



CASE WHITE: VOICE OF THE RESISTANCE

Chris Hartford

Alexander Farmstead, Kalispell, Montana
North America, Terra
13 March 3068, 15:50 TST (07:50 local)

Nathan had seen shooting stars before in his seven years, but never this bright or during daylight. What he was seeing looked more like the pictures of comets his mother had shown him, a snowball followed by a long tail. Only this wasn't ice like in those pictures; it was a ball of fire that left a glowing trail across the ice-blue sky, unusually clear for this time of year. He watched the star fall, swiftly dropping toward the horizon. He should've yelled to Dad and gotten him to look at the amazing sight, but it was too late now.

His jaw dropped and he nearly dropped the sack of feed cradled in his arms. Another fireball followed the first shooting star, then another. A whole swarm of them. The rest of his journey across the snow-covered yard to the pig sheds was forgotten. He dropped the sack and turned toward the half-open doors of the barn.

"Dad! Look!" He called out, pointing up into the bright morning sky.


John Alexander looked up from where he was disassembling the drive train in their tractor. The venerable machine should've been retired before Kerensky was born, but it'd been used by a succession of Alexanders on their farmstead. He crossed to the doors, his breath condensing to mist in the frigid air and impatience furrowing his brow as he wiped oil from his fingers. The boy was prone to flights of fancy, indulged by his mother and inspired by her off-world tales, and so he followed his son's gesture warily. John frowned as he saw the meteor-like shower. His eyes tracked one fireball then switched to another just as it exploded into a shower of smaller fragments. The individual shards glowed as they fell, but the shape of some of them looked familiar.

This wasn't a meteor shower. It was debris. Vehicular debris. A lot of it. He swore under his breath, then tore his gaze away from the spectacle, locking eyes with Nathan. "Get your mother. "

"She's still in bed," the boy protested.

"Now!" John pointed at the dark hulk of the house, then turned his gaze back to watching the stars fall. He shielded his eyes with his left hand, careless of the oil marks he left on his forehead.





Nathan bolted, dashing pell-mell up the hill, his boots churning deep ruts in the snow. He stomped up onto the veranda and raced into the scullery to the bemusement of Achilles the cat, who regarded the human hurricane blasting through *his* kitchen with typical feline disdain. The boy was so excited that he didn't stop to take off his boots and so tracked ice and slush across the tiles, something he realized he'd catch hell for shortly. He skidded into the hall and slid to the base of the staircase, mittened hands clutching at the banister to steady himself. "Mom!" he yelled. There was silence. "Mom!" Floorboards creaked and he heard bare footsteps padding across the floor. A door was wrenched open and an incandescent fury appeared at the top of the stairs. Nathan gulped and belatedly remembered to pull the cap from his head. His mother, clad only in a nightdress and with her long red hair in uncharacteristic chaos, glared down at him.

"What did I tell you about yelling, Nathan?" Her voice was lilting, her "I" elongated and more like "eh." Her accent, more pronounced when she was angry, made her stand out as "not from around here." Five hundred light-years of not-from-around-here, from the Magistracy of Canopus. His mother's eyes followed the trail of slushy footprints, narrowing as they took in the scene. "And what'd be the meaning of—"

"You have to come and see," he said breathlessly. "Dad said to get you."

She bit back a retort, then stepped back into the bedroom to grab her robe. She cinched it around her waist as she descended the stairs, then grabbed her coat from the rack when she reached the bottom.

Nathan was already dashing toward the door, tracked by the ever-vigilant cat, and had his hand on the doorknob when he realized that his mother was still pulling on her boots. He waited several seconds, then yanked on the handle and allowed the freezing air to pour into the kitchen. He glanced back; his mother's piercing green eyes met his own gaze and promised severe punishment if this was some childish whim. "Mom, quickly!" he injected as a means of convincing her otherwise. She still seemed skeptical of his earnestness and hesitated before stepping out into the cold, pulling the jacket tighter around her.

"Blake's blood!" she swore as she took in the sight, holding onto a wooden veranda post and leaning out to get a better view. John bounded up the short staircase to join his petite wife, throwing a heavyset arm across her shoulders while the boy turned in circles

in the yard, trying to see all the dozens of trails crossing the sky. "So many," she whispered.

"Ships?" he asked, receiving a faint nod in reply. "Ours or theirs, Edi?"

"Ours." She flinched as another meteor-like object exploded in a shower of smaller flares. "*They* wouldn't be having so many vessels on an inbound vector." *And theirs weren't likely to be exploding during reentry*, she didn't need to add. John glanced down at his wife's intent face, a faint smile tugging at his lips as he heard her accent strengthening.

"Liberation?"

