

The Errand

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Spoiler Alert

This story contains spoilers to the Traveller: The New Era novel, "The Backwards Mask."
Read the novel first. If spoilers aren't an issue for you, read on!

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Debt of Honor

Lieutenant Cassandra Mayfield of the Federation Navy watched as the precipitation timer on the HUD of her vacc suit continued its inevitable march down to zero like sands falling in a digital hourglass. It was in the shifting of the monochromatic light, the pattern on its trajectory of constant decay, that emphasized that each second which disappeared from her display was one that could never be reclaimed. She was fighting the clock, combating it just as surely as if it had been a battle fleet of Virus-laden Vampire ships.

Time was her enemy, her nemesis, in this conflict she had inherited. Though she might now find herself in command of the corporate courier, *Cyllenius*, rather than her rightful place on a warship, the enemy was already on the move. For all she knew, it might already be too late.

Then again, this area of space had been living off of borrowed time ever since the collapse of the Third Imperium almost a century before, and had continued to defy the odds ever since. This one cluster of worlds had survived the greatest holocaust that had ever befallen Humanity – Virus. When whole sectors of space were being scoured down to the last microbe of life, this tiny clutch of worlds clung tenaciously to life. Where Cassandra's ancestors had fled the dying Empire to find safe haven in the Hiver Federation, these worlds had stood fast as the light of civilization had died around them.

They were the Reformation Coalition.

They were a tough and lucky breed, and Cassandra had come to respect them deeply. True, their technology base had regressed back on some of their member worlds to ox-drawn carts and steel crossbows. The highest magnitude of warship their most advanced shipyards were natively capable of delivering would barely qualify as a third-rate destroyer in the Federation Navy. They had no sense of tradition or uniformity in what could jokingly be called their military. They were informal and prone to flying by the seat of their pants. Perhaps most ridiculous of all was the farcical concept of "taccodes" they insisted upon using. Their system of government was about as unfeasible and cumbersome as you could imagine, and the member worlds didn't seem to care much for one another. It seemed that they were forever minutes away from an internal shooting war that would consume them from the inside.

Central to this near-constant strife were the two core worlds of the Reformation Coalition, Aubaine and Oriflamme – both representing extreme ends of the spectrum. Aubaine, the current capital of the Coalition, seemed populated with optimistic dreamers, who were perhaps too optimistic for their own good. They lived to see into a brighter tomorrow while often overlooking the obstacles of today, and their inability to follow through with solid action was a constant source of frustration to the other member worlds, particularly their greatest rival, Oriflamme. *That* unpleasant world was the dark reflection of Aubaine. The Oriflammens believed that the universe was such a harsh place, and the prospects of survival so dim, that only the iron grip of a strong central

government would suffice to hold back the night. Of course, the Oriflammen would gladly choose *themselves* as the ruling class.

It was easy, so very easy, for the few powers that remained to look down their noses at the Coalition, to dismiss them as a bunch of backwards, ignorant technology raiders with self-important delusions of civility. Many might wish to wash their hands of them completely. Cassandra had to admit that she had even harbored some of those same feelings when she had been tapped to come to Reformation space.

They were a 'pocket' polity to some, barely worthy of note, but now Cassandra knew, just as the Hivers knew, that the Reformation Coalition could potentially be the womb from which Humaniti's light might be rekindled anew among the stars. They possessed courage and heart in uncommon amounts, however raw and rough. They fought when all conventional wisdom told them to run; they stood their ground when they should retreat, but most of all, they succeeded where they should have failed. They had spirit in them and a natural will that was staggering to see, or frightening to behold.

It was ironic that the very qualities that she admired, that had so convinced the Hivers to become the fledgling star nation's benefactors, had brought her here to be savaged at their hands.

The Hivers had placed so much faith in the Coalition that they were willing to impart the greater part of their technical knowledge to them. It was hoped that this knowledge might one day bootstrap the Coalition into a much more stable and enlightened nation.

When they had called for volunteers for the mission of clandestinely transporting the vessel of knowledge to Coalition space, she had been the first to step forward. She was one of the best, both in her technical and engineering skill, and of a lineage that went back to Admiral Sir Thomas Mayfield of the Imperial Navy. The Mayfield naval dynasty was one of the most prestigious in the Federation, and each link in the chain since Sir Thomas had organized the Exodus had proven strong and true. If there was going to be a mission critical to the long-term success and well-being of the Federation, there was no doubt that she was going to be a part of it.

That had led her to the disguised merchant ship, *Hokona*, and the long route through the stars from Federation territory. Their cover had been flawless the entire way, until the asteroid fields of Kruxter. They were a single jump away from delivering their priceless cargo to Aubaine when they were intercepted by an unknown power. The men had boarded the *Hokona*, overpowered the Ithklur guards and captured the ship intact. In the long darkness that followed, she could only wonder how the enemy had known to interdict them. What had given them away? Their security and tradecraft had been impeccable, but somehow that didn't matter. She just couldn't understand it.

In the interim, she had been taken prisoner aboard a secret asteroid base and forced to ply her engineering skill at keeping their shoddy reactor up and running. Even now, she could not quite fully come to terms with the brutality that had been visited upon her on that accursed rock. She had let them think that her spirit was broken, while inwardly she watched and waited. Still, she could not

begin to fathom how the enemy could have learned of their mission when not even the recipients on Aubaine had been aware of the great boon they were about to receive.

Now, looking back, the ugliness of that answer left her feeling nauseous, much like when she stood up too quickly, or accidentally prodded her newly repaired ribs. The truth was that the enemy *hadn't* known about their mission. They had captured her vessel and tortured her Captain and crew merely as a means of preventing traffic to the Aubani capital. The Orriflammen government, or some dissident faction thereof, was finally making their move to supplant the Aubani by force. It had been the prelude to a Coalition civil war, and *Hokona* had been one of its first victims.

Her tormentors had been completely ignorant of the incredible gift she had come to give them – the wisdom and learning that would render such a civil war completely unnecessary. The Hivers had sought to deliver them from chaos and darkness, and these *barbarians* had repaid that benevolence by killing them for sport, merely because they were aliens. She had hated them, hated every jack-booted one of them with the burning fury of eleven thousand suns.

Hope had faded the longer she'd stayed in the hands of the enemy, until at last she had come to know the true face of the Coalition. The asteroid base had been raided, this time by official Coalition forces in the form of RCS *Hornet*. The Aubani Marine who had pulled her out of that wretched place had done so by nearly sacrificing his own life. In the aftermath of the attack, Corporal Alonzo Black, better known by his Coalition taccode "Bonzo," had used vital medical supplies to patch up her bullet-riddled, unconscious form while saving none for his own prodigiously bleeding wounds. When the relief teams had found them in the reactor room, Bonzo had passed out from blood loss, his rifle in hand and a temporary barricade erected to keep her out of harm's way.

It was only after she regained consciousness in a corporate hospital that she began to understand the scope of events around her. Her body had been badly broken; even now she wasn't fully recovered. Worse yet, the vessel of knowledge *Hokona* had carefully shepherded had been spirited away by enemy forces. To her eternal heartbreak, she was not yet strong enough to accompany *Hornet* in her attempts to reclaim that source of knowledge. Her mission was now their mission.

She could not, however, remain on the beach. To do so would have flown in the face of millennia of naval traditions that traced back to the First Imperium. She owed them a debt of honor that was to forever remain in arrears, but one to which she was committed to paying. All the ghosts of *Hokona* demanded it of her. And, as their last living representative, she could not refuse. Collectively, they propelled her on her way, lending her a speed and a determination above and beyond her known limitations.

No, she couldn't go with *Hornet*, but she could command this corporate courier on a mission to the spinward systems of the Coalition and raise the alarm that an attack on the capital was imminent. The fleet base at Aurora was her immediate destination. The numbers that continued to count down in front of her marked the time until they emerged from jump space into the system.

No matter the obstacle, whatever the cost, she must locate the Coalition's fleet and rally them to Aubaine's banner.
This was her errand.
And time was running out.

Call to Arms

“Precipitation in five, ma’am,” Devon Kandt, *Cyllenius*’s pilot said. “Five, four, three, two, one – precipitating now.”

One moment the little courier was ensconced in the mystery of jump space, the next she appeared in the Aurora system at the same relative speed and orientation as when she had left Kruyter.

Cassandra let the nauseous tingling that accompanied such an alien event wash over her. In the space of three breaths it was gone. In the last year, she had spent almost as much of her time in jump space as in real space. Her two crewmen, on the other hand, had not.

“Report status,” she said over the comm from her station in the engine room.

“We’re secure, ma’am,” Devon reported. “All systems in the green.”

“Position?”

This time it was Lyle Grimsly, the ship’s astrogator, who answered.

“We’re on target. Just a smidge over 100AUs from the planet, ma’am.”

