.

“Josh, Alice,” another man yelled out before standing up and waving his arms.

“Jeff,” Josh replied, acknowledging his long time neighbour and father of two.

“I hadn’t heard that your son was playing football this season.”

“How would you have heard Jeff?” Alice asked, “It’s only the first game of the season.”

Jeff pointed across the field to the team, “Sarah’s the head coach,” he began, “She’s been playing football since before I met her back in university.”

“Well I’ll know who to ask for a ride to football when we can’t make it,” Josh said with a laugh to his neighbour who constantly required Forli’s assistance, particularly during snowstorms.

“I’d love to make Sarah run the boys to football so we can stay home on Saturday and watch the premier league while having a few cold ones.”

“And maybe even mow the lawns,” Alice offered with a grin as the teams took the field, “I mean, the boys will need a place to practice at home and long grass makes it difficult.”

The two men looked at each other before Jeff said “We’ll send her,” he motioned towards Alice, “with Sarah and the kids.”

Josh and Jeff shared a laugh as the teams lined up before the referee blew his whistle to signal the beginning of the game.

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28 Years Ago – Jan. 8
Rodari – Coalition Space
Marza Class Dreadnought – *Calisto*

The Phase Signature Detection and Ranging (PSIDAR) whistle sounded across the intercom to all ships in the defense fleet as an Antorak Marauder emerged from the Pollux-Rodari phase lane.

The Vasari ship quickly turned to starboard and accelerated to full speed, heading away from the planet and the defending Trader fleet.

“Looks like a lone scout,” Captain Somers called out to his comrades, “launch all fighters,” he continued.

“Keep your distance,” Captain Forli swiftly replied, “something doesn’t seem right about this.”

“Aye sir,” one of the Kodiak Captain’s answered, “we’ll keep a safe distance while still getting some shots in.”

The Kodiak’s fired their engines and closed in to attack range before they unloaded a burst of autocannon rounds. The bullets melted into the energy shielding of the Marauder as the PSIDAR whistle sounded again.

• • •

23 Years Ago – Apr. 11
Naeve – Coalition Space
Community Football Pitch

“Josh,” Alice repeated, “are you ok?”

“Yeah,” Josh shook his head as the referee marked the goal on his scorecard, “Yeah, I’m just a bit tired after this morning.”

“That’s understandable,” Alice declared with a smile as she turned back to the game moments before the referee blew his whistle to restart play after the goal.

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28 Years Ago – Jan. 8
Rodari – Coalition Space
Marza Class Dreadnought – *Calisto*

Hundreds of Vasari ships emerged from phase space and quickly moved to cover the Marauder that had been the first ship into the system. One of the Kortul’s quickly accelerated into position between the Antorak and the Traders, flaring its shields and powering its weapons in a surge of energy.

“Regroup,” Forli bellowed as pulse beams lashed out from the Kortul to the Kodiaks.

Static erupted across the intercom as one of the Kodiaks lost its shields before the Kortul’s wave cannons slammed into the dorsal turret on the Kodiak, igniting the ammunition and ripping the turret to pieces. The pressure difference pulled countless crewmembers out of the ship into the vast expanse of space.

“My god,” Josh quietly muttered as he stared at the viewscreen, counting the bodies as they shot out of the heavy cruiser. Of the 30 or so people lost to the void Josh recognized six of them, four men and two women, who had been in his mining group for years. Now they were gone, likely never to be found.

The *Bravick* moved between the Kortul and the rest of the Trader fleet, broadsiding the Vasari ship while simultaneously shielding her allies as an unknown ship emerged from phase space.

“This is Commander Hui Tai of the KOL Class Battleship *Vanifax*. Captain Forli, we’re moving to engage the aliens from behind, we’ll catch them in a crossfire.”

“Thank god someone finally showed up,” Forli answered as the *Bravick* retreated until it was between the *Calisto* and *Ithica*.

“Fire all missiles!” Forli bellowed moments before a barrage of missiles burst out of the launch tubes on the Marza’s port side. A glistening amber trail traced its way from the Marza to the Vasari ships.

One of the Skarovas Enforcers that was hit by the missiles of the *Calisto* during a maneuver lost its engines and spiralled towards the Marza.

“Captain!” an officer aboard the bridge called Forli’s attention to the incoming cruiser.

“Brace for impact!” Forli roared across the onboard intercom moments before the Enforcer slammed into the Marza.

• • •

23 Years Ago – Apr. 11
Naeve – Coalition Space
Community Football Pitch

“Oh my god, Josh,” Alice frantically cried.

“I’m alright Alice,” Josh declared as he rose to his feet and tossed the football back towards the pitch, “Just caught me by surprise,” he declared as he sat back down after dusting himself off.

“Ah that’s nothin’ compared to a rogue asteroid or meteor, eh Josh?” Jeff comically asked his neighbour.

Josh chuckled, “It sure ain’t,” he began, “but I have a few thousand tonnes of metal between myself and those asteroids,” he concluded as he settled in to watch what remainder of the match.

• • •

23 Years Ago – Oct. 9
Rhyzov – Coalition Space
Council Chambers of the Trader Emergency Coalition

The Councillors poured into the Chambers for their quarterly meeting, a gathering often used to discuss the past quarter and prepare for the next.

Lucius Mannacher stood and called everyone to attention, “Councillors,” he began, “Let us begin our quarterly meeting.”

Mannacher paused to survey the Councillors, attempting to identify who was most troubled so as to let them begin. Christopher Vanifax locked eyes with Lucius for a brief moment, just long enough for Mannacher to know that he had something extremely important on his mind.

“Christopher,” Lucius declared as he motioned towards the Councillor of Adonis, “perhaps you’d like to begin this meeting.”

Christopher stood up and acknowledged the Councillors before he began, “As you all know, we’ve been losing ground ever since the beginning of this war,” he paused briefly,

knowing his statement was both true and difficult to hear, “And although the bleeding has lessened over the past couple of years, make no mistake, the wound is still open.”

“What are you getting at?” Thomas Verlin of Karlstad asked.

“The Vasari have been fortifying our worlds unmolested for nearly seven years, even if we did break through their fleets the worlds which we once lived on would be so heavily fortified that our forces would be decimated in an instant.”

None of the other Councillors made a sound.

“We need some way to strike them without committing valuable assets to suicide attacks.”

“I won’t condone attacks on our worlds,” Patricia Provian quickly snapped, “not after what happened at Dresda.”

“Why not?” Frederick Arn replied, “Is it because your homeworld is on the frontlines and likely to be the next world to fall?” he accused Patricia of both cowardice and a conflict of interest.

“Unfortunately I agree with Freddie,” Thomas Verlin added his opinion.

“What do you mean, *unfortunately*?” Arn asked.

“I mean I don’t want to destroy our planets!” Verlin hastily replied.

“Can you even call them *our* planets after the Vasari have held them for seven years?!” another Councillor roared above the now frantic congregation.

“The reports indicate that they keep our citizens alive,” Patricia passionately rebutted.

“The reports indicate they keep our citizens as slaves,” Christopher factually declared, not wanting to take sides in the argument that was spiralling out of control.

“I think we can all agree that our reports are incomplete and inaccurate at best,” Lucius intervened, calming the room, albeit momentarily.

“Unless we can put the Vasari on their heels then we may never get a chance to complete those reports,” Arn quickly declared, thrusting the room back into chaos.

“If we could return to my suggestion,” Verlin softly declared, somehow managing to get the attention of everyone.

“I’ve been in talks with some of the higher ranking members of the Defense Force in an attempt to determine a possible next step,” Vanifax began, “and they have presented me

with a number of requests, which I have whittled down to the most promising request for us to discuss.”

Christopher Vanifax stood, drawing the eyes of everyone towards him as he began to walk the perimeter of the Council Chambers, “The admiralty wish to strike the enemy unhindered,” Christopher began slowly, choosing his words with great care, “and one of the ways they believe they would be capable of doing this would be with the use of an Interstellar Ordinance Delivery System, or IODS as they have dubbed it.”

Many of the Councillors smirked as Christopher told them of the acronym, politicians loved to poke fun at the military for their quirks, notably their need for acronyms. Unfortunately, IODS was only a single acronym unlike some of the more complex acronyms which were themselves made up of acronyms.^[G]

“With this capability the military brass believe they could strike planets away from the frontlines but still potential targets, luring the Vasari away from the battlefield long enough for us to reclaim a world or two.”

“When you say *ordinance*,” Verlin began, “what exactly are you talking about?”

Lucius stood up before Christopher could answer, “That is something that I wanted to discuss,” he declared, glancing at Councillor Vanifax, signalling for him to retake his seat.

“Last month,” Mannacher resumed, “some of the Admirals came to me to discuss the possibility of using more lethal weapons in our fight against the Vasari,” he paused, “Their requests were as follows.”

Lucius drew in a deep breath before continuing, “The Admirals have requested we vote on allowing the deployment of weapons of mass destruction including, but not limited to, nuclear, chemical and biological arms.”

The room was overcome by an uneasy silence before the Councillors began to quietly discuss the request amongst themselves.

“If this Coalition feels it is necessary to use weapons as inhumane as this,” Patricia Provian began, “Diomedes will withdraw itself from the Trader Emergency Coalition.”