"Maybe, but if there are that many hulks hitting the atmosphere and visible here, either the entire Com Guard has pitched up or something has gone badly wrong." Her eyes flicked to meet his, then returned to regarding the falling destruction. John leaned down and kissed her cheek. She slipped her arm around his waist.

"The toaster-worshippers have had ten years to fix the SDS, despite our efforts, though surely Focht would allow for that possibility in his planning."

"Assuming the Old Man is still in charge. He wasn't young then, and it *has* been ten years." She shivered. Ten years and eleven days since she'd been blown from the wreckage of her *Avatar* into a Colorado snowdrift. She still had nightmares about Gunnison and the seven weeks she'd spent as a *guest* of the Blakists before John and his people had rescued her. Edi Alexander didn't register on the authorities' radar. Edelle Kearny, her maiden name, was still among TerraSec's ten most-wanted. Her role as the de-facto commander of the 201st Division after the Shadow Lancers' sneak attack would've ensured that, even if she hadn't been involved with the resistance ever since. The Blakists were furious to have *lost* her, having spent considerable effort breaking her will and extracting military intelligence. Memories of that time chilled her even more than the cold spring air and she shivered, prompting John to wrap her in his arms. She rested her head on his shoulder. She'd put a gun to her own head before she allowed herself to fall into the Blakists' clutches again. *Was this the end of all that, or the end of hope?*

"He'll be there; he's indestructible. The question is, where to do we fit in with this? There's no news."

"We do what we always do: Improvise." She peered through the kitchen window, ducking slightly to regard the wall clock. "Get everyone to Maxwell's for noon."



Maxwell Farmstead, Columbia Falls, Montana
North America, Terra
13 March 3068, 18:30 TST (11:30 local)

Thirty kilometers was considered next-door in rural Montana, but the snow slowed the Alexanders' progress to the rendezvous and a number of others had beaten them there. Edelle wished she'd put on a woolen hat as a gust of wind blew her hood back and snatched at her hair. She tucked an errant strand back into the collar of her coat with her left hand as her right released Nathan's door. He'd already unbuckled himself and bolted out into the snow in search of Maxwell's children and their puppies; he already seemed to have forgotten about the morning's—literal—fireworks.

"You saw?" Alix Maxwell asked, greeting Edi with a kiss on each cheek. Despite Edi's height—or rather, lack of it—the small round woman had to stretch to deliver the greeting and didn't even try with John, making him bend to kiss her. Alix wasn't one of their active fighters, but her organizational skills were second to none.

"We did," Edelle replied, nodding and reaching out to shake Sam Maxwell's hand as he joined the group.

Tall and slender in contrast to his wife, the former infantryman maintained his martial bearing. "Come into the barn. We have the heaters running. Moran and Highfield are there already." He followed Edelle's gaze to where Nathan was pestering two scarf-wrapped figures. "Lisa and Joe will keep the boy out of mischief."

Edi sighed with relief as she crossed the threshold into the heated air, pulling off her coat and gloves even as those already in the building rose.

"Colonel," Tom Highfield saluted as he rose, eschewing ComStar ranking in favor of that of the Star League; he'd never been part of the Com Guard. In his twenties, he was a recent addition to the band but a valiant one.

"Edi," gray-haired Jacob Moran nodded to her from his perch at the long bench. He continued to tinker with the wireless set.

"Any joy with that thing?" she asked. The communications technician grunted and continued to solder wires.

"Is it the Guard?" Highfield fidgeted impatiently. "What do we do now?"



"We wait."

Others straggled in: Nicole Chen, Martin Fellows, May Donaldson, who looked so like Liz Backman, long-dead at Pueblo. The Dees, Mike Rodriguez, Jane Peters.

"We need to hit them hard and fast," Fellows stated, jabbing a finger at Donaldson, obviously continuing an argument started before they arrived. "Keep them off balance so we can link up with the Guard."

"And where do you suppose we might do that?" Rodriguez countered dryly. "America is a big place, and there's no guarantee their main landings were here."

"If we saw their debris here, we likely were on their approach path," Peters said.

"The Court? Makes sense, given the Wobbies' interest in the place." Highfield grinned, his fingers resting on the barrel of a rifle that was older than he was. That was probably older than any of them.

Peters shook her head. "In that case, they overshot their target. Somewhere to the west seems more likely. Chicago or New York."

"Or Hilton Head," Edi added softly. Peters nodded.

"Straight for the jugular?" the boy's grin widened. "Ballsy."

"Foolish, given the standing defenses from back in the day that the Word surely have bolstered," the Canopian countered. "And Focht no be that. My money be on somewhere like Salinas." Her old stomping ground, where her face-off against the Blakists had begun last time. The Com Guard base was long gone, ruined by a thermobaric bomb, but the Word had established their own facility there on the ground leveled by the fuel-air explosive. As with Mulvanery and the Shadow Lancers, the Com Guard knew that neutralizing those forces would be essential before taking and holding Hilton head. "We need information, though, and contact with the commander of the liberation forces."