“Excellent work,” Cassandra replied. “Set a course for Aurora, maximum military speed. Begin broadcasting our message on the priority channel now.”

With that order, *Cyllenius* sent out a continuous omnidirectional signal on a frequency reserved for planetary emergencies. It possessed all the correct auth-codes and ciphers, it bore all the stamps and tags needed to rally all fleet units in the system to Cassandra’s cause. It was a call to arms directly from Kruyter’s system leader, Director Tirese Serene, beseeching all those in uniform to answer the summons.

Cassandra did not know what role she would play in the conflict from here on out, but her most important responsibility had just been discharged; she had warned Aurora of the coming threat. The enemy’s plan had depended on misdirection and secrecy, and she was delivering the one weapon that could turn back the enemy’s designs – knowledge. Perhaps in that sense, the information she bore now would be of infinitely more use than that she had borne from the Federation.

“Mr. Grimsly, are there any ships in our vicinity?”

“Negative,” he said after a moment, “the scope is clear, ma’am.”

“I see. Locate the nearest sensor platform and use our emergency access.”

The platform would only be able to provide them with a snapshot of the system, one that was possibly hours or days old. It would, however, give her an idea of the ships in the system. Though the Coalition fleet was relatively small in number, they tended to concentrate their forces, sending only individual ships or small formations out into the unknown. Aurora was one of their major nodes. The system should be buzzing with the activity of a beehive. However, they had yet to be challenged either by security personnel or long-range automation.

“Um...ma’am,” Lyle’s voice said. “I think you’d better have a look at this.”

“On my screen.”

The repeater in front of her reconfigured itself from a perspective starfield to a representation of the Aurora system and all its military units. The black of space was as smooth and unblemished as the uniform she wore. Only two green emeralds encircled Aurora like a necklace. Cassandra fought down the rising surge of disbelief.

“Am I to understand, Mr. Grimsly, that there are but two military units in the entire system right now?”

“It looks that way. The image from the platform was updated eight hours ago, ma’am.”

According to the platform, the two remaining ships were both system defense boats. Neither of them could leave the system on their own power what with their appalling lack of jump drives.

She had come to Aurora looking for a fleet, but the fleet was nowhere to be found.

The torch she had carried from Kruyter could not be passed; she would have to carry it further still.

* * *

Cyllenius set down on the landing field of Aurora’s fleet base. All of the docking slips and hangars of the downport were empty and vacant. If it weren’t for the distant burn of the lights and the oscillating of sensor antennae, Cassandra might have guessed that the facility had been abandoned.

No, not abandoned – stripped, she thought. The fleet had gone *somewhere*. Had it been destroyed? Diverted? Was it possible that the Oriflammen insurrection had compromised it? Might the very ships she had come to rally even now be heading towards the capital to neutralize it?

Secrecy and misdirection, she reminded herself. *Heavy-handed and brutal as the Oriflammen might be, their tradecraft was respectable. Perhaps they have anticipated this move already, and taken steps to ensure there was no fleet to find.*

The bright light of local noon assaulted Cassandra’s eyes as she stepped onto the landing pad. To an outside observer, it would surely look like an officer from another time had arrived. The cut and design of her space-black Federation uniform had been heavily modeled from the Imperial uniforms of her great-grandfather’s time.

Behind her, Grimsly and Kandt were in there light grey corporate jumpsuits and helmets. Between them, they carried a fourth person – the one passenger on *Cyllenius* who was not there by choice. If given his way, he would likely like to be many parsecs away from Coalition authorities, and the young woman whose blue eyes blazed with cold fire whenever they fell upon him.

Isel Voniv.

The traitor.

He had been the inside man at Kruyter, the one who had made sure that the activities on the Lambda-3 asteroid had gone unnoticed for so long. All of

those responsible for her accommodations there were now dead, though Cassandra could take no credit in their destruction. He was the only surviving member of the opposition who could give an account of her story, and she was determined to make sure he did exactly that.

"Good morning, Mr. Voniv," she said in a level voice. "I trust that we can count on your continued cooperation?"

"You go to hell, you Federation whore!" he spat out.

Her eyes narrowed, revealing only slits of blue. There was the promise of a universe of pain as the price of defiance. The fraction of a spine that Voniv had built up during the week in jump space evaporated instantly.

"Manners maketh the man, Mr. Voniv," she said. "If you no longer have manners, then I will no longer consider you a man, and will act accordingly."

He shrank from her in the strong grip of Grimsly and Kandt. He did not, or could not, meet her gaze, but nodded like a scarecrow blown about in the wind.

"Ma'am," Kandt said. "It looks like there's the welcoming committee."

Cassandra turned to look across the tarmac, while surreptitiously unclasping the strap on her sidearm's holster. Across the way, a ground vehicle was speeding across the ferrocrete with a young man in uniform at the wheel. He screeched to a halt in front of them.

"Greetings, ma'am. I've been instructed to convey you to Fleet Headquarters immediately."

"Very well, Corporal," she said, looking at the insignia on his shoulder, "I believe your Commander will want to hear what we have to say."

* * *

The Commander's office was clean and functional, with a kind of military austerity that Mayfield could admire. The man who came from around the desk to greet her was a reflection of the space in which he worked.

"Commander Thorsten 'Crusher' Standridge, ma'am."

"Thank you, Commander. I believe you already know my name, correct?"

Standridge nodded as he perched on a corner of his desk.

"Then you know why I am here."

"I do."

"Then tell me, where is your fleet, Commander?"

"Ah," Standridge said, dead-pan. "I'm afraid that's classified."

"Then I suggest you *un*-classify it, Commander, and soon. You have exactly the time that it takes for my ship to refuel. I will be leaving shortly thereafter, and I will need a destination."

"I wish it were that simple, Lieutenant," he said. "But my orders are to keep the fleet's whereabouts secret under our current case scenario. The threat you claim to warn us about is of a lesser imperative than what we are facing now."

"What case scenario is that, may I ask?"

"I'm afraid I can't divulge that information to an officer of a foreign navy."

Cassandra's eyes glittered like ice, yet she remained still.

"Then I am afraid that you do not fully understand the implications of the warning I delivered."

Standridge picked up a data reader from his desk.

"Let's see, you found some Oriflammen mercenaries on an abandoned station smuggling a few pallets of weapons. I'm afraid I have to question Director's Serene's conclusions. It sounds more than a little far-fetched that Aubaine is about to be attacked based on what I see here." He let the reader fall to the desk with a light *thud*.

"Those 'mercenaries' as you call them had at least one Coalition warship in league with them," Cassandra said. "One that was perfectly willing to attack and destroy other Coalition units. The weapons they had, if you are inclined to look, include relic ground vehicles, missiles, explosives, landmines and the facilities to maintain and repair Imperial battledress. They all point to hostile ground-based activities in the works."

"Precisely, which leads me away from the idea that Oriflamme would try to invade, or even attack, Aubaine. They don't have the ships or the resources to pull off a feat like that," Standridge said.

"Unless they have help from a foreign power," Cassandra replied. "One which *does* have ships of sufficient magnitude to neutralize the capital system."

"Speculation," Standridge dismissed. "You don't have any evidence of that aside from a few unidentified corpses on an asteroid. Oriflamme would never ally themselves with the Solee Empire. Both of them are too power hungry for that to ever be an issue."

Cassandra sat back in her chair and crossed her legs. At this point, it was clear that bringing in Voniv would certainly do more harm than good.

"I can see that you've already made up your mind. I take it that you do not recognize the authority with which I was sent?"

"I'm afraid not, Lieutenant. I will need more than a paranoid corporate suit and a Federation officer to convince me otherwise."

"Then are you willing to deny a direct plea from a system leader?"

"Kruyter isn't technically a member system," Standridge countered. "It's an administered territory, little more than a system-wide mining camp."

Cassandra's eyes hardened along with the pleasant lines of her face.

"Very well, Commander, if you insist on barricading yourself behind technicalities and red tape, then I will need to seek answers elsewhere. I trust that when the hammer falls – and it will, Commander – you will need to live with the fact that it fell on your watch due to your own short-sighted incompetence. Now if you will excuse me—"

"Now hold on just a moment, my dear," a whiskey-smooth voice came from behind her. The handsome, mustachioed man who filled the door wore a friendly half-smile, one which deepened as Cassandra stood. He took in her trim figure and the luxuriant golden hair pulled back in a pony tail.

"My, my," he said with obvious approval. "Tell me, do all ladies of the Federation look like you?"

"Enough, I suppose. Are all military men of the Coalition such feckless bureaucrats?" she replied with a backwards nod to Standridge. In her mind, she had already dismissed him.

"Hardly."

Standridge reddened. "I will not be insulted in my own office, not by a—"

"Ah, come now, Crusher, I'd thought you'd be used to being shot down by the ladies," the newcomer cast an impish smile at Cassandra, "especially the beautiful ones."