“It’ll keep us from wasting lives defending your world for nothing,” Arn retorted, nearly inciting a riot.

“THAT’S ENOUGH!” Mannacher boomed, the veins in his forehead pulsing with rage.

The Council Chambers fell silent again, this time in fear as opposed to reflection, before Christopher rose to speak, “I do not think it wise to deploy biological weapons on the

Vasari,” he began, locking eyes with Arn in an attempt to dissuade him from inciting another shouting match, “we don’t know enough about their biological makeup.”

“I agree with Councillor Vanifax,” a member in the back of the room called out as more shouted their approval of Christopher’s opinion.

“The risk on other life is substantial too,” Patricia added, attempting to keep calm.

“My discussion with the Admirals was not limited to bombardment weapons, it was a general request for use in space or atmosphere,” Lucius clarified.

“Either way,” Verlin jumped in, “we know so little about the Vasari that we can’t make proper use of biological or chemical weapons without further research.”

The room quieted for a third time in less than two minutes as everyone contemplated a nuclear solution before Arn finally spoke, “We’ve been using nuclear weapons on our own kind on and off for over a thousand years and have already used them in a limited role,” he bluntly stated, “I don’t see any issue with their continued use against a true enemy.”

Shockingly, the room remained calm as everyone attempted to reach their own conclusions on the matter.

“I agree,” Christopher Vanifax added his support to the use of nuclear weapons, “a nuclear explosion near an unshielded vessel would be effective.”

“What if they capture our weapons?” Patricia asked, trying to keep the Coalition from using such gruesome weapons on a regular.

“I imagine they mastered nuclear weapons long ago Ms. Provian,” Verlin attempted to console Patricia, “and have since moved on to weapons well beyond our means,” Thomas then looked to Lucius, “I support the use of high radiation nuclear weapons.”

The majority of the Councillors began to agree with the use of nuclear weapons while a few argued or walked out of the Chambers in an act of defiance not seen since the Coalition was formed.

Lucius made eye contact with every Councillor who walked out, knowing that the Coalition couldn’t afford to be divided again. Especially if one side was willing to use weapons of mass destruction.

CHAPTER 11

22 Years Ago – Feb. 26

Liberia – Vasari Occupied Space

Vulkoras Class Desolator - *LarrTul*

Tara Krai stood before her work station on the bridge of the *LarrTul* as phase space readings streamed across the screen. The young woman had spent her entire military career onboard a Jikara Navigator before her Praefectus put her up for promotion, prompting Var N’ok to consider her for his vacant phase sensor operator position. After much deliberation, Var N’ok brought Tara aboard and began to see the benefits of a fresh set of eyes almost instantly.

“Tara,” Var N’ok called out, momentarily disrupting her train of thought, “have you detected anymore anomalous readings on the far side of Trader space?”

“Nothing unusual of late,” she replied, “I’ll inform you as soon as something develops.”

“Very well,” Praetor N’ok conceded before he diverted his attention back to the war effort, which was now in its eighth year. The veteran Praetor contemplated massing for an attack on Condruces in an attempt to draw the Traders away from the desert and ocean worlds that bordered Liberia. “No,” he thought to himself, “They wouldn’t leave billions to save a few million on a barren wasteland.”

Var N’ok began to pace the bridge as he heard an alarm sounding from one of the workstations. The Praetor straightened, his mind racing, trying to figure out what could be the cause of the alarm.

“Reading’s back Praetor,” Tara Krai promptly declared, “It’s barely detectable at this range.”

“Where’s it headed?” Praetor N’ok swiftly queried.

“Anomaly appears to be headed for a planet in orbit around the red giant 5.3 light years down phase.”

“Which planet?” Var N’ok asked, wanting an exact location not merely a system.

“That’s difficult to calculate given our current position,” Tara replied as she quickly thought of a more acceptable answer, “Based on our astro-scans I’d say they were heading to the fourth or fifth planet in orbit. Target planet’s diameter appears to be approximately 12.39 krie.”

Var N’ok paused, taking in all the information he had been given. For the past month there had been strange phase signatures approaching the far sides of Trader Space just

close enough for the Vasari to detect the signatures but just far enough away to avoid PSI^[G].

“Open a channel to the *Toruvak*,” Var N’ok ordered as he briskly strode back to Praetor’s console on the bridge.

In mere seconds a channel was opened and Praetor Korsul’s face could be seen on screen.

“Greetings Praetor,” Ilaka Korsul promptly declared.

Var N’ok nodded before getting to the point, “We’ve detected more anomalies at long range,” the Praetor began, “and this time we’ve discerned their destination.”

Korsul nodded, “I’ll prepare for deep range recon.”

“Excellent,” Var N’ok replied, “report back as soon as you acquire a silhouette and then we’ll decide what to do next.”

“Of course sir,” Ilaka replied, “We can be there in less than two months.”

“No,” Var N’ok snapped back immediately, “I don’t want you to go directly to them, they may detect you and ...”

“Retreat?” Praetor Korsul asked.

“Or worse,” Var N’ok began, “they may bring in reinforcements.”

“You don’t think ...”

“I don’t know,” Var N’ok replied, the fear in his voice was noticeable, “and neither does fleet command.”

Korsul solemnly nodded, “We’ll get you that silhouette Praetor,” he paused, “and if need be, we’ll buy you as much time as we can.”

“I know you will Ilaka, Var N’ok out.”

• • •

22 Years Ago – July 7
Ginerva – Coalition Space
TDN Headquarters

Vice Admiral Eskelinen sat in his office on the dwarf planet of Ginerva reviewing intelligence reports on Vasari fleet movements. For the past six months the Vasari had been performing reconnaissance on numerous Trader worlds, all of which were deep

behind the front line. What was even more confusing to the Vice Admiral was the fact that the Vasari were moving their fleets away from the front line, making a large offensive push extremely unlikely.

Jussi Eskelinen let out a sigh as he rose from his desk and walked towards the window that looked out onto the desolate Eastern plain. A small and largely infertile world, Ginerva, despite being located in the core of Trader Space, wasn't colonized in the initial expansion due to its undesirable traits. It was these same undesirable traits that made Ginerva an ideal location for a secure military installation.

"Hard to believe we're only a few jumps away from Rhyzov," an unexpected guest to Vice Admiral Eskelinen's office noted.

Recognizing the voice, Eskelinen turned sharply and snapped off a salute, "Apologies Admiral Condoza," he sheepishly remarked.

"At ease," the Admiral replied as he stepped into the office, "I find I do my best thinking looking out at that emptiness," Condoza began, "because I don't want to see all of our worlds end up like this."

The two high ranking men shared a moment of silence thinking about the pristine worlds lost to the Vasari in the eight years of conflict before Eskelinen turned to Condoza, "I can't make any sense of their tactics," he bluntly admitted, "If I didn't know better I'd say they thought we were building something big all while trying to get out of the way when we unleash it."

"Well if it's up to those god damned Councillors we'll never see the IODS."

"They're still dragging their heels?"

Condoza let out a laugh, "They're too busy arguing about what's best for the public image to even contemplate such a project."

"If I may speak frankly."

"Please do."

"If we don't put the Vasari back on their heels there will be no need to worry about the public image. If they see that we don't have anything behind our front line fleet they'll punch through and push all the way to Rhyzov," Eskelinen continued, his pace increasing along with the level of passion in his voice, "and god damn it, if we could blast Arietis out from under their starships we'd have them running scared."

"I know," Condoza acknowledged as Eskelinen calmed himself with a deep breath, "but the fact that the Vasari are retreating from the front lines is headline news from here to Naeve. The Council is touting it as the beginning of a peaceful end to this war."

“A peaceful end?”

Condoza shot Eskelinen a quick glare. Speaking frankly had its limits as far as the Fleet Admiral was concerned.

Vice Admiral Eskelinen paused for a second before continuing, “If we could convince the Council that the Vasari are trying to instill a false sense of security in us before they launch a quick strike on one of our worlds.”

“We have no proof.”

“Not yet,” Jussi Eskelinen continued, “but the Vasari aren’t interested in our capital system, in fact, they’ve gone to great lengths to stay away from the Seginus system,” Eskelinen pulled up the map, “The Vasari have been pushing towards the Algol system with haste. Our last readings had them entering the Lotharos Ring.”

“Have they emerged anywhere yet?”

“No,” Eskelinen flatly replied, “but strange readings have been growing more and more prevalent in the Tir Hazards over the past year.”

Eskelinen quickly brought up the files on the siege of Arietis II, “We know they can emerge from phase space even when there is no apparent phase lane to emerge from,” the Vice Admiral paused to give the higher ranking Fleet Admiral time to correlate the information he had just been bombarded with, “What if the Vasari pulled their fleet back because they are going to bypass our front line and take the fight to the vulnerable link between Algol and Capella?” Eskelinen rhetorically asked before continuing, “Algol would be completely undefended and at the mercy of the Vasari while our fleets would be spread thin trying to defend on two fronts.”

Condoza stood in silence and awe, “I thought you couldn’t make any sense of their tactics?”