A high-pitched squeal cut through the barn, causing the group to flinch. "Sorry," Moran said gruffly and adjusted the volume. The box he'd been working on continued to whistle.

"Good job," Highfield said sarcastically. "No comm, no chat with the Guard."

"The set's working fine," Jacob replied calmly. Highfield raised an eyebrow. "That's broad-frequency jamming."

"Which means?"

"Which means the Wobbies don't want the Guard talking to each other." He hesitated a moment. "Or to us."

"Either way we're screwed."

"Maybe. Maybe not. A strong-enough signal should still punch through." He twiddled the controls, the pitch of the whine rising and falling as he did. The others listened in rapt attention, struggling to pick out words in the chaos. A sawlike buzz replaced the whine for a moment. "Encrypted signal," he commented.

"Ours or theirs?" Edelle asked. Moran shrugged. It didn't matter; her codes were ten years out of date. The whistle returned and the murmuring around the table rose.

"—ninety-fourth on the ground with—" The chattering stopped as all eyes focused on Moran and the box. "—sive flotilla challenged—" Static disrupted the voice. "—gency drop. We're scattered across—" Distortion washed out the sound again. "—cant losses and sizzeewwoocchheechaastance. We're heading toward—" The whine returned. Moran adjusted the controls but wasn't able to get the voice back. He turned to Edi.

"One of ours. Probably not a command channel, judging by the lack of encryption."

She nodded. "Keep trying." He slipped a headset over one ear and connected it to the wireless. The whine abruptly cut off.

Edelle looked at the gathered resistance fighters. Highfield was grinning broadly, as were the Dees. Rodriguez and Chen obviously felt the opposite, deep frowns furrowing their brows. The others' expressions were somewhere between the two poles.

"Payback time," the youngster said excitedly.

Chen snorted. "Don't be such a fool. Did that sound like an organized rescue effort?"

"They're here, aren't they? We need to help them."

"Means nothing. How long did Tianshan hold out, or Titan?" The resistance had communicated with both bases for months after the invasion. "But they still fell eventually, overrun or sold out."

You want to chance our lives on that being more than an isolated infantry platoon somewhere in the Deep South?"

"We can't just sit on our asses."

"And we've only got one life to give. Let's make it count, shall we, eh?" Chen spat back. "Want another West Crossing?"

It was an old argument: the old-time Com Guard veterans, cognizant of the horrors of war and cynical, contrasted with the too-keen young bloods who believed action—any action—was better than waiting. The disaster at West Crossing had cost the group a third of their strength for no appreciable gain and had become a byword for a futile endeavor.

Highfield was having none of it. "That was—"

"Another," Moran interrupted, pulling the headset jack. A new voice filled the air, this time female and barely audible above the static. "Long distance this time."

"—ding the port terminal." A burst of static. "—Daugava and pushing east along Hanzas—" For a moment the whine returned. "—mal opposition. Since dropping we've secured—" They listened for several moments as the voice named streets and intersections, then slowly faded.

"Any ID?"

"She mentioned the 166th just before I put it on speaker, so that's at least two divisions."

"They hit us with more than that in '58." Edi blew on her fingers. "They had five and it'd take at least twice that to counter them, possibly three times, and that's assuming Alsace is caught napping." To the resistance, Precentor Terrasec David Alsace was the devil. Edi had strong memories of the man from her interrogation; intelligent, charming, utterly ruthless. Not much chance of him being asleep on the job, no matter that the security forces had backed off in recent months.

Moran held up his hand for silence and cranked up the volume. Words were barely audible above the static. Was it the same woman? "—sorganized attacks Piecemeal, almost suicidal ... overrun ... —ly a challenge."

"Who's disorganized and piecemeal, us or them?" The elder Dee, Mark, enquired. "She sounds incredulous, not frustrated."

"Them?" Edi meant the Word of Blake, incredible as it seemed. Had the Old Man caught them unprepared? Was it a rerun of '58 all over? "Any idea where?" That was directed at the younger Dee, who was frantically thumbing through a printed atlas.

"There's a Daugava River running through Russia, Belarus and Latvia."

"She mentioned a port. Where does the Daugava reach the sea?"

"Riga." Maggie Dee grinned. "They're in Riga."



The sun had set by the time they'd pinpointed the first transmission and pieced together a picture of their rescue. The 394th, or rather its remnants, were spread from Texas to Georgia—it was their shattered flotilla they'd watched fall—and they'd identified two other divisions, the 166th and the 79th. There were suggestions of other formations, but nothing larger or more cohesive than those three. Other formations could be intact and hidden behind encryption, radio silence or jamming, but somehow Edi doubted that. It looked like only three divisions had made it to the ground. *Out of how many?* She wondered.