"I believe you have me at a disadvantage, sir," Cassandra said.

"Nothing could be further from the truth, my dear." He grinned as he took her hand and kissed it lightly. "Gervais Racine is my name. Captain. Coalition Naval Intelligence, at your service. My taccode is "Crimson," but I think we can leave that one at the door. I can't help but find them quite the stumbling block in conversation."

"Agreed."

"Now, Crusher," Racine said. "Can't you see that this...stunning young lady has come all this way to help us? I think she deserves just a bit of leeway, don't you?"

"Our orders specifically state—"

"Oh, sink the orders! There's an exception to every rule, my dear Commander, and from where I stand, our guest is *quite* the exception. Besides, I would hate to pull rank and have to report it to Commodore Ramirez later. So, why don't you let me worry about what we can and can't tell our guest, alright?"

Standridge cast a withering glance at the both of them, and marched out of the room.

"Now, where were we?" Racine's light green eyes danced.

"The fleet."

"Ah, yes, the fleet. You see, we seem to have a pesky Vampire problem to spinward. We have reason to believe that a fleet of Virus-infected ships is massing at both Buhler and Kresek, the terminus point for what is colloquially referred to as the 'Vampire Alley.' At the risk of sounding alarmist, it is the largest one we've ever encountered, so we are operating under Case Vermillion. That's our Coalition fancy talk for a mass Vampire invasion. It's one of the scariest scenarios that we have in our color case codebook."

"You then sent everything that you had that could leave the system," Cassandra said.

"Intelligent as you are beautiful."

"Well, Captain, I have reason to believe that your Vampire threat is a carefully fabricated way to get your fleet out of position so that they are unable to counter the next phase of their operations."

"Not to mimic our good Commander, but how can you be sure?"

"Let me guess, the ship that reported this fleet of Vampires, which I would wager was a merchant or free trader, was Oriflammen in registry, crew, or both."

Racine regarded her for several long moments. Cassandra could see the wheels turning in this head.

"Oh dear," he said. "The ship that reported all of this was the *El Dorado*, a trader that was returning to Oriflamme. She was captained by Julius Kerowin, who, if memory holds, served at least one full term in the Oriflammen defense forces."

"Do you have the sensor data he gave you?" Cassandra asked.

"Yes, of course."

"Then we had better take another look at it."

"Yes, my dear, I think we should indeed."

* * *

In one fell swoop, Cassandra had been able to win over Crusher, determine the destination of their next jump and gain some reinforcements, all with some well-placed computer wizardry. The Federation mini-comp she had recovered from the ruins of *Hokona* was a powerhouse for this kind of work. It was unlikely that any Coalition resident had seen a Tech Level-15 rated computer that sophisticated, or, more importantly, one with a user adept at using it to its fullest potential.

The sensor data from *El Dorado* had crumbled before her digital onslaught. The rough edges of the data's false manufacture were brought to the fore – enough so that Crusher's tone did an immediate about-face. Now, he was going to charter the remaining three merchant ships in the system to make a run to the scout base at Fjia, and warn all units at Apollo and Trybec. Now word would spread throughout the spinward Coalition worlds. While she had not entirely passed the torch she bore, she had at least ignited other torches off of it.

By the time *Cyllenius* was ready to launch again, she already had Grimsly working on a jump plot to the Buhler system two parsecs away, the supposed site of the Vampire invasion.

Cassandra was making a final walk around the ship when Racine sidled up next to her, flashing a smile over his perfect teeth. He was dressed in a spacer's kit with a duffle bag in hand.

"Going somewhere, Captain?" she asked, keeping her gaze on the ship as she continued her circuit.

"Of course. You don't think I'd let you get away that easy, do you?" His eyes sparkled. "Besides you'll need someone, a local, to explain things to the fleet. Namely, *moi*."

"You realize that I will continue to command the mission." It was said as a statement, not a question.

"Dear lady, I would have it no other way."

"The accommodations will be cramped, I'm afraid," she said. Everything about *Cyllenius* seemed to check out. It was time to take off.

"Oh, I think the accommodations will be most satisfactory, my dear."

"And why is that, Mr. Racine?"

"Well, I believe there are usually four staterooms on a scout/courier. Your corporate lads are double bunking in one, and your turncoat takes up another."

Your hold is already full, which means that I am, regrettably, forced to use one of the others to house my field tradecraft supplies.”

He threw a devilish smile her way.

“So, by my reckoning, I believe that makes us bunkmates.”

Black Bubble

Cyllenius made it to her jump point and slid neatly into the swirling grey eye that formed their gateway into jump space. Their course was now committed. Even if they had wanted to turn back, the rules of jump were clear – 168 hours would need to pass before the courier would return to normal space. They were now encased in an impenetrable black bubble, a prison from which there would be no escape for a standard week. The hands of the clock were still working against her, and a lot could happen on the outside during her transit time.

In the interim, all she could do was ensure the ship was running properly and think of her next move. She could also find a small measure of retreat in the book that Bonzo had given her before they parted ways at Kruyter. It was an old and weathered volume, but the pages were all intact and legible. There were, however, mysterious stains on the cover and spine. One corner of the back cover appeared to be slightly burnt. She harbored no doubts that the Marine had carried this volume with him into combat.

Cassandra liked the weight of the book, its heft, its substance, which wasn't lacking in the least when her eyes traced the words across the page. The story, *The Red Badge of Courage*, spoke to her in ways she would not, *could not*, have appreciated at any other time in her life. On some level the Marine had sensed that about her. They had known each other for such a short amount of time, but they were old souls together. It was almost enough for her to believe in past lives. Perhaps in some ancient incarnation the two of them had—

A terrific *CRASH* passed through Cassandra as though she were in the chaotic throes of an earthquake. She was immediately on her feet, but *Cyllenius* had become a wild animal and threw her hard into the bulkhead of her stateroom. Then, as suddenly as the disturbance had come, it was gone.

The alarm klaxon wailed as a red strobe light pulsed in time with what would be an accelerated heartbeat. Coming to her feet, she was out of her stateroom and in the bridge compartment before the ringing in her ears could subside.

“Report!”

“Explosion in the aft compartment, near the main environmental controls, ma'am!” Grimsly said, his face an uncharacteristic shade of red. “We're leaking atmosphere outside the ship.”

Once again Cassandra found her body moving in the correct direction before her conscious mind could send out instructions. There was a blur of movement and then she stood before the ugly wound in the corridor where the vital junction had been. Acrid smoke choked the air of the compartment. Through the grey wisps, she could see that the access panel had been shattered. What lay beyond was now a tangled mass of tubing, mangled wires and circuit boards belching forth showers of orange sparks.

The fire extinguisher came free of the wall bracket as Cassandra fired a jet of foam into the very heart of the ship's wound. Emergency fans whirled to life, removing the smoke to the recessed ventilation shafts.

Now she could see the extent of the damage, and her heart sank. It was an exercise in self-control not to lose her mental grip. Boots thundered on the deck as Racine came from his watch in the engine room at a dead run, sliding to a stop next to her.

"How bad is it?" he asked.

"Very," she replied. "The life support system has shut down, and what atmosphere we do have left is venting itself into jump space."

"Meaning what, exactly?"

"What it means, Captain, is that unless we are able to stop the leak, we will run out of air long before we reach Buhler."

* * *

"So," Cassandra began to the assembly on the cramped bridge, "here's the situation."

She waited a heartbeat to continue. It was necessary to do so, though time was working against them now more than ever.

"Environmentals are shot, as are the overrides, and we're leaking what we have left into jump space. I'm confident that I can make temporary repairs from our spares and stores, but the time it takes to effect such repairs is greater than what air we have left, even working in vacc suits until the end. The numbers do not add up, not if we continue to lose atmosphere at our current rate."

"So, we are dead men? Is that what you are saying, ma'am?" Grimsly asked. He was merely voicing what they all felt.

"If you are asking whether or not all hope is lost, then answer is 'no,' Mr. Grimsly. There is a way, though it will require an *unorthodox* approach to address."

"Which is?" Racine asked as he slouched against the aperture of the iris valve. "Pray don't keep us in suspense."

"We'll have to repair the breach from the outside of the ship."

Three pairs of eyes widened. Then, they were all talking over each other. They already knew who would have to step outside. On a personal level, she was touched by their concern.

"You can't be *serious*!" Grimsly said.

"But that would be *suicide*, ma'am," Kandt said.

"There must be another way, my dear," Racine said.

She silenced them with a raised hand.

"Those are the cards we have been dealt, pure and simple. I'm the only the one who has a hope of repairing the breach, therefore I must be the one to go." Her calm gaze scanned the compartment like a sensor sweep.

"Understand something – we cannot count on the ships from Aurora to assemble the fleet. That task still belongs to us, and *only* us."