“I guess *I do my best thinking looking at that emptiness*,” Eskelinen said with a slight smirk before he got back to business, “Tell the Council we need IODS to press the attack on the current front and keep the Vasari from attacking our vulnerable sectors.”

“If I tell them everything you just told me I think they’ll have a hard time saying no.”

• • •

21 Years Ago – Jan. 4
Rhyzov – Coalition Space
Council Chambers of the Trader Emergency Coalition

Thomas Verlin arrived at the Council Chambers a mere five minutes before the start of session, a stark contrast to his usual 20 minute early arrival. For months Council had been deadlocked in discussions over the latest IODS proposal put forth by the TDN.

“You’re late,” Frederick Arn declared as Verlin took his seat beside the Councillor of Novalis.

Verlin looked at his watch, “It appears as though I’m early.”

Arn scoffed, “We need to stick together otherwise IODS will pass and both our worlds will fall.”

“What do you mean Freddie?”

“The Vasari are relentless, do you really think they’ll stop because we nuke a few planets? They’ll just be more inclined to stay on the move and attack behind our lines, which is exactly where our worlds are.”

Lucius rose to begin the session before Verlin could reply, “Good morning Councillors,” he began, “we are here today to continue our discussion on the latest IODS proposal,” Mannacher paused before turning to Patricia, “We will continue where we last left off, with Councillor Provian of Diomedes.”

“Thank you Lucius,” she stated as she rose to address the congregation, “As I was saying yesterday, despite my stance on the war in general I feel IODS is vital to our survival for numerous reasons. Perhaps the main reason is the need to keep the Vasari from opening a war on two fronts, which is exactly what some of the top military analysts believe is about to happen,” she paused for a brief moment but no one attempted to offer any counter point so she continued, “I make my suggestion not for the people of Diomedes who live in fear of the Vasari who linger a mere jump away, but for the people of the entire Order, in hopes that they may never live with the fear my people have come to know.”

Numerous pro IODS Councillors rose to applaud Patricia’s brief speech while those against the project sat silently as Lucius quelled the applause before continuing, “Thank you Patricia,” he began, “We have a special guest from the Navy coming in today but I’m told he’ll be a few minutes late so if there’s anyone else who would like to say a few words...”

“If I may,” Thomas Verlin declared as he stood up.

“What are you doing?” Arn sharply asked.

“What my people want,” Verlin replied, “unfortunately.”

• • •

21 Years Ago – Jan. 4
Rhyzov – Coalition Space
Hotel de Marco - Room 409

Thomas Verlin cinched his favourite red and black tie around his neck before putting on his suit jacket as his PVCD began to buzz.

“For god’s sake,” he muttered to himself as he strode across the hotel room, his handmade Liberian loafers silently impacting the pristine carpet with each step.

Verlin picked up the device and activated voice only mode, “Good morning gentlemen,” he politely began despite the fact that he risked being late for the Council session by answering this call.

“Good morning Councillor,” the man on the other end began, “We’re surprised you’re not on your way to the Council Chambers.”

“I was just getting ready to leave actually.”

“Well then,” a different man began, “We’ll try not to keep you too long.”

“That would be greatly appreciated gentlemen,” Verlin replied, “Is it just the two of you today?”

“Yes,” the first man quickly answered, “the others don’t want to talk to you.”

“Something about you driving them into ruin,” the second man continued the previous man’s remarks, “not helping us out too much either.”

“I already told you that IODS is a risk to Karlstad.”

“And we told you,” the first man snapped back, “this stalemate doesn’t make us money. An open conflict does.”

“And if that conflict is right on our doorstep then not only will we get the designs,” the second man began discussing the scary possibility of combat so close to Karlstad, “but also the builds.”

“Unless of course,” the first man started in a new direction, “you don’t want us to fund your next campaign.”

“I can find others who would be willing to support my re-election,” Verlin answered.

“What makes you think that you would be around for re-election?” the second man quipped.

Verlin paused to consider his options before he finally answered, “Watch the news tonight,” he began, “I understand and respect your eventual reaction,” Verlin declared, hanging up on the two men before either of them could respond.

• • •

21 Years Ago – Jan. 4
Karlstad – Coalition Space
Board of Directors Lounge

“What did he say?” one of the men asked as he lit a cigar.

“He said, ‘Watch the news.’”

“Why don’t you all shutup,” a woman snapped as she increased the volume of the newscast moments before it began.

“We begin as always with our top story tonight and for the past month,” the reporter began, “The Council finally reached a tentative agreement on the controversial Interstellar Ordinance Delivery System, better known as IODS. We go now to Katherine Hardwig on location.”

“Yes today in a shocking turn of events one of the strongest opponents to the IODS program had a change of heart. Thomas Verlin, Councillor of Karlstad, delivered what many are describing as a stirring speech before calling for a vote that just barely passed the required 60:40 split. Now let’s see what some of the Councillors had to say.”

The screen blinked to Patricia Provian, Councillor of Diomedes, “I was absolutely shocked by Tom’s change of heart. It really is what’s best for the safety of all our worlds, Karlstad especially.”

Frederick Arn, Councillor of Novalis appeared on screen next, “How do you think I feel?” he angrily asked, “Betrayed, deceived, most of all I feel disappointed. This is a sad day for the Coalition. To think that we would bomb our own planets and risk stirring them up and drawing them out to attack us.”

Finally Thomas Verlin appeared on screen, “I’d say the biggest turning point was when I took a step back and thought about what I would want as a citizen. I spoke with plenty of citizens and they all showed overwhelming support for the IODS program.”

One of the men turned off the newscast, “How’s your proposal look?”

“You think we would’ve forced his hand unless we were ready?” one of the men who spoke with Verlin earlier rhetorically asked.

“Our proposal is going through final review,” the second man who had been talking to Councillor Verlin added, “It’ll be sent to the Navy later in the week.”

“Excellent,” the cigar wielding man replied, “how many subcontracts are we looking at?”

“That’ll be up to the Navy to decide exactly but we’re suggesting twelve.”

“Well,” the man with the cigar began, “let’s see that proposal one more time,” he declared with a hearty chuckle, “and get me some more cigars, I have a feeling our second quarter is going to be a good one this year.”

CHAPTER 12

21 Years Ago –Jan. 12 Landau –Coalition Space Town Square

Amy looked at her mother as she sat in her wheelchair knitting another scarf, “I’m going to work,” she declared as she donned her balaclava, preparing to exit her apartment and step out onto the frozen streets of Landau.

“Again?” her mother asked, “You worked last weekend.”

“I know mom,” Amy replied, ashamed that she had to leave her mother alone.

“I can go to a home,” Gladys offered, “I was doing alright there before you brought me here to live with you,” the elderly woman continued, “and besides, you don’t have the money to support me.”

Amy couldn’t argue that. Ever since her mother had moved in she had been working 70 hours a week to make enough money to support her mother and the medication she so desperately needed.

“This’ll be the last weekend,” Amy promised as she removed her balaclava and sat on the chair beside her mother, “After today I’ll have enough money to support you.”

Gladys chuckled, “Amy, dear, a mother is supposed to support her daughter, not the other way around.”

“You took care of me for twenty years mom,” Amy responded as she rose from the chair and pulled her balaclava over her head once again, “I think it’s time I returned the favour,” she finished as she opened the door and exited the apartment.

Amy quickly made her way down the steps and onto the street before turning right to head downtown, where the anti IODS protests were being held and, more importantly, where Amy’s job had to be done. As she drugged on her short journey through the snow one of Arn’s anti IODS advertisements came onto a billboard.

“If you lose your home,” Arn began in the advertisement, “you have three options. You can rebuild and hope that it doesn’t happen again. You can move to a safer location, or, you can prevent whatever destroyed your home from destroying your next home.”

The advertisement displayed recently declassified images of Arietis, Galanthus and numerous other worlds destroyed by the Vasari.

“I’m Freddie Arn, Councillor of Novalis, and I’m here to ask you whether you really think those who destroyed our worlds without provocation would hesitate to continue if we employed IODS.”

The burning worlds reappeared before Arn resumed speaking, “I strongly suggest you all inform your local Councillor of your thoughts on IODS, after all, the Coalition is a democracy and democracies work best when they strive to implement what the people want.”

Arn’s advertisement promptly ended before a promotional video for the local sports team, the Landau Dunlins, began.

Amy took a deep breath as she waded into the crowd of protesters, “This is for mom,” she thought to herself, “they promised me it’d be worthwhile.”

• • •

21 Years Ago – Jan. 12
Landau – Coalition Space
TG-107 - *Cobra 3*

“Alright marines,” 2nd Lieutenant Kingston called out across the secure channel that linked all the marines of the 21st Poison Darts, “we’re going in to prevent any protesters from getting into the Lower House, understood?”

“Sir, yes sir,” the marines replied in unison.

“Excellent,” Kingston declared before continuing, “as such, we have no need to employ lethal force. These are our citizens, we just want to make sure they respect the buffer between the town square and the doors to the house.”

“One minute to Tango Delta,” one of the pilots yelled above the howling winds before the gunship doors shot open, grinding on their frozen rails the entire way.

“This is tropical compared to the bitter cold up there,” Seppälä declared, pointing up into space, “You must be getting soft in your old age Lieutenant.”