"We have to help them," Highfield argued, backed by the Dees and—to her surprise—May Donaldson. "We can't waste the chance."

"We're too small," Chen countered. "Too scattered." Which was true enough. Even with their absent members they'd only muster a platoon-strength force, not that Edi had any intention of getting drawn into a stand-up fight. They knew others though, in the mountains and across the plains, others who could provide intelligence and assistance. It sounded like the 394th needed every bit of help they could get. And the resistance could arrange a few other surprises for the Wobblers too.

They'd debated all through the evening, only coming to a consensus after several heated exchanges.

"You know what to do?" she asked as she pulled on her coat. They nodded.

"I don't envy you," Alix said wryly, handing across a large satchel. Edi groaned at the weight.

"I'd get John to do it, but it's little small for him I think." She hefted the satchel to emphasize *it*.

Alix Maxwell sniggered. "Well, make sure he warms you up afterward." She handed over a small cylinder. "And take care of this."



Little Bitterroot Lake, Montana
North America, Terra
14 March 3068, 8:45 TST (01:45 local)

"Whose bright idea was this?" Edi protested as she threw her coat onto the passenger seat and pulled her sweater and blouse over her head, tossing them onto the coat. Her trousers followed a moment later. "Quick, damn you. It be a little cold."

"I hadn't noticed," John deadpanned, his jacked buttoned up to his chin and his hat pulled low. "Come on." He held out the black suit, pulling at its collar. Edi slid her feet in, seating them in the integral boots, and pulled the form-fitting garment up to her waist. She took a deep breath and ducked her head as John pulled. One arm slipped in, then the other.

"I hate these things." She shivered, then with a final snap pulled the hood into place. "Can't we wait for spring?"

"It is spring, darling." He handed her a mask that she held up to her face gingerly, her nose wrinkling at the smell. "All working?"

Edi gave him a thumbs-up with her right hand as her left adjusted straps. She lifted the mask free again and set it atop her head while she pulled her jacket free of the pile of clothes and slipped it on again, glancing to the back seat where Nathan lay fast asleep. "Ready?"

She nodded and took John's arm, the pair gingerly making their way to the spot illuminated by the headlights. White tussocks and depressions suddenly gave way to a plate-smooth expanse of snow. She shrugged out of the jacket and handed it across to her husband, who gave her the cylindrical object in exchange.

"Are you sure we can't just throw rocks?"

John snorted.

"Oh well, here goes." She yanked a pin on the device, then tossed it two dozen yards out onto the ice before turning to face their car, resting as it was on the boat ramp. There was a dull crump and a bright flash.

The lake had been a great place for the cache, save that in winter—and early spring—the ice was too thick to break by hand. There were open expanses out near the center of the three-kilometer



lake, but it'd be hard to get to their objective there. They needed to make their own entry point. Edi turned back to regard the lake and saw that what was once a broad, flat expanse was now a mass of black water and little icebergs. It'd freeze in short order, but she didn't need long.

"Me and my bright ideas." She winced as she pulled the mask down over her face then gingerly made her way out to the temporary shoreline where the white land met the black lake. Even muffled by the faceplate, her profanity as she tested the water was unmistakable. She looked back at her husband, stretched out her arm and stuck up a thumb, then stepped backward into the icy water.

John Alexander made his way back to the car and pulled open the driver's door, sliding into the seat and thumbing a switch on the central console. A minute passed, then two, then five. He felt a faint vibration run through the car and reached for the central console again, thumbing the microphone.

"All good down there?" He asked.

"It's being like a meat locker," came the gasped reply. He could almost hear her teeth chattering. "Being too cold isn't something they considered." He stifled a laugh.

"What is it, Dad?" came a sleepy voice from the rear. Nathan pushed his head and upper body between the seats. John patted the passenger seat and the boy wriggled into his mother's place. "Is Mom outside?"

"In a manner of speaking."

There was another rumble and the boy turned to his father. "What do you—" Movement glimpsed in the corner of his eye caught Nathan's attention, and he turned toward the lake, his jaws dropping and his eyes widening in shock.

Illuminated by the headlights, a snow-white monster rose from the depths like a giant waking from a ten-year bath, strands of weed hanging across its shoulders like unkempt hair. Streaks of mud ran across its chest and water drained from weapon ports and heat sinks. Armor panels popped and groaned, adding to the bestial image.

"M-Mom?" Nathan stuttered, fearfully pushing himself back into the seat.

A spotlight blinked on and swiveled to illuminate the car. "Not too shabby. There be only three critical indicators," came her voice over the radio. "Shall we get started?"