They knew she was right. Her two-man crew was from the corporate circle, not the military. They had never had to make the hard call that could mean the difference between life and death, and now it showed. Only Racine was steady in the midst of the outpouring.

There were two things, however, that were working in her favor. For one, she had been living on borrowed time since *Hokona* had been captured. She had made her peace on Lambda-3 when all hope seemed irretrievably lost. If she fell now, she had the satisfaction of knowing that it would be in the service of something greater than herself, something ultimately worthwhile. Second, she would not go quietly into the howling void. Willing as she was to lay her life down if needed, she wasn't ready to die just yet. The debt she carried would not be dismissed that easily.

"Now, man your stations," she ordered, and they obeyed.

As she turned to step through the hatchway, Racine placed a gentle hand on her arm and leaned in to her.

"I'm not done with you yet, Cassandra Mayfield, not by a long shot," he said. "You come back alive, you hear?"

"I'll do my best."

* * *

The aft airlock dilated open. The swirling grey energy of jump space, mysterious and inscrutable, was there to greet her. The bands of energy crackled like a lightning bolt caught in a perpetual state of discharge. It seemed so chaotic, and yet it seemed that brief patterns emerged for infinitesimal instants before they were lost in its alien depths. It was hypnotic, like a strange symphony of light and dark played just for her.

There was so much they didn't know about jump space. They knew its strictures and vagaries, how to manipulate it for interstellar travel, but the thing itself remained an enigma. It was so beautiful, so eternal...so...

She tore her eyes away from the sight as the rising nausea began to manifest itself. It was unhealthy to stare into the abyss too long, for a variety of reasons. It was an imperative that she keep her eyes on the hull as she worked. Of equal importance would be her proximity to the ship. If she strayed more than a few meters from the hull, she might be absorbed and forever lost into the stuff of jump space itself.

With one final check of her vacc suit, she magnetically attached her lifeline near the external airlock panel. Then, she was outside, laying flat against the skin of *Cyllenius*, and negotiating her way over the hull.

Typical of her design, the scout/courier was shaped like a delta arrowhead, with the prow being the point. She had exited from the stern and was now making her way around the portside 'rear point.' It was a methodical routine of engaging and disengaging the clamps she held in her hands, aided at times by the electromagnets in her boots. *Clunk*, red to green, *sssst*, green to red, *clunk*, back from red to green, her ears translated the vibrations she felt through her arms. At intervals, she would attach a 'piton' to the ship to keep her lifeline flat

and true. It was painstaking. Her training as a professional spacer was now invaluable. The mental discipline to work in repetition without allowing distraction kept her pace. All other considerations faded into a black bubble of her own creation now.

Streaks of sweat began to work their way down her back, her neck and under her arms as she proceeded, the timer on her HUD's display a constant companion. Then, at length, she gained the rear point, and sat straddling it.

Now she could see the ghostly plume of escaping gasses that danced and swayed as they fell into the jump envelope above her. The exit point was one of the ship's external vents, and not an unnatural rupture. That was the good news.

The bad news lay in that she would have to fight the outdraft to seal it, lest it carry her with it on its way to annihilation.

Clunk, red to green, *sssst*, green to red. Hand over hand, quickly as she dared, she approached. Her piton locked in place, as she secured the line to the attachment points at her middle. Locking her feet in place, she came around into a crouched position and let go of one of the hand clamps, feeling the feathery jet pushing against her. Her free hand went to the external tool belt that wrapped around her upper thighs and withdrew a self-adjusting spanner wrench. Fitting it around the valve, she moved the wrench around in ratcheting half-circles. With each pass, the vent closed a tiny bit. Progress was won and made by millimeters.

The only warning that something was wrong came in a slight rumble beneath her feet.

The gush of atmosphere had been pent-up in a little corner of the ship. As it rushed towards freedom, it did so through the tight vent, which focused its force into a concussive blast. So near to the vent, there was no way Cassandra could avoid what was coming. She took the full brunt of it in the chest. The emergency gears and pulleys in her lifeline rig strained to lock in place. Overcome by the sudden force, her leg magnets disengaged. Her closest piton followed suit, flying from the ship to disappear into the swirling mass beyond. Now there was a fatal amount of slack in the line.

Cassandra felt her grip on the remaining clamp, the only thing now rooting her to the hull give way. For a split-second there was the sickening feeling of falling, of being out of control. Her stomach turned in icy knots.

As she fell away from the ship, now feet-first into the abyss, she struck out with her wrench...and looped it over the handhold of one of the magnetic clamps. With a flick of her thumb, the wrench tightened around the clamp. She held the handle of the wrench in a death-grip. For a moment, she dangled by one arm, the soles of her feet facing along what must have been the outer limits of survivability.

Against the swarm of gasses, Cassandra climbed the wrench, until she risked removing a hand to reclaim her grip on the opposite clamp. The sensation of closing her hand around it was like nothing she had felt before, but she did not linger on it. Tightening her abdomen, she executed a stomach crunch to jack-knife her body and plant her feet upon the hull once more.

Her head was buzzing; muscles were strained. The tendons in her shoulders seemed stretched to the breaking point. Dizziness and disorientation

washed over her, but she let it pass through her, just as she had been trained. When she opened her eyes, she centered herself and closed the vent the rest of the way. The miasma tapered down into coiling wisps, then finally to nothing.

For long moments she curled up to the ship like a baby to its mother, before she activated her helmet comm.

“Bridge, this is Mayfield. Mission accomplished.”

Lux in Tenebrous

Cyllenius precipitated exactly on cue, this time into the lonely expanses of the Buhler system. Once there had been a thriving culture numbering in the billions among the various artificial habitats in the system. Parts and spares had become increasingly rare as the shattered Imperium had continued down its long degenerative path. When the tendrils of Virus had come upon them at last, only a very few had made it to the last functioning ships that remained. Those left behind had died. Now the empty desolation of the system was palpable, even from where Cassandra stood in the engine room.

"Mr. Grimsly?" she said, and he took his cue.

"It's coming through now, ma'am," he said. "I'm picking up several faint contacts on the extreme edge of sensor range."

"The fleet?"

"No way to be sure at this distance," he replied, then added, "um...ma'am."

Grimsly and Kandt often forgot to add the honorifics and protocol befitting a commanding officer. That they made the effort to include it at all was enough to endear them both to her.

"Very well, set a course towards those contacts and proceed."

Cyllenius maneuvered and got underway at her best speed. Being a courier, she carried no ECM or defensive counter-measures of any kind save the canary system, and Cassandra felt the vulnerability of her position quite clearly.

Now that they had passed beyond the borders of Coalition space, there was no way to know what those contacts represented. They could be raiders, pirates, Mercantile Guild ships or Vampires. There was simply no way to know but to investigate.

Hours passed in relative silence, save for the soft thrum of the maneuver drive, which resonated through the whole of the ship. Each attended to their station, including Racine who, of his own initiative, manned the courier's single laser turret. He wasn't a gunner by any stretch of the imagination, but, by Cassandra's reckoning, a flesh and blood sophont at the controls was better than automation any day.

It was Grimsly that broke the silence.

"Incoming transmission, ma'am," he said from the bridge. "It appears to be an omnidirectional broadcast from the contact cluster."

"Pipe it through the shipwide channel."

It was a recorded message filled with static. A male voice was speaking:

"This is the Reformation Coalition ship Norfolk Victrix, do not approach, I say again, do not approach. Our squadron has been infected by Virus and must remain sequestered. We are self-imposing a quarantine to avoid further contamination. I say again, do not approach."

"The message repeats, ma'am."

"Understood. Status of the canary? Any activity?"

"Checking," Grimsly said and went off the comm.

The canary, the ship's one defense against infection, was nothing more than a partitioned memory bank of immense size. Virus could replicate itself through spatial transmissions or communications. Because the self-replicating Virus grew exponentially faster the more memory it had to work with, the canary provided the viral 'egg' a fertile place to mature that was cordoned off from all ship's systems. Once the strain grew smart enough to start reaching out from its digital womb, alerts would sound to let the crew know of the impending infection.

That was one of the reasons why Cassandra had to shake her head at the foolishness of *Norfolk's* commander. By broadcasting a warning, he might very well infect the ships that he hoped to warn away.

"Negative on the canary, ma'am. It hasn't so much as twitched."

"Thank you. Mr. Kandt, take us in."

"Confirm that last order, ma'am," Kandt replied. "Weren't we just warned away from approaching?"

"Indeed we were. Nevertheless, take us to *Norfolk's* position immediately."

"Okay."

It was clear he was not convinced, but did as she ordered.

They had found the fleet, or a portion thereof. Whatever state they were in we she arrived, her errand had not changed.

* * *

The squadron, which was approximately a third of the overall fleet sent to deal with the fabricated Vampires, lay clustered around a massive asteroid, each tethered in place and carefully positioned to be away from her sister ships like lampreys on a whale. Power levels fluctuated wildly, painting a picture of endless malfunctions, systems failures and chaos aboard every ship.