“Do you know why I always get you to lead our HALO^[G] jumps?” Kingston responded.

“Because I’m tough as nails, sir!” Seppälä replied.

“No,” the Lieutenant flatly answered, “because I’m always debating whether or not to shoot your parachute when it opens,” Kingston declared before getting serious about the mission, “Alright marines, standard formation on landing, secure the perimeter and keep the protesters off the lawn. Weapons cold until I say otherwise, I repeat, all shots must receive my go BEFORE they are taken. Understood?”

“Sir, yes sir!”

Lieutenant Kingston walked to the open door of the gunship and looked down, attempting to see the target through the snow and ice that was blowing through the city, “Jump!”

• • •

21 Years Ago – Jan. 12
Landau – Coalition Space
Town Square

“Look,” one of the protesters declared, pointing to the sky.

Amy squinted, attempting to see whatever it was that was falling from the sky.

“What the hell is that?” one protester queried.

“Shit, it’s a Vasari probe or something,” a man bellowed with fear moments before a dozen parachutes opened.

“Calm down jackass, it’s just a few marines,” the man *in charge* of the protest declared to a chorus of laughter.

“They think a few marines can scare us into backing down and letting the military continue its frivolous spending when they should be defending us?” a woman yelled as the first marine landed on the frozen lawn between the town square and the Lower House of Representatives of Landau.

“Well we aren’t going anywhere,” another man roared before the mob gave a hearty shout of approval.

“Not until IODS is rejected and we get more ships to truly defend our worlds,” another man shouted before receiving the same shout of approval from the mob.

The final marine landed on the lawn as Amy forced her way up to a few rows from the line that was separating the fence of the Lower House from the town square. Amy turned and took a few more steps back, letting people drift into the gap between her and the fence, before she drew a pistol from her jacket and fired at the woman who was the most vocal earlier.

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21 Years Ago – Jan. 12
Landau – Coalition Space
Town Square

The distinct pop of a gunshot rang out for miles mere milliseconds before all of the protesters ducked.

“Shot fired,” Petty Officer Ashley declared as the marines turned towards the square, rifles leveled, searching for the shooter.

“She’s hit,” one of the protesters in the centre of the mob declared.

“Those damn marines,” another man yelled, the anger in his voice was noticeable.

“I swear to god,” Kingston began, “if any of you fired that shot I’ll personally rip your tongue out of your mouth and stick it to that metal fence before the rest of us try shoot it off!”

“Sir,” Petty Officer Hanson began, “wounded civi, protocol dictates...”

“Do you think they give a damn about protocol?!” Kingston angrily continued as he drifted further from the man who had cracked a joke at Seppälä’s expense mere minutes ago, “One of those protesters just shot someone who was supposedly on their side.”

“Sir,” SpaceFarer Tristan Stenson began, “if we don’t go in there to assist we’ll be in just as much shit as if we fired that shot.”

The Lieutenant let out a sigh, “Leave your rifles,” Kingston ordered of Hanson and Stenson, “Ashley, get up and make sure you have a good view. If any of those civis make a move on my marines you let me know.”

“Yes sir,” Dwight Ashley replied before turning and running up the hill towards the Lower House.

• • •

21 Years Ago – Jan. 12
Landau – Coalition Space
Town Square

“Oh, coming in to join us?” one of the protesters mockingly asked the two marines who had just climbed over the fence.

“I hope your friends don’t shoot you like they shot us!” another man shouted as the two marines swiftly made their way towards the wounded woman.

When the two marines arrived by her side the leading marine created a three metre buffer zone while the second knelt to speak with the woman.

“Where’d you get hit ma’am?” he asked rather softly for a marine surrounded by people who likely wanted to assault him, or worse.

The woman pointed to her abdomen, where blood was slowly seeping out, “It’s hard to,” the woman fumbled for the words, “to see on this black jacket,” she said before forcing a laugh.

The marine laughed in kind as the soldier clearing the protesters whispered something to his comrade.

“Just do what you can,” the marine tending to the woman sternly replied before turning back the woman, “What’s your name ma’am?”

“Rebecca,” she answered.

“Do you have any family here on Landau, Rebecca?” the marine asked as he surveyed her wound.

“No,” she replied after forcing another laugh, “I think all the men here know I’m too rash and brazen.”

The marine let out a sincere chuckle, “my friend,” he jolted his head towards the other marine, “is pretty brazen himself. Perhaps you two could go out for a meal when this is all over.”

“Let’s be honest,” Rebecca began as the marine snapped his head up before pushing Rebecca to the ground, as if to shield her, and turning to his right.

“Gunman sighted,” Ashley called out across the SSRL, “South East.”

“I see him,” Stenson answered, “Hanson, you stay with her, I’m going for the gunman.”

“Stenson!” Lieutenant Kingston roared across the link, “You get your scrawny white ass back to Hanson or so help me god...”

“What’s going on?” Rebecca asked the marine who had been tending to her as the other marine walked away.

Davis turned back to Rebecca, “I told you my friend was brazen,” he declared as Stenson began shoving people aside in an attempt to get to the gunman.

Tristan pushed the last few people aside just in time to see the gunman draw his weapon and fire into his chest twice.”

“Shots fired,” Ashley declared once again as he tightened his grip on his rifle, preparing to take a shot if ordered.

“Hold fire,” Kingston commanded as Tristan lunged at the gunman, knocking him to the ground and forcing the pistol from his hand.

The nearby protesters quickly jumped in and began pummeling Tristan before the entire mob moved towards him.

“*Cobra 3* this is *Iron Frog*, requesting close air support,” Kingston ordered the gunship.

“Solid copy *Iron Frog*,” one of the pilots of the gunship replied.

“Hanson,” Kingston began, “get that civi back here ASAP.”

“Yes sir,” Hanson replied before turning and scooping up the civilian.

“What about Stensy?” Ashley asked as the entire mob swarmed around him.

Lieutenant Kingston looked up at the gunship and then down at the mob, “*Cobra 3*,” he began, “fire off a few warning shots.”

“Aye sir,” a pilot replied before the gunship turned to present its right side.

“Firing,” one of the gunners called out as 20 mm autocannon rounds dug into the icy ground around the mob.

“This gathering is in direct violation of the Trader Emergency Coalition Constitution, Article 11, Subsection C, which states: *citizens may engage in demonstrations for political, religious, or other purposes provided these demonstrations remain non-violent. Any violence on the part of any member of such a protest shall be responded to by local authorities or the military as an act of terrorism,*” one of the pilot’s recited the lines from the constitution, “Anyone who does not leave this area immediately will be fired upon.”

Some of the protesters quickly ran from the town square while others hurled chunks of ice towards the gunship as the pilot raised altitude to reposition for a strafing run.

“Safeties off gentlemen,” Kingston ordered as Hanson placed Rebecca in front of the door to the Lower House.

The marines clicked off their safeties and raised their rifles in unison as *Cobra 3* strafed the mob, knocking dozens of protesters to the ground in a pool of rapidly freezing blood.

“Dear God,” Lieutenant Kingston thought to himself, “I’m just a simple man following orders.”

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21 Years Ago – Jan. 12
Landau – Coalition Space
Town Square

Amy was on the icy ground with the marine she had shot twice on top of her, fighting furiously to get the upper hand as he clearly was simply trying to stay alive and not inflict any harm.

“He hasn’t gotten his *true* orders yet,” she thought to herself as the gunship flew past on its second pass, mowing down another two dozen protesters who were running away from the town square.

Amy wrestled her right hand free and unleashed a solid right hook across the marine’s jaw before he grabbed her wrist with his right hand while using his left hand to push on her elbow, breaking her arm.

Amy cried in agony as the marine shouted something into his link before saying, “Confirm Whiskey Foxtrot?”

Amy rolled from her chest onto her back just in time to see the marine draw a knife and fend off another protester before the gunship came around for a third pass.

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21 Years Ago – Aug. 21
Ginerva – Coalition Space
TDN Headquarters

The various shuttles ferrying the Councillors to Ginerva touched down one after the other as Fleet Admiral Henry Condoza drew in a deep breath.

“For what it’s worth sir,” Vice Admiral Jussi Eskelinen began, “I’m sure this meeting can’t go any worse than last month’s.”

“20 credits?” Condoza asked.

“50,” Eskelinen replied, “my wife’s birthday is next month and I want to buy her something nice.”

Condoza offered his hand before the two men shook, sealing the deal as Lucius Mannacher disembarked one of the shuttles.

In a matter of minutes the Councillors and high ranking military personnel were in the main conference room, ready to discuss the proposals that had been shortlisted by the military.

Condoza called the crowd to attention before jumping right into the meeting, wasting no time on opening remarks and pleasantries.

“Since our last meeting,” Condoza began, “we have narrowed down the list of proposals to two. The Diomedes Dynamics proposal and the Gauss Weapons Group proposal,” the Admiral paused momentarily, expecting an outburst from the Councillors despite the fact that the two aforementioned proposals were the only realistic choices, “I’m going to turn the floor over to Vice Admiral Eskelinen who will briefly discuss the key points of each proposal before we offer our suggestion.”

With minimal fanfare Condoza took his seat as Eskelinen rose and cleared his throat, “Thank you Fleet Admiral Condoza,” he graciously declared before he brought up some information on the Diomedes Dynamics proposal, “First we’ll talk about the Diomedes Dynamics proposal,” Eskelinen began, “a few things that we like about this proposal is the reputation of Diomedes Dynamics but also the minimal number of subcontracts. We’ve had great difficulty in the past dealing with subcontractors on some of our larger projects.”

“Could you provide us with some examples of past subcontracting issues?” Christopher Vanifax asked, “It’s my understanding that subcontracts help to spread the wealth out to more worlds.”

“They certainly do but it requires coordination from more companies,” Eskelinen began before launching into his example, “The KOL Battleship is probably the best example. Karlstad Offensive had a lot of subcontractors to manage and some of them simply couldn’t meet their schedule. Granted, a lot of what went into the KOL was prototype equipment and delays are inevitable with such cutting edge technology.” Eskelinen offered both ends of the spectrum, not wanting to offend any of the Councillors, “Anyways,” Eskelinen signalled his desire to get back on topic, “The downside of the Diomedes Dynamics proposal is that it doesn’t include relocation of the necessary personnel off of Diomedes to a safer world,” Eskelinen paused, letting the Councillors contemplate the ramifications of such an oversight, particularly for a world that was on the edge of an ever shrinking frontline, “and based on the estimated cost of the proposal we would end up vastly over budget if we paid to get everyone to a safer location.”

“How much over budget?” Councillor Provian asked, hoping to get work for her local company and perhaps even help a few people get off the planet before the Vasari attempted to claim Diomedes for themselves.

“We estimate an extra 37% on top of the proposal’s price,” Eskelinen regrettably replied before the Councillors broke out into small conversations amongst themselves.

“What about the Gauss Weapons Group proposal?” Mannacher asked, quickly bringing everyone to silence.

“An excellent question,” Eskelinen answered before quickly bringing up a new slide with brief details on the GWG proposal, “Since we were just talking about location it’s worth mentioning that Gauss Weapons Group is located on Karlstad. Also worth noting is that the proposal cost is under budget which leaves us a bit of wiggle room, especially if any of the twelve subcontracts suggested fall behind schedule.”

“Twelve?!” one of the Councillors shouted in disbelief, “Didn’t the Diomedes proposal only have six?”

“That is correct, however,” Eskelinen began defending the Gauss Weapons Group proposal, something he had not even considered doing for the Diomedes Dynamics proposal, “their proposal agrees to liquidated damages and they would make all of their subcontractors agree to liquidated damages as well.”

“What sort of compensation is on the table?” Freddie Arn asked, intrigued that they would be under budget and willing to provide compensation if they fell behind schedule.

“The exact specifics of the compensation obviously aren’t determined yet but the proposal mentions compensation could range from the cost of a frigate to the cost of a capital ship depending on the severity and duration of the delay.”

Arn uneasily shuffled in his seat, trying to understand the logic behind the proposal as Vice Admiral Eskelinen ended his presentation.

“Based on the information in the proposals, the Military of the Trader Emergency Coalition recommends the Gauss Weapons Group proposal with final negotiations to begin immediately.”

Christopher Vanifax quickly gazed around the room at all the other Councillors, “could we have some time to discuss it amongst ourselves?” he politely asked.

Fleet Admiral Condoza rose, “Of course,” he promptly replied before signalling for all the military personnel to exit the room.

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21 Years Ago – Aug. 21
Ginerva – Coalition Space
TDN Headquarters

For the past two hours the Councillors had been secluded in the main conference room on Ginerva discussing the IODS proposals and the military’s desire to choose the Gauss Weapons Group proposal.

“Two hours and counting Juice,” Condoza commented to Vice Admiral Jussi Eskelinen as he prepared to collect his twenty credits.

“Calm yourself Doze,” Eskelinen replied, uncharacteristically using the Fleet Admiral’s nickname while on duty, “You saw how great my presentation was, there’s no way they couldn’t agree.”

The two men shared a laugh as the calm inside the conference room shattered into the ordered chaos of a vote. With haste the Admirals made themselves presentable by flattening the wrinkles that had grown in their shirts.

Minutes later the room calmed before the door opened revealing Lucius Mannacher. The other Councillors were packing their things, preparing to depart, as Mannacher spoke, “The Council agrees to the Gauss Weapons Group proposal.”

Eskelinen shot a quick smirk at Condoza before the Fleet Admiral replied, “Excellent news Councillor Mannacher. I’ll be sure to inform our friends at GWG of their successful bid.”

Mannacher nodded and returned to gather his papers as Eskelinen held out his hand.

Condoza slapped 50 credits into Eskelinen’s palm, “I should have you discharged for gambling,” Condoza exclaimed sincerely before letting out a hearty laugh.

“I’m still trying to earn back all the credits I lost on the Javelis project,” Eskelinen answered back through a grin.

CHAPTER 13

20 Years Ago – Jan. 21
Themis – Coalition Space
Sova Class Carrier - *Mobius*

“Captain Somers,” a familiar voice called out, “this is Captain Little of the Akkan Class Battlecruiser *Bravick*, requesting permission to join your fleet.”

“Permission granted,” Captain Somers replied as a smirk slid onto his face, the two men hadn’t been in the same gravity well since the Battle of Diomedes.

“When I was told you had a high priority mission I signed up to assist right away,” Captain Little began.

“Why is that?” Somers asked, intrigued.

“I knew you’d need a *real* Captain to keep you alive,” Captain Little bellowed before bursting into laughter.

Somers let out a forced laugh before turning to Lieutenant Commander Poole and rolling his eyes, “When you hear what our mission is I don’t imagine you’ll be too concerned about my wellbeing.”

“Oh?”

“Lieutenant Commander Poole,” Somers signalled his fellow officer, “brief Captain Little.”

“Of course sir,” she swiftly replied, “Captain Little, Operation Iron Shield will see our fleet patrol the IODS construction site on Lycomedes and the adjacent gravity well of Karlstad in an effort to enforce a blockade and prevent spying and sabotage. To that end we have been authorized to use Alpha Delta Foxtrot^[G] engagement orders,” she paused, awaiting any questions that may arise.

“I know it’s a bullshit assignment,” Somers quickly declared, not wanting Captain Little to think it was his idea.

Captain Little scoffed at Captain Somers’ comment, “What would you prefer? To see our investment destroyed by some of those terrorists from Landau?”

“Some of those *terrorists* on Landau,” Captain Somers began, the agitation in his voice was obvious, “were once my neighbours, colleagues and friends.”

“With all due respect Captain,” Brad Little began, “I’m glad the company you keep has improved.”

“Well Captain Little,” Somers began as his frustration continued to mount, “*with all due respect*, I’d prefer if you kept your personal opinions of my homeworld and its residents to yourself for the duration of this assignment.”

“There are opinions and then there are facts.”

“Excuse me, Captain,” Lieutenant Commander Poole interrupted, attempting to diffuse the situation, “you had a meeting schedule with the fighter wing that’s set to begin in five minutes.”

Captain Somers shook his head and walked to the doorway leading off the bridge before thanking Kendra.

“Unfortunately,” she began to Captain Little, “you’ll have to continue your, *discussion*, with Captain Somers at a later time,” she concluded before severing the connection.

Kendra quickly went back to her duties, trying to forget the unprofessional display put forth by Captain Somers, despite her tendency to agree that a few billion credits worth of ships would be more beneficial than a multi-billion credit cannon.

• • •

20 Years Ago – April 2
Naeve – Coalition Space
Josh and Alice Forli’s Home

Josh Forli stood outside in the unseasonably warm sunlight digging flower beds for the Zinnias that Alice wanted to plant.

“Dad,” Josh Forli Jr. signalled his desire to ask his father a question, “why do we do all the work for mom’s flowers?”

The senior Forli chuckled before beginning his reply, “Because we’re men and it’s our job to do as we’re told, that includes digging flower beds,” he concluded before taking a seat on the stairs that led up to the front door, “Could you ask your mother what the lemonade status is?”

“OK,” Jr. enthusiastically replied as he bolted up the stairs.

Halfway up the stairs Jr. slipped and fell, “Whoa,” Josh announced his surprise, “slow down on those stairs.”

“What are you talking about?” Jr. angrily asked, “Didn’t you feel that?”

Josh shook his head.

“There was an earthquake!”

Josh let out a laugh, “We’re not in an earthquake zone.”

“I’m telling you dad...” Jr. began as Alice opened the door, the family’s black PVCD stood out against the backdrop of her bright yellow cardigan.

“Josh,” she called out, “It’s for you.”

Josh made his way up the stairs and took the PVCD from Alice before toggling the device’s *HOLD* function. An instant later Vice Admiral Lisa Smithson appeared on screen.

“Vice Admiral Smithson,” Josh acknowledged with surprise, “My apologies,” he began stumbling for words, “I, I wasn’t expecting you.”

“I need you to get to the Porhitan Naval Yard immediately, and send your family to the nearest spaceport,” she rapidly declared, not mincing words or exchanging pleasantries.

“Ma’am, if I may...”