"Are you sure this is a good idea, my dear?" Racine said at her shoulder. "Might we also contract the Virus that they have?"

"The fleet has definitely caught a bug, but I doubt that it's Virus," Cassandra replied. "Otherwise, they would already be destroyed, dead or starting their new career as Vampire ships. That they are still here and malfunctioning is honestly a good sign."

"You think that it's some kind of malevolent program designed to simulate Virus?"

"Yes, that's it exactly."

Racine looked at her with eyes that danced.

"You grow more beautiful with each passing moment, my sweet," he said. "Have you ever considered a career in naval intelligence?"

She turned to him with a faint trace of humor coloring her face.

"Do try to contain your enthusiasm, Mr. Racine."

"Consider me duly...chastised."

Cassandra turned her attention to Grimsly.

"Contact *Norfolk Victrix* and inform them that I wish to speak to her Commander immediately."

Grimsly went about his work as Kandt put the courier into a parking position a moderate distance relative to the fleet. If their weapon systems were compromised, Cassandra had no intention of her ship becoming an accidental target.

“Response from the *Norfolk*, ma’am.”

“Let’s see it.”

The viewscreen filled with a dark-haired man in his late thirties, a frown engraved semi-permanently on his features. Behind him lights from his bridge flickered in a maddening strobe.

“This is Captain Maxwell “Landmine” Stokes. To whom am I speaking?”

“Lieutenant Cassandra Mayfield, Federation Navy, sir.”

“You’re a long way from home, Lieutenant,” he said, a streak of growing annoyance evident in his voice.

You have no idea.

“Why did you approach despite my warning?” he continued. “By coming in this close, you will almost certainly be infected.”

“Unlikely, sir. I don’t think we *can* be infected. I hav—”

“And why is that?” Stokes asked darkly. “Is the Federation immune to Virus now? I must have missed that memo.”

Cassandra forced herself to remain calm.

“If you will permit me to explain, sir, I believe that you are not infected by Virus. Rather, you are experiencing the effect of an enemy logic bomb, one that was likely planted deep into your computer system and timed to go off once you reached this system. That is why it is improbable we can be affected.”

Stokes’s scowl deepened as she spoke until his face was a mask of downward angles.

“Furthermore, we must take steps to rectify the situation and mobilize the fleet immediately. There is reason to believe that Oriflamme is now in open revolt against the Coalition. Your ships will be needed to counteract this threat.”

“We’ve been trying to ‘rectify’ the situation on our own, *Lieutenant*,” Stokes shot back. “We can’t keep our systems online long enough to even address the situation, much less correct it. You think that you can step in and solve what a hundred Coalition speciali—”

Racine put a hand on her shoulder and leaned in towards the comm pickup.

“Damn it, Max, kindly pull your head out of your posterior and listen.”

The Captain quirked an eyebrow in surprise.

“Crimson? That you over there?”

“In the flesh,” Racine replied. “Now if you’re quite done making an ass of yourself, perhaps you should listen to what this rather brilliant young lady has to say.”

Stokes motioned to Cassandra.

“Alright, you have my full attention. Dazzle me with your insight, Lieutenant.”

Cassandra’s patience held true, despite her bone-deep want to tell this ‘captain’ what to go do with himself.

"I need to come aboard, sir. I have functioning equipment that might allow me to gain a foothold in your system and isolate the infection. If I can do that, I believe I can restore your ships to an operational status."

Stokes again motioned, this time with a sweep of his hand that seemed to encompass the entirety of his ship and the fleet.

"Fine, do as you will. *Mi casa es su casa.*" Stokes terminated the connection and the screen went dark.

Racine sighed and shook his head.

"I feel I must apologize, my dear," he said. "I can't say that you have exactly been welcomed with open arms since you arrived within our humble star nation..."

Cassandra's passive blue eyes flashed like the doors of a furnace being thrown wide to reveal the burning flames beyond. The moment passed, and she was once again herself. For an instant, however, Racine had seen beyond the professionalism and glimpsed the vast anger and anguish that she had bottled up. It was...terrifying. He knew immediately that he had misspoken, and took steps to recover.

"Um...that is, except for *me*, of course." He flashed his most charming smile her way. "Still, I hope that the ill manners of this one oafish ship-handler will not divert you from your present course."

"No, Mr. Racine," she said with a dead-level gaze. "I can assure you that I entertain no such notions."

"Excellent well! I was hoping you would say that."

* * *

Cyllenius came around and made a hard connection against *Norfolk's* starboard airlock. The iris valve whirled open and Cassandra stepped onto the deck with Racine behind her. The pungent smell of burning insulation assaulted their nostrils. The officer of the deck was there, and did not look happy to see her. The compartment in which they stood was a disaster area with rivers of wires and tubing flowing across the deck. Lights blinked on off and sparks spewed at random intervals.

"Permission to come aboard?" she asked.

"Granted," the officer said. "Follow me to the bridge, please."

Together, the trio marched through the unsprung corridors until the hatch opened onto the command deck. If anything, the conditions were worse than what Cassandra had first thought. Stokes sat in the middle of the mess.

"Welcome to the madness, Lieutenant."

Cassandra gave a perfunctory nod as she unfolded her mini-comp and hunted for a hard connection port.

"How long have you been under siege, Captain?" she asked as her diagnostic subroutine came to life.

"Four days. Everything was fine when we arrived. We began our sweep of the system and detected multiple contacts around this asteroid. They bolted as we approached, but beamed a signal at us in their wake. At first, we believed that

our canaries had absorbed whatever it was, but then our systems began a cascade failure, and continued to degenerate to the level you see now. We practically tore the ship apart trying to hotwire it, but no dice. The best we can hope for is that our tethers hold us in place when our maneuvering drive fires off randomly.”

Cassandra was absorbing his words as she opened an access panel below the connection port and peered inside.

“Have you ever encountered or fought a Vampire before, Captain?” she asked, her hands never ceasing their work.

“Is this the point where you point out my lack of experience, and imply that a Federation crew would have been better, more prepared, and so on?”

“Maxwell...,” Racine said with a warning from the workstation he had appropriated for his own use.

“Well, Captain,” she glanced up, “I wasn’t going to say as much in front of your crew, but yes.”

Cassandra held the Captain’s stony gaze for a three-count before she smiled. It was infectious, and Stokes couldn’t resist it.

“So I’m being a boorish host,” he said. “Your point is well taken, and the answer to your question is ‘no.’”

Removing a small silver globe from her tools, Cassandra connected the power leads of the panel to the recessed contact points. The workstation stabilized, its lights now burning strong and sure. Now she could begin.

“Vampires wouldn’t run from your squadron, Captain. That’s your first clue. They would either come at you full-bore, or circle you like sharks if they were overmatched. All it would take is one ship of your formation to succumb. From there it’s just a matter of time.”

Her mini-comp reached out and took a ‘core sample’ of the code flowing through the ship’s veins. Protective firewalls kept it at bay while her counter-electronics protocols stripped its kinetics and began to dissect it.

“Second, if this were truly Virus that had you in its thrall, *Norfolk* would now be a Vampire, as would the rest of your fleet. Four days is an almost infinite amount of time to an artificial intelligence, certainly more than enough time to learn your systems and take them over. That your crew is still alive speaks volumes about what we’re facing, or rather what we *aren’t* facing.”

Using the stabilized panel as a base, she cut off the information routers to the bridge, isolating its systems from the rest of the ship. It would be a strain on the mobile generator she had installed, but not for long, not if she correctly executed her plan of attack. With a few more keystrokes, every station on the bridge righted itself, giving the impression, albeit thin, of normality.

Stokes looked around his bridge as though seeing it for the first time.

“Go on.”

“Lastly, you attempted to crosswire your systems in order to restore their functionality. Had you been infected by an actual strain of Virus, you would have promoted its spread rather than preventing it. The only hope you have of limiting the infection is to disconnect systems from each other. Otherwise, you are just

lowering the proverbial drawbridge and inviting it to take over more of your ship. Not to mention that you made one hell of a mess in the process.”

The analysis her computer displayed was not a hopeful one. While it confirmed her suspicion that Virus was not responsible for crippling the ship, the code of the responsible agent was adapting and evolving before her eyes. Already it was attempting to reassert its stranglehold on the command deck’s systems. Isolating it would be tricky, but far from impossible. The core algorithms of virtually every known computer virus, parasite, maleficent, trojan and boreworm were contained within the memory banks of her mini-comp.

She reached out through the network, giving each system the equivalent of a stimulant shot. It wouldn’t last, but perhaps it might light her way through the shadowy labyrinth of *Norfolk’s* command pathways. It was a war she waged in ones and zeroes for dominance. First, she secured the ship’s power plant, and with it the life support systems. The viral beast was not taking her assault in stride; it was already testing her parameters and devising means of flanking her maneuvers on the fly. She countered its every move as she methodically worked to exorcise its presence from the system.