“You’ll be briefed upon your arrival,” Vice Admiral Smithson cut him off, “Oh, and I should mention, you’ve been recommissioned. Welcome back to the Navy Captain Forli,” Smithson declared before the communication ended.

Josh set the PVCD on the counter just inside the door before calling out, “Alice! I have to go to the naval yard,” he began, his voice quivering ever so slightly, “You and Jr. need to get to the spaceport,” Josh turned and stepped outside, “I love you,” he declared before closing the door and running down the stairs, taking two strides on the ground before feeling the earth shake under his feet.

• • •

20 Years Ago – April 2
Naeve – Coalition Space
Rapture Class Battlecruiser - *Sinistra*

Coalescent Solabri blocked out the cries of the heathens on the surface of the lush terran world currently being bombed by the Unity’s forces as another kinetic bolt leapt forth from the magnificent Rapture.

“Do not repent,” Ilus the Wise began to broadcast^[G] her message to all of the Unity’s servants participating in the battle.

“The heretics showed us no mercy,” Ilus the Vengeful continued from the bridge of the Radiance *Furia*, “they deserve the same.”

A swarm of drones launched from the *Sinistra* before taking up defensive positions around the bombardment fleet as a half dozen Purge Vessels entered the system and quickly darted towards the planet.

“Infidels taking off from the far side of the planet,” Ilus the Sacred declared, sensing the fast approaching enemy minds.

“All anima,” Ilus the Wise began, “smite these defilers!”

The telekinetic adepts controlling the drone anima forced the strikecraft into action, guiding them towards the Trader formation. The drones entered weapons range and a brilliant display of beams and lasers illuminated the gravity well as shields flared and hulls ruptured.

• • •

20 Years Ago – April 2
Naeve – Coalition Space
Cielo Class Command Cruiser

Captain Josh Forli quickly acclimatized himself to the bridge of the Cielo that was now under his command as a swarm of enemy fighters and bombers devastated a dozen Cobalts on their first strafing run.

“All ships,” the veteran Captain began, “this is Captain Josh Forli, engage the escorts and buy some time for the civis to escape.”

Acknowledgements quickly flooded the comm channel as the few TDN ships formed up to engage the nearest unidentified frigate.

The Cobalts and Kodiaks led the way, approaching the enemies with haste. As they drew closer the enemy ships fired intense blue beams which whisked away the shields of one of the Cobalts before melting into the hull.

“This is Charlie 7,” one of the Cobalt Captains called out, fear and panic were evident in his tone, “All ships break and evade, try to spread their firepower.”

• • •

20 Years Ago – April 2
Naeve – Coalition Space
Radiance Class Battleship - *Furia*

The heathen ships attempted to take evasive maneuvers as Ilus the Vengeful ordered the *Sinistra* to accompany the *Furia* after the escaping heretic shuttles. The *Furia* brought its forward beams to bear on one of the bulky cruisers as some of the frigates entered the field of fire of the port and starboard beams of the Illuminators.

Ilus the Vengeful could sense the surprise of those who called themselves Traders as the beams shot out both sides of the small frigate.

“They are no match for us,” she broadcast to her fleet as the *Sinistra* took up a position on the portside of the *Furia*.

“What does the Unity will?” Coalescent Solabri asked as the mighty Rapture Battlecruiser fired its beams at a trader missile frigate.

“Defilers are retreating,” Ilus the Vengeful replied, “we must strike them down, before they can escape.”

• • •

20 Years Ago – April 2

Naeve – Coalition Space

Corpus Spaceport

Alice led her son into the spaceport as another earthquake rocked the building, forcing everyone to struggle to maintain balance.

“What’s going on mom?” Josh Forli Jr. asked.

“I don’t know,” she honestly replied, “but we need to get out of here,” she continued as they approached a guard who was directing people to various Protevs.

“Name?” he asked Alice as she approached.

“Alice Forli,” she answered, “and Josh Maxwell Forli.”

The man swiftly searched for their names before signalling for another man, “You’re on *Shuttle 12* ma’am,” he declared as the man put his hand on Josh’s shoulder, “you’re on *Shuttle 9*.”

“What?!” Alice yelled, “Please, let him come with me,” she continued to yell as tears began to form in her hazel eyes.

“I’m sorry ma’am,” he unapologetically replied before turning to the next person.

“Then I’m going with him,” Alice declared as she pushed the man aside and strode off towards her son.

Moments later two guards grabbed a hold of her and began to drag her back towards *Shuttle 12*. Alice cried out as she attempted to break free but it was no use. The two men carried her all the way to the shuttle and made sure she wouldn’t get off before they left and the shuttle took off.

Meanwhile Josh Jr. was getting strapped into his seat aboard *Shuttle 9*, which was filled with children. A security officer made a quick trip around to ensure all the children were secure before closing the hatch and disembarking the shuttle.

Moments later *Shuttle 9* took off, quickly forming up with the other 23 shuttles that made up the first wave of refugee shuttles.

• • •

20 Years Ago – April 2
Naeve – Coalition Space
Cielo Class Command Cruiser

“This is *Shuttle 1* to defending ships,” the lead Protev Captain called out, “keep the invaders off us as long as you can, this run is the women and children.”

“Solid copy *Shuttle 1*,” Forli acknowledged, “All ships assume defensive positions around the shuttles, nothing gets through.”

The Trader ships quickly turned and fired their engines, moving to defend the vulnerable Protevs as the hostile ships formed up, likely preparing to engage the retreating ships. Moments later the hostiles began to approach, led by a swarm of hundreds of strikecraft.

The Gardas moved to engage the incoming strikecraft but there were too many and countless got through to engage the Protevs.

“This is *Shuttle 18*, our phase drive has been hit. We are no longer safe to jump.”

“It’s no more dangerous than not jumping,” another shuttle Captain called out as *Shuttle 18* was hit by another wave of strikecraft.

Captain Forli could only watch as the strikecraft pounded away at the helpless frigate, eventually ripping through to the hull and depressurizing the ship, throwing countless bodies out into the void of space.

“Dear god,” one of the women aboard the bridge remarked.

Forli looked closer and saw the bodies of hundreds of children floating through space as the strikecraft moved towards their next target and the hostile fleet continued their approach.

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20 Years Ago – April 2
Naeve – Coalition Space
Rapture Class Battlecruiser - *Sinistra*

The *Sinistra* soared into firing range of Trader fleet and fired, sending beams and plasma raining down upon the escort ships as the *Furia* continued on towards the retreating frigates. As the gargantuan Radiance began to fire on the retreating shuttles all of the Trader ships turned to fire on the *Furia*.

“Scryers,” Coalescent Solabri called the attention of the strongest psi adepts aboard the *Sinistra*, “defend the *Furia*.”

The scryers began to focus their thoughts on redirecting the weapons fire from the *Furia* back to those who sought to destroy it, telekinetically altering the trajectory of missiles and autocannons. A barrage of missiles approached the *Furia* as the scryers began to focus intently, sending three of the missiles hurtling back towards the ship which had fired them. Another scryer guided a burst of autocannon rounds away from the *Furia* and into one of the retreating shuttles, severely damaging the fragile vessel.

Seeing that their weapons were doing more damage to themselves than their enemy, the Traders turned to retreat alongside their shuttles as the *Furia* began to charge her beams for a devastating strike.

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20 Years Ago – April 2
Naeve – Coalition Space
Protev Colony Frigate – *Shuttle 9*

Josh Maxwell Forli sat in his seat, gazing out the starboard viewport at the alien ships firing their blue lasers as the Trader defense ships began to turn.

“I hope dad’s okay,” he thought to himself as a Javelis exploded after having its missile pods destroyed by a wave of strikecraft.

Josh continued to watch the battle unfold as a shuttle came into view from the rear of the viewport, the number 12 barely visible on the port side of the hull.

“*Shuttle 1*, standby for phase jump,” a voice boomed over the comm channel, “Jump.”

After hearing of the departure of the lead shuttle, the children aboard *Shuttle 9* perked up, hoping that their shuttle would be entering phase space soon.

“*Shuttle 3*,” another voice began, “Jump.” Josh began to get anxious as he felt the shuttle slow and turn, preparing to jump.

As the shuttle drifted on its turn Josh caught a slowly building blue light in front of the lead enemy ship. Josh never thought anything of it as he braced for the transition to phase space when suddenly an intense white light shot out past the starboard viewport.

“*Shuttle 8*, taking...” static erupted as the now blue beam relentlessly slashed through space at the Protevs.

Josh continued to stare out the viewport as the shuttle he had previously seen came into view, frantically trying to avoid the immense beam that was right in front of it. The shuttle collided with the beam and its shields quickly gave way as the hull was peeled back by the intense heat.

“Standby for phase jump,” the pilot of *Shuttle 9* declared to the children on board and the other Trader ships nearby.

As the ship began to tear into phase space Josh watched as the hole in the other shuttle grew and more and more passengers were thrown from their seats. The hulk of the ship spun around, revealing the number 12 as Josh’s eyes were drawn to a bright yellow object being pulled from the ship’s cargo hold into space.

An instant later *Shuttle 9* was enveloped in the safety provided by phase space, prompting some of the younger children to vomit as they weren’t accustomed to interplanetary travel. Josh didn’t vomit however, he simply began to cry as the yellow object registered in his mind.

CHAPTER 14

20 Years Ago – Nov. 23

Tirol Beta – Coalition Space

Antorak Class Marauder - *Toruvak*

Ilaka Korsul paced about the bridge of the *Toruvak* as the large capital ship continued to lurk close to the comet in an attempt to avoid detection from any bypassing ships.

Unfortunately Korsul and his crew had yet to identify anything unknown despite the strange readings previously being detected in the Algol system.

“Praetor”, the phase signature officer aboard the bridge called out, “unidentified phase signature approaching.”

“Mass?” Korsul asked, hoping that the approaching ship wasn’t large enough to cause too much trouble if they were detected.

“Readings suggest a combat frigate or scout,” the officer replied, “They should be in system now.”

“Move the ship out of the comet tail so we can get a clear view on the target,” Praetor Korsul ordered before the ship lurched to life and entered scanning range of the small blue ship.

“Preliminary scans indicate two fore weapon emitters and modest shielding on the craft sir.”

Just then more ships entered the system, all of them unknown to Ilaka Korsul and the Vasari records.

More ships incoming Praetor,” the phase signature officer called out as the crew began to unsettle, “They’re turning towards us sir.”

“Unidentified strikecraft inbound.”

“Power up the stabilizer,” Korsul ordered, “plot a jump to our front line on Condruces, but make sure you have information on all those ships to analyze.”

“Yes Praetor, should only take a minute.”

“A minute?!” Korsul bellowed, contemplating what to do with an enemy fleet rapidly approaching, “Power up the phase engine and prepare to phase the ship out,” Korsul ordered.

“Praetor?” the helmsman asked with a sense of confusion.

“Power up the phase drive,” Korsul began once again, attempting to clarify his plan, “but before we jump phase the ship out so as to make it look like we jumped. Then we’ll wait in phase space and scan them while they continue on their way.”

“Aye sir,” the helmsman replied as the characteristic orange disk began to grow in front of the Marauder. “Jump drive online,” the helmsman declared with a touch of fear.

“Phase out!” Korsul bellowed before the ship disappeared into phase space.

• • •

20 Years Ago – Nov. 23

Tirol Beta – Coalition Space

Halcyon Class Carrier - *Polaria*

“Ilus,” Priestess Cerebri called out to the sister leading the search effort, “we have encountered an unknown alien ship, we’re launching anima to intercept.”

“Of course,” Ilus the Vengeful replied, “we’re sending a fleet of Disciples to reinforce you.”

“Priestess,” an acolyte on the bridge demanded Cerebri’s attention, “Their minds are rife with fear.”

“As they should be,” the Priestess replied, “for we will burn all who walk the blessed path between us and our rightful homeworld,” she decreed as a brilliant orange disk appeared before the alien ship.

“The alien ship appears to be preparing to jump,” another acolyte called out as the disk continued to grow.

“What lane are they taking?” the Priestess asked, “I didn’t think we detected any on that side of the well.”

“We didn’t,” the acolyte replied, “but they think one exists.”

Priestess Cerebri watched as the orange disk continued to grow before finally the ship disappeared on an unknown phase lane, “Continue exploration mission,” the Priestess ordered, “and be on the lookout for any other alien ships.”

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20 Years Ago – Nov. 24

Tirol Beta – Coalition Space

Antorak Class Marauder - *Toruvak*

For what felt like hours but was only a matter of a few minutes, the entire crew of the *Toruvak* had sat idly in phase space, no one daring to do anything more than breathe. When the last unidentified ship phased out of the system the entire crew breathed a collective sigh of relief prompting.

“Did we manage to scan all the ships?” Praetor Korsul asked.

“Yes Praetor,” a subordinate aboard the bridge confirmed, “But it will take us some time to analyze.”

“Open a channel to Var N’ok,” Korsul demanded, “the fleet will be able to analyze this faster than us.”

Within a matter of seconds Var N’ok’s image adorned Ilaka Korsul’s screen.

“Korsul,” Var N’ok quizzically began, “Has there been a problem?”

“No Praetor,” Korsul replied, “We have acquired data on a number of unknown ships, however, we were spotted in the process.”

“No matter,” Praetor N’ok shockingly reassured Korsul, “Send us the data and we will analyze while you head to the following coordinates.”

Korsul eagerly awaited the new coordinates and quickly verified the location upon reception.

“What are we looking for Praetor?” Korsul asked, hoping to identify the goal of his new reconnaissance mission.

“If our suspicions are correct,” Var N’ok began, “You’ll know it when you see it.”

Ilaka Korsul held back a gulp of terror, “Of course sir,” he replied before Var N’ok faded from the screen.

• • •

20 Years Ago – Dec. 18

Obrant – Coalition Space

Refugee Encampment

In the eight months since the return of the exiled tribe known as the Advent the refugees from Naeve had slowly dispersed amongst the numerous colonies in the Capella sector as the citizens of Novalis and Varuna migrated away from the Algol system. The Advent, after their swift strike against Naeve, had paused their advance as they scouted the Tir Hazards and Lotharos Ring. However, the fear of Varuna and Novalis being cut off grew

with each passing day as more and more Advent patrols made the trip from Naeve to Tirion and back again.

But such fears were not for Josh Forli to face. Despite being recommissioned during the attack on Naeve the Councillors of the Coalition swiftly chastised the military for their heavy handed recommissioning, which was described by some as a blatant violation of military procedure. As a result all recommissioned personnel were decommissioned shortly thereafter, though rumours had been spreading that laws were being pushed through in order to allow even more widespread recommissioning.

“Dad,” Josh Forli Jr. called out to his father who quickly turned to face his son, “why did we have to move here?”

“I’m sorry Jr. but we didn’t have much of a choice.”

“This planet sucks,” Jr. grumbled, “I can’t go outside and play football because there’s so much falling ash and I can’t stay indoors because our *house* is the size of a closet.”

“It’ll all get sorted soon Jr., I promise.”

“How will it get sorted?!” Jr. shouted his question, “Those blue people destroy our home Dad! They killed Mom! They’re not going away unless we fight them!”

“Jr.” the Sr. Forli declared with a tone implying that Jr. had best calm down.

“You know it’s true,” Jr. snapped back, “and when I’m old enough I’m joining.”

The Sr. Forli turned and looked at his son with a look that only someone who has seen friends vented into space can hold.

“One of us needs to fight for Mom,” Jr. continued, his voice much softer after his father’s stare down, “and it’s obvious that you’re not going to,” Jr. declared as he turned and walked to the other end of the Forli’s *closet*.

The Sr. Forli turned back to the table he was sitting at in order to keep himself from replying to his son. “How can he not see that I can’t go back to the military because there’s no one left to take care of him?” he asked himself. “How can he not see that we have lost so much in our ten years of war that to continue is simply asking for our own demise?”

Josh shook his head and grabbed his PVCD to download the Obrant Daily and recognized the date. “December 18th”, he muttered to himself. “Maybe that’s why Jr.’s in such a foul mood today”, he thought to himself. It’s Alice’s birthday.

• • •

20 Years Ago – Dec. 31

Rhyzov - Coalition Space

Council Chambers of the Trader Emergency Coalition

Henry Condoza strolled into the Council Chambers, preparing to request something of the Coalition which he knew would be divisive to say the least. Since the return of the expelled peoples, who now called themselves the Advent, the military ranks had been stretched to the limit in an attempt to prevent the loss of anymore worlds, the most at risk being Novalis.

“As expected,” Lucius Mannacher declared to the congregation of Councillors, “our military guest is exactly on schedule,” he finished to a chorus of laughter.

Admiral Condoza smiled, knowing how much the Councillors loved to make jokes at the expense of the military despite the fact that it was his men and women who were fighting and dying to save the Trader way of life.

“I’ll turn things over to Fleet Admiral Condoza now,” Lucius stated as he stepped back from the podium and motioned for the Admiral to take his place.

Henry Condoza briskly strode to the podium, the image of rugged calmness was but a charade as butterflies fluttered throughout his stomach, threatening to escape.

“Thank you Mr. Mannacher,” Condoza acknowledged the head of the Coalition, “As you all know, for the past eight months we have been fighting a two front war, something we simply do not have the numbers for,” Condoza paused and scanned the room, searching for early warning signs of displeasure from the crowd, “As a result, we were forced to evacuate the research colony of Condruces and many refugees have fled the remaining planets in the Algol system, however,” the Admiral paused, before continuing to the more difficult parts of his proposal, “There is still a significant civilian presence in the Algol system that we cannot realistically protect.”

The Councillors burst into loud arguments at the Admiral’s last statement, “What do we pay the military for if they can’t even protect us?!” one Councillor bellowed in rage.

“Maybe they can’t afford to protect my planet because you bastards wasted all their money on that god forsaken cannon!” Freddie Arn of Novalis hastily replied.

“Freddie,” Verlin whispered to his friend in an attempt to get his attention and calm him before he started a riot.

Arn turned to Thomas Verlin, “You,” he declared just loud enough so that Verlin could hear him above the ruckus, “You have no leg to stand on after your IODS flip flop.”