This has to be a Pre-Collapse construct, she thought as she worked, one that was discovered and retasked. Its adaptive functions are far too sophisticated to be locally produced.

Racine joined in the fight once Cassandra cleared the way. Together the two of them were able to attack simultaneously from multiple quarters. Again and again the virus gave ground until it became corralled in one of the many subsystems. *Norfolk* was throwing off its chains and coming back to life.

“Um...sir?” the sensor tech said to Stokes.

“Yes, what is it?”

“I’m detecting a battery of jump precipitations, sir. I count at least eight so far. They are powering up and heading our way.”

Racine swiveled in his chair to face the viewscreen.

“Why do I get the feeling those bogeys aren’t exactly here on a relief effort?”

“Because they’re not,” Cassandra answered as she stood and dusted herself off. “The logic bomb was a just a prelude, a way to paralyze the fleet so that that they,” she indicated the unknown contacts on the screen, “could sweep in and finish the job.”

Stokes looked on with dawning horror.

“We’ll be sitting ducks, the whole fleet, all of us.”

“My dear Maxwell,” Racine said, “I believe that’s entirely the point.”

Crucible

It was now a matter of time *and* numbers. The eight hostile contacts had grown to ten as they shaped a least-time course towards *Norfolk’s* squadron. Individually their assassins were comparable in tonnage; some of them were not

proper warships and looked to be converted merchantmen. While the crippled Coalitions ships outnumbered their adversary by a wide margin, they might as well be target practice for a formation of ten ships that were fully functional and coordinated in effort.

Cassandra felt the tension on the command deck stretch tight. *Norfolk's* command crew all looked to Stokes for leadership, but at the moment his ships were a fleet in name only. The enemy ships were only minutes away from effective missile range. If they continued to close into energy range, and right now they could do so with impunity, they could burn Stokes's fleet from the stars in detail.

She forced herself to relax and drew in a deep breath. Just as she had trained in the Academy, Cassandra imagined all the danger, the peril, the fear were all in the air that now filled her lungs. She acknowledged it for what it was as she held it for a six-count, before all of it exited her mind as she exhaled. Now she could work. With a glance at Racine, she knew that he was ready as well. The two of them began, ignoring the tactical display which showed their executioners moving inevitably toward them.

Code and numbers scrolled before her eyes as her mini-comp cross-referenced the statistics, responses and data. The logic bomb had injected an agent into the system that was adapting on its own, learning from Cassandra's actions against it. She had it largely walled up, but it was not the current state of *Norfolk* that concerned her. No, if the agent was that good at adapting, then each ship would require a separate approach to contain as each agent would have mutated natively. Unless...

If she could isolate the source code, then she could attack the agents on their base level. Then it wouldn't matter what modifications they had made to themselves. Of course, to do that and clear each ship for action, it would take time...the one thing that seemed to perennially work against her.

Her first goal was to scrub *Norfolk's* systems clean, including fire control. It was essential to have an untainted platform with which to branch out to the rest of the fleet.

Purging it for the first time will take the greatest effort, she thought. Turnaround times should go down dramatically after that. I hope.

* * *

Missiles fired as the enemy ships closed. There was an agonizing period as the combined salvo homed in on their targets. There was no way to know where the hammer would fall until the moment arrived.

RCS *Falchion* died first in a blinding final quietus, followed a few moments later by *Lysander*. Their death throes extended outwards to damage *Cataphract* and *Janissary* with their passing. Mercifully, a fringe of lifeboats dotted the space around the mammoth asteroid.

The enemy squadron was leaving nothing to chance. Had hubris been a larger factor, the ships might have killed their forward acceleration and come to

rest relative to the asteroid to prosecute their attack. Without a means to defend themselves, or the ability to maneuver, the enemy could stand off and finish them. These ships, however, were in the position to continually make passes at the asteroid on a three-lobed polar plot. If correctly executed, it would be enough to scour the area of ships and life. The enemy was already following a parabolic course around to strike at them again, and the damage they had caused was very apparent.

Forty-two lives had just been lost in an instant.
And it was only the first pass.

* * *

The agent was tenacious. Each system it affected gave it the opportunity to morph and rewrite itself. Cassandra methodically unlocked *Norfolk's* turrets and defensive systems, smashing the agent flat whenever it popped its head up or tried to retake a system she had already secured. There wasn't enough time to install a Federation firewall; all she could do was to bolster the Coalition version that was already in place.

"I think I have something, my dear," Racine said from his station. "Perhaps we've been going about this the wrong way."

Cassandra tilted her head, a sign for him to continue.

"If this awful critter wants to reformat itself when it gets into a new system, perhaps we should let it. If we can catch it 'in the chrysalis' as it were, maybe we can catch a glimpse of it while it's in transition."

"Now that, Mr. Racine," Cassandra said, "is a very good idea."

"I knew you kept me around for some reason," he quipped, "extraordinary good looks notwithstanding."

The bait would have to be tantalizing. While the agent was not truly sentient, it would have a built-in priority of systems coded into it. If one of those systems weakened, it would have no choice but to seize the initiative and attack.

So far her mini-comp had not been able to identify the agent in its entirety, but that was likely because she was seeing the programming in an altered state. If Racine was right, it just might give her the insight she desperately needed.

Her hands flew unerringly over the holographic console with the express purpose of weakening the firewall that protected the life-support system. Then she waited behind a secondary 'fire break' for the agent to make its move.

Shadowy tendrils reached out to probe the hole in the life-support. Satisfied that it could gain a toehold in the most crucial of systems, it began to replicate itself.

As it did so, Cassandra shut the firewall behind the agent while simultaneously widening the fire break, effectively trapping it on both sides. Then her computer pinned it down like an insect and began disassembling it into its elementary parts. The kinetics of it, she found, were quite advanced, more so than she had suspected from the onset. The symbols and numbers crisscrossed and overlapped, until...

There.

The mini-comp nailed a fragment of the source code, enough to identify the foe they faced. It was a relic virus called "Ice Nine." First employed by Solomani saboteurs against the Imperium, it was second only to Virus itself as digital malefactors went. Only the Coalition's canary system had given it enough false leads not to have destroyed their ships outright.

Now that she had identified her opponent, she could eradicate it. However, the profile of the logic bomb told her of Ice Nine's final, retributive action once it realized it faced extinction.

"It's going to galvanize itself in each system," Cassandra said to Stokes. The Captain was studiously watching the tactical display. "Once we beam the anodyne to each ship, we'll need to redeem each system separately in waves."

Stokes could see the enemy coming about to make their second pass, and Cassandra read the horror in his eyes.

"Will it work for all ships?"

"Yes, I've isolated what we're up against. Administering an effective vaccine is going to take—"

"Time?"

"Correct, Captain, though I have an idea on how to buy us some. Do I have your permission to proceed?"

"*Carte blanche*, Lieutenant."

Cassandra turned back to her computer and began running computations and simulations. The enemy would target a separate cluster of ships this time around since their approach would bring them in on a different attack angle. It would require bypassing a few safeties, but if it worked...

* * *

The enemy ships had allowed themselves enough time to reload each missile tube before looping back to make another pass on the helpless ships. They had enough in the way of magazine space to make an additional pass at full salvo strength. After that, the four actual warships in the formation would continue to hurl missiles at a distance, but the real killing would be handled by lasers from then on. Their orders had clearly stated to concentrate fire on only a few targets each pass, to ensure their total destruction. High Command had no desire to recover these ships. Thus, they were a total write-off, along with their crews.

While certain elements within the ten ships relished the idea of the raw fear their predatory passes invoked, most of their ranks believed that the paralyzed ships were so disoriented and scrambled that they would hardly know they were under attack. Death would come quickly, by surprise, without undue suffering or resistance. Perhaps they were murderers, sent to traitorously eliminate helpless ships, but there was no reason they couldn't be civil about it.

Una salus victis nullam sperare salutem.

The only hope of the vanquished is no hope at all.

With that in mind, the formation fired off its second dense salvo, targeting three ships this time. Last time, had, after all, been a little bit of overkill. This time, they were flinging nukes instead of contact warheads.

That was why it came as a surprise when most of the ships moored on that face of the asteroid answered the missiles with a coordinated point defense. Missiles began to disappear at an alarming rate until the last one winked out well before reaching its target. The immobilized fleet was demonstrating that they weren't exactly helpless. Perhaps the viral agent had not fully disseminated through them.

It was too late on this pass to decelerate and bring their energy batteries to bear; they were already too far along on their curved flight path. It mattered little – their next pass would target a new selection of ships. The defiant ones could wait their turn.

And then...