“Freddie we both know how politics work,” Thomas pleaded to his long-time friend.

Arn turned back towards Verlin, “The way politics works for me is that you look out for your people,” he declared, “you look out for the Coalition,” he continued, “What did you do by supporting IODS?” he rhetorically asked, “You earned your companies a chance to bid but you murdered billions on Naeve and created billions more refugees and now my world is at the mercy of a band of pious zealots.”

“ORDER!” Christopher Vanifax shouted before the room fell eerily silent, “We were not elected to point fingers and squabble like a group of five year olds!” Vanifax roared in anger, “We were elected to solve the problems of the Coalition,” he finished before taking his seat.

Henry Condoza cleared his throat before he resumed, “As a result of the new threat I request approval from the Council to reinstate all decommissioned members of the military pending medical evaluations by our doctors.”

The Councils began buzzing before Vanifax rose from his seat once again. As soon as he left his seat the room quieted and the Councillor from Adonis returned to his seat without opening his mouth.

“I also request approval to begin military conscription for all single men and women between the ages of 20 and 40 standard Rhyzov years of age in order to build up our forces and effectively engage targets on both fronts.”

“This Coalition is supposed to serve the people not lead them to their death,” Patricia Provian of Diomedes shouted.

“Perhaps you’ve been too caught up watching the military amass their ships over your planet to see what’s happening in the Algol system!” Verlin replied, attempting to regain the trust of his friend.

“I will not allow a single person to be taken off of Diomedes to fight unless they consent.”

“You don’t have a choice,” Arn replied, “This Council is democracy as the people of Naeve found out when their world was left undefended while your lifesaving cannon was being constructed.”

“The Planetary Dominion of Karlstad moves to reinstate all military personnel and begin conscription,” Thomas Verlin stood, attempting to call the Admiral’s requests to a vote.

“The Republic of Novalis seconds the motion put forth by Karlstad,” Frederick Arn declared before turning to Verlin, “You beat me to it you bastard.”

Lucius Mannacher

• • •

19 Years Ago – Jan. 1
Obrant – Coalition Space
Refugee Encampment

Josh Forli Jr. awoke to the unusual sound of someone knocking on the door. Since the Forli's had arrived Obrant they hadn't had a single visitor that Jr. could recall.

"Daaad," Jr. whined, "get the door so I can go back to sleep."

Josh walked towards the door, "I got it," he replied to his son before opening the door to two MPs and a woman, "Hello," he greeted the visitors with a slightly surprised tone.

"Are you Captain Josh Forli?" One of the MPs^[G] asked.

"Yes," Josh replied.

"Come with us," the other MP declared as the two parted so that Josh could exit.

"Just let me go wake my son and get him ready," he declared as he turned to return into his refugee shelter.

"That won't be necessary," the first MP declared as he firmly grabbed Josh's shoulder.

"She'll see that your son is taken care of," the second MP declared.

"What's going on?" Josh asked, "Where do you want me to go and what the hell are you going to do to with my son?"

"Get in the vehicle Captain," the second MP ordered.

"Why?" Josh asked the MPs.

"You'll be briefed on your arrival," the first MP declared as he grew noticeably angry at Josh's resistance.

The second MP raised his weapon and repeated, "Captain, get in the vehicle."

Josh raised his arms slowly and stepped outside before he began to walk towards the Armoured Personnel Carrier. "What are you going to do with my son?" he asked, looking at the woman.

"Shutup and get in the damn vehicle," the first MP shouted as he kicked Forli behind the left knee, "now move it."

The woman knelt beside Josh, “I have to take your son to the Children’s Centre since his mother is not around to care of him in your absence.”

“My absence?” Josh asked with shock, “How long will I be gone?”

The two MPs grabbed Forli by the shoulders and began to drag him to the APC^[G]. When they arrived they threw him into the rear crew hold and locked the hatch, sealing him in the vehicle.

• • •

19 Years Ago – Jan. 1
Hecuba - Coalition Space
TDN Rehabilitation Facility

“I’m sorry Sergeant but the people in this facility are not fit for active duty,” one of the nurses declared to the MPs demanding to be let into the Rehabilitation Facility in order to recommission military members.

“Step aside sir,” the MP declared as he put his hand on the nurse’s shoulder and shoved him back through the door and into the foyer.

“Excuse me,” the nurse declared as he grabbed hold of the MPs wrist.

“Sir,” the MP hollered, “take your hand off me or we will have to use force.”

“Force?” he laughed, “what do you call your methods for getting in this building?”

Another MP pulled a document out and began to read, “On the evening of December 31st the Coalition agreed by a majority vote to reinstate ***all*** previously decommissioned personnel within the Trader Defense Navy pending medical evaluations by Military doctors. As a result, all military personnel are required to comply with Directive Delta Niner Foxtrot Gamma. Any and all who disobey the aforementioned directive will be dishonourably discharged for insubordination and tried for the high crime of treason.”

The nurse gasped as the facility manager arrived, “Military doctors have already deemed these people unfit for active duty.”

“That’s enough Jeff,” the facility manager declared, “I’ll take it from here.”

“My apologies Dr. McKenzie,” the nurse declared as he left the MPs and Dr. Kira McKenzie.

“Why wasn’t I notified of this?” Dr. McKenzie asked the MPs.

“This directive has only recently come down from the top Ma’am,” one of the MPs declared.

“We’re ordered to take all your patients Ma’am,” the MP holding the order declared, “You can either assist us or get the hell out of the way.”

“These men and women aren’t fit for duty,” the doctor replied, “that’s the whole god damn point of this facility.”

“Military doctors will re-evaluate all the patients and decide whether they have progressed far enough along in their rehab to serve.”

“Well you bastards are going to have to break down every door because I’m locking down this facility until I hear from the military’s medical director,” Dr. McKenzie declared as she turned to initiate the facility’s lockdown procedure.

“Ma’am I’m going to have to ask you to halt,” the MP declared as he raised his weapon and another half dozen MPs entered the building.

Dr. McKenzie laughed, “Are you really going to shoot me?”

“Corporal,” the last MP to enter the building called out to the MP who had just raised his rifle.

“Lieutenant,” the MP replied, obviously unable to salute.

“Escort the doctor to Tango 12 then begin rounding up our brave men and women.”

“Aye sir,” the MP declared as he lowered his weapon and approached Dr. McKenzie, grabbing her by the shoulder and steering her out of the building as the MPs began to extract all the military personnel in rehab.

GLOSSARY

A

- Acroception** An acronym within an acronym. One of the most notable examples within the Trader Emergency Coalition is FHS which stands for FSAPS Handling System. The definition of FSAPS is not publicly available at this time.
- ADF** Alpha Delta Foxtrot engagement orders, phonetic military designation for Ask, Demand, Fire. Commonly used when enforcing blockades in dense civilian areas, the blockading ships will ask unwanted ships to turn back, then demand and, if need be, fire on the ships.
- APC** Armoured Personnel Carrier, a military vehicle capable of transporting approximately three to eight fully outfitted combat personnel into a warzone while simultaneously withstanding small arms fire.

B

- Broadcasting** Due to their telepathic prowess, Advent crews can communicate in complete silence without the need for communications equipment. Higher ranking members have been known to be capable of telepathically broadcasting messages to entire planets, sometimes even entire star systems.

C

- CHZ** Circumstellar Habitable Zone, known colloquially as the “Goldilocks Zone”, is a region around a star that could theoretically support planets with liquid water.
- Code White** One of numerous codes in the Trade Order signifying threat level, Code White is the highest threat, symbolizing imminent danger to everyone on site and within two jumps.

F

- FUBAR** Frigged Up Beyond All Recognition

H

HALO High Altitude Low Opening, a technique for air delivery of personnel among other things, HALO jumps involve a lengthy freefall before a parachute is opened at low altitude, making for a stealthier insertion.

I

IODS Interstellar Ordinance Delivery System

K

Krie Vasari measure of distance where one krie is 1000 rie.

M

MP Military Police.

N

Numbers After the Kron Crisis and the annihilation of the 7th Fleet of Darkness, all Vasari fleets were renumbered so as to avoid the number 7 and any of its multiples as 7 was deemed a number of death.

P

Papa Phonetic military designation for pirate.

PEC Personal Earpiece Communicator, similar to a Bluetooth headset although it is extremely low power and short range, using the ship as a relay. The PEC sends signals to the ship which are transmitted throughout the communications wires onboard before being transmitted to the recipient.

Penal Wing Vasari ships with crews composed mostly of enslaved races, making them more expendable and less effective in combat.

Praefectus A high ranking position in the Dark Fleet tasked with commanding a capital ship.

Praetor One of the highest ranking positions in the Dark Fleet tasked with commanding a fleet element.

PSI Phase Silhouette Identification, a method of deciphering phase signatures to determine the silhouette of the phase anomaly in question.

PVCD Portable Video Communications Device, a small touchscreen device that allows audio and video communications.

R

Rie Vasari measure of distance where one rie is approximately one km.

Romeo Golf Phonetic military designation for Rail Gun.

S

SSRL Secure Short-Range Link, a device used by marines to provide secure communications over a range of 50m.

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