As the formation cleared the sensor-blinding asteroid, two contacts appeared on their scope. One, it seemed, was a scout/courier coming in at an oblique angle, one calculated to allow it to fire its one laser turret at extreme range while minimizing its time within their own firing envelope. They would get their shot, too, as it would catch them as their flaring drive sections faced away from the asteroid.

The second contact, however, was an even greater threat. Their sensors read a fully operational *Victrix*-class attack sloop rising from the far side of the asteroid and unleashing a decent salvo of missiles.

Once the missiles closed, they exploded in spheres of nuclear fire, extending their laser rods to focus the incredible power into a X-ray laser beam. The X-rays moved at the speed of light to sink deep into the flanks of TNV *Napoleon*. Her power levels fluctuated wildly as hull plating boiled away.

In the same moment that the wounded patrol cruiser fell away from its sisters, the scout/courier fired. The bolt reached out through space to transfer its energy into the converted merchantman, *Golden Dream*. She carried paper-thin armor. Worse, the hastily rigged magazine in her hold had not been fortified. At first her power signature sputtered and went dark, until a single explosion was followed by a second, then a third. The explosions began to overlap upon themselves until the merchant was erased from existence utterly.

The squadron commander looked on the situation with disgust. He would make one final pass at the asteroid. If they continued to resist, then there was always a contingency plan he could enact.

This round had gone unequivocally to them, but both sides knew that the third round would be the most decisive.

* * *

Across the fleet, more systems came online by the moment. Cassandra had assigned a priority to each ship, but had cleared the comm systems across the board first of all. That opened the way to unlock the systems one by one. The

area of space was a crucible, and she was burning out the impurities to reveal the steel that lay beneath.

The fleet was starting to come alive, slowly, like a bear awakening from a long hibernation, but growing stronger by the moment. Besides *Norfolk*, she had successfully decontaminated *Jannisary*, *Suleiman Victrix* and *Lirgishkhunan*. That gave them five ships, including *Cyllennius*, to the enemy's eight. *Norfolk* would need to stay tucked into the asteroid to complete the cleansing, and the courier was not equipped to withstand the punishment of a directed conflict.

So, the three Coalition ships detached from the asteroid and went out to meet their traitorous sisters, playing the role of matador long enough for the others to get into the fight.

Their prospects of coming back were not good.

Cassandra watched their tactical icons break from the pack and get underway.

We've got to buy them more time, she thought, *but how?*

That was when an idea arrived in a flash that lit up in her head like a supernova. *The same way the enemy delayed the fleet long enough for them to arrive.*

She had to admit, there was a sort of poetic justice to it.

The mini-comp was largely automating the retrieval process, but its system resources were vast, and she needed only a few moments to bring her plan to the edge of fruition. If the enemy was as paranoid of discovery as she thought...

A few keystrokes later, she used *Norfolk's* communications array to broadcast the source code of the Ice Nine agent at the enemy ships.

* * *

Suddenly things had started to go wrong. At first, the Oriflammen Commander had had a sense of satisfaction when he had destroyed one of the three ships that came to face him, and scored hits on the other two. But then, as he closed, all hell had broken loose.

Their coordination and fire control had collapsed for reasons unknown, as had their communications. Power systems became unreliable, maneuvering uncertain. The Commander could not account for why this had happened.

It was when he felt a frigid burst of air on the back of his neck that he realized the environmental systems were compromised, but more importantly, he knew why.

The Ice Nine agent could not replicate itself through communications. If his ships were suffering from exposure now, then that meant that the logic bomb had been installed in *his* ships *before* they launched. Of course, he thought bitterly, High Command would not want inconvenient crewmembers around to be captured or interrogated in the event that his squadron was compromised. The firewalls surrounding the life-support systems had been intentionally removed and triggered to go critical if the situation warranted.

That meant that they were all dead men. Pretty soon the atmosphere would vent itself into space and leave them all in airless vacuum if the Coalition ships didn't kill them first. That none of his people were in vacc suits just then, including himself (and now he knew why orders had encouraged a 'shirt sleeve' environment for the mission), meant that getting blown out of space might be a mercy.

Someone over there had sent the activation code to his ships and signed their death warrants. But, there was still one more move he could make that would assure a measure of victory still, even if he wasn't going to be around to enjoy it.

Well, it seemed the Great Endeavor was about to receive many more martyrs to the cause today. He could console himself with that, at least.

Viva la Revolution!

* * *

Racine sat bolt-upright in his seat, and turned around to face both the Captain and Cassandra.

"Have we restored full maneuverability to all ships? I'm looking for the answer of 'yes.'"

Cassandra checked the readouts and nodded her assent.

"*Spahi* was the last one, though she still hasn't regained full fire control."

"Captain, I recommend that we move the fleet away from the asteroid, immediately."

"On what basis?" Stokes inquired.

"I'm monitoring some strange traffic on the fleet-wide channels. Some crewmembers are unaccounted for. Now, in the heat of battle, on a ship, we're either looking at desertions, or..." his voice trailed off.

"Saboteurs," Cassandra finished for him.

"Brilliant and vivacious as ever, my dear," Racine said. "Likely, the saboteurs quietly disengaged from their posts as soon as the enemy squadron appeared so that they would escape obliteration. Since we're still gathered around this rock, I think I can fathom the act of sabotage they have in mind."

Stokes whipped around to the comm specialist.

"Tell all ships to get clear immediately! Put as much distance between us and the asteroid as possible, full power! *Go!*"

On the tactical display, the ships of the fleet broke off and scattered from the asteroid that had once been their refuge. Further out, *Suleiman Victrix* and *Lirgishkhunan* had angled off and left the malfunctioning enemy behind them.

"Sir, unknown shuttle departing the asteroid," the sensor tech said. "It's headed towards the enemy's position."

"And those," Racine pointed at the glowing icon, "would be our resident turncoats getting out of Dodge. *That* should tell us something."

Norfolk Victrix's engines strained as no reserve was left untapped.

Cassandra had a quiet moment to wonder just where the saboteurs thought they could escape *to*, when a string of world-shattering nuclear

explosions blossomed to life across the asteroid's surface, creating in their wake a miniature asteroid belt.

Namesake

"Absolutely not," Stokes said, crossing his arms. "I've lost five ships out of my formation, and several others are damaged. My duty is to repair to my home port at Aurora and defend it, not chase off after unsubstantiated threats, or link up with the rest of the fleet."

"Spoken like a true Auroran," Racine said, ignoring the vitriolic look Stokes bestowed upon him.

"With respect, sir," Cassandra said, "that is exactly what you need to do. I'm afraid that someone went to quite a bit of trouble to dispose of your fleet, Captain. They wanted you out of commission or out of position, and were willing to pay hard currency to bring that about."

"All the more reason to cover Aurora," Stokes countered. "If this is all part of some nefarious plot by Oriflamme, then who is to say that Aurora and her fleet yards are not the ultimate target?"

Cassandra waited for him to finish and retained her calm. With the exception of *Hornet's* CO, it was becoming routine to have to overcome the agendas of the Coalition commanders to get them to see the light.

"Captain Stokes," she began, "can we agree that the Oriflammen government, or some portion thereof, is responsible for the destruction of those five ships and the attempted destruction of the others?"

"Yes, we can."

That point was pretty obvious. The saboteurs who had gone missing from each ship had been almost exclusively of Oriflammen heritage or relation. Plus, two of the warships that attacked them had been patrol cruisers from Oriflamme or its administered holdings. At least one of the merchantmen had a registry from there as well.

"Excellent. Now, if Oriflamme is opting for a surprise attack, what objective would allow them to supplant the leadership of the Coalition, essentially in one fell swoop?"

Stokes narrowed his eyes.

"I suppose you want me to say 'Aubaine,' is that right?"

"It would help, yes," Cassandra said. "Aubaine is their greatest rival, and the capital of the Coalition. If their goal was to draw you out of position, then Buhler is not so far that you couldn't get back there in one jump, assuming you evaded the traps they laid for you."

Cassandra pointed to the holographic star chart.

"That same tactic *would* have the effect of putting you six parsecs away from Aubaine, which is just far enough that it would take you more than two jumps to get there, once again assuming that the ships survived and your fleet was fully alerted to the threat."

"That's conjecture," Stokes said. "You're asking me to abandon my planet of responsibility based on information that you have inferred rather than deduced. While I can appreciate all you've gone through to bring—"

Cassandra gave him a level stare, but kept her features neutral.

"With respect, Captain, I sincerely doubt it."

Stokes closed his mouth with an audible *click*.

"To be blunt, sir," she continued, "Aurora is of a lesser strategic importance than the capital. If I'm wrong, then Aurora can be retaken, especially with a combined force from Aubaine."

Stokes glared at her, but she continued unperturbed.

"But, if you're wrong, then you risk leaving Aubaine to its own devices. If the Technocracy has a force capable of neutralizing the capital's fleet, then they can certainly do the same to Aurora, and with far less effort. Standing alone, your ships won't make a bit of difference, Captain," Cassandra said. "None at all."

Stokes opened his mouth to speak, but Cassandra held out a hand to forestall it.

"My patience is wearing a little thin at being the one who continually points out that the sky is falling, only to have my warnings fall on deaf ears. Now I realize that my name is Cassandra, Captain, and that people have been naturally disinclined to listen to those who bear that name since the Greeks fought the Trojans, but I would ask you to put that aside just this once. What matters now is that I am trying to prevent you from making a grave error – one that will likely result in a catastrophic number of deaths. Aubaine *needs* you, Captain, and if you still can't see that despite all this, then you risk having no Coalition at all."

"Ouch," Racine said, admitting her point in the Captain's stead. "She's too polite to mention that she just saved the fleet, and all our lives. But, I suppose if that Herculean effort is not enough to convince you, well then..."

"I'll be moving on to Trybec aboard *Cyllenius* with or without you, Captain Stokes, and soon," Cassandra said. "So I ask you, what shall it be?"

She held his hard stare with one of her own. Calm logic was not getting through, so she had upped the ante. Perhaps emotion was the only real language these people could understand.

Stokes uncrossed his arms and straightened to his full, impressive height. At first, Cassandra thought he was trying to intimidate her with his presence, but something changed about him, like a toggle switch being thrown.

"You've made your point," Stokes admitted, "and your service to us here cannot be overstated. We may have lost five ships in the battle, but we gained nine more thanks to your actions. It seems that you've known just what to do since you arrived, Lieutenant, which lives up to the Federation Navy's reputation."

Cassandra was taken aback. Was he, a Coalition officer, finally admitting that she was...*right*? Would wonders never cease?

"Therefore, you should depart immediately for Trybec," Stokes said with a measure of finality. "I can assure you that this fleet will not be far behind."

* * *

"Steady as she goes, Mr. Kandt," Cassandra said from her station in the engine room. "Time to jump point?"

“Call it five hours, ma’am, on our current course and speed.”

“Thank you.”

Cassandra returned her attention to the courier’s engines. Kruytercorp might be a backwater megacorporation with a faltering profit margin, but she had to admit that *Cyllenius* was well-kept and maintained. The interior was austere with very little in the way of creature comforts, but, to Cassandra, it was everything she had needed it to be.

Within these clean corridors, she had been able to heal. The crisis in Buhler had served to underscore the fire she had recaptured from the ghosts of Lambda-3, and how her thoughts had shifted. Already, the workstation and repeater plot were becoming familiar, as much as her old berth aboard *Hokona* had been. It amazed her how short a time it had taken the little ship to feel like home.

Now *Cyllenius* was bound for the Trybec system. The Coalition base there was where the larger part of the fleet had gone on their route to the Kresek system. The real prize there was the greater part of the Coalition’s *Aurora*-class clippers. The reconfigurable “fish bone” ships represented the height of Coalition naval power, such as it was. If properly fitted out, the clippers could be quite formidable to deal with the local threat. Many of them also possessed recovered jump drives with a sufficient stride to reach Aubaine directly from Trybec.

Of course, she would again be in the position of having to convince the Coalition commander on the scene that what she said was true. If he or she proved to be another blustering, self-important jackass such as Standridge or Stokes, then the game would begin anew. Cassandra, however, was a quick study. She would be ready next time.

“Already planning your next move, my dear?”

She looked up to see Racine leaning against the hatchway.

“I’m thinking of how best to put your talents to use, Mr. Racine.”

His eyes brightened. “Truly? I have a few suggestions in that regard if you’re game.”

“Concerning Trybec, that is,” Cassandra amended.

“Ah, well, whatever it is, I’m sure it will be brilliant, my dear. I’ve found our partnership thus far to be most...agreeable.”

“Excellent, Mr. Racine,” Cassandra said, rewarding him with a smile.

“Thank you for volunteering.”

Firebrand

"Precipitating...now, ma'am," Grimsly said. A moment later, the strange sensation of transiting to real space washed over the four souls aboard *Cyllennius*. The jump shields retracted from the forward viewports to reveal the starry nightscape of the Trybec system. This jump, in contrast to their last one, had gone without incident.

"Accessing the nearest sensor beacon, ma'am," Grimsly said over the comm. "It's coming through now."

Grimsly took in a surprised breath.

"They're here...the fleet, they're *still* here!"

Cassandra felt her heart skip a beat. She had hoped at the very least to warn the scout base on the planet, but this...she had caught them in time! Perhaps for once time would be on their side. It seemed that by the law of statistical averages, it was bound to happen.

"What's their position?"

Grimsly used the computer to extrapolate where the ships were now in relation to *Cyllennius*, using the timestamp as his datum point.

"They are on approach to a jump point. I estimate that they require only another hour or so before they jump. They are a hair over ten light minutes out from our own precipitation point, ma'am."

Lucky star, keep on shining.

"Very well, put us on an intercept course with the fleet at maximum power, and begin broadcasting. I trust that meets with your approval, Mr. Racine?"

"Fortune favors the bold, my dear," Racine said from the turret. "I'm sure that my humble auth-codes will pale in comparison to the pageantry that *you* intend to provide."

"A noble fiction, shall we say?" Cassandra asked.

"Indeed, my dear," he replied, stifling a laugh. "Indeed."

In space, a kind of message was broadcast from *Cyllennius* that most military personnel born in the New Era would have only read about in history books. In the old Imperium, there existed a set of emergency protocols used by the nobility – normally of ducal rank or higher – to grant them immediate access to Imperial facilities, fleets, personnel or restricted materiale of any kind. It was, in essence, the Alexander's Sword to the Gordian Knot of red tape, a way to cut through the layers of bureaucracy to respond to security threats that in the modern day were of an unimaginable magnitude. Collectively, these one-use protocols were designated "Argon Blue."

And now, an Argon Blue protocol was being beamed to the Coalition fleet. If that didn't get their attention out there, nothing would.

Of course, Cassandra possessed no such code. She was, however, familiar with the format of the protocol, and substituted Racine's "Case Cobalt" authentication codes to underpin the gravity of her arrival.

When the ‘incoming message’ alarm bleeped twenty-one minutes later, Cassandra knew that she had someone’s attention. That meant that they responded to her message within a minute of receiving it.

The head and shoulders of a man appeared on the forward viewscreen, a full Captain by his rank insignia. Though he possessed hard and chiseled facial features, and a shock of red hair that stood straight up in a flat top, it was the man’s fiery eyes that immediately seized Cassandra’s attention. Here was a man that meant business, and Cassandra immediately liked him even before he began to speak.

“Attention *Cyllenius*,” he began, “this is Pat “Who Me” Ritter, commanding RCS *Thunderchild*. Your message has been received. Now, as I see it, one of two things is going on over there. Either, one, someone is playing a joke, in which case the humor is *not* appreciated, or, two, a surviving Imperial Duke is trying to commandeer my ships. In that case, I hate to be the one to tell you, Your Grace, but you can humbly stuff it. We don’t cotton to Imperialism around here anymore.”

He snorted into the video pickup.

“Either way, hoss, someone’s got some serious explaining to do, and I can’t *wait* to hear what it is. Ritter out.”

* * *

Cyllenius once again made a hard connection, this time with *Thunderchild*. With Racine’s codebook, she had successfully stopped the fleet from entering jump. They couldn’t ignore the Case Cobalt codes, which their own systems had authenticated.

That hadn’t stopped Ritter from exchanging some rather heated comments with Cassandra as she drew closer to the fleet, however. There was no denying that the man was a firecracker, a fire-eater, but even a passing mention of a deep conspiracy against the Coalition was enough for him park his fleet and bring her aboard to hear the full story in person.

Nothing was certain, of course. It was very possible that she might face the same resistance from Ritter as from the others. Her initial read on the situation, however, told her that this man would at least hear her out.

The man himself was there to meet her party at the airlock, accompanied by a several Marines in Coalition light battledress. To her surprise, he was a little shorter than she was, but his personality did not fail to fill the compartment to capacity.

“Welcome aboard *Thunderchild*, ‘Your Grace’,” he said, extending his hand in welcome. She clasped his hand and found his grip to be every bit as firm and confident as she could have expected. “And for that little stunt, I think that should be your taccode – Lieutenant Cassandra “Your Grace” Mayfield. You’ve certainly earned it.”

“If that is the price one must pay, then so be it,” Cassandra said with a sigh. There were those silly, impractical call-signs again, but in this case, it truly was a sign of welcome.

"And who might this be?" Ritter said, turning to the manacled man guarded by Grimsly and Kandt.

"This," Cassandra introduced, "is Isel Voniv. He's been my guest aboard *Cyllenius*, and someone who wishes to unburden himself to you, Captain. I think you'll want to hear what he has to say."

She leaned over to him and gave what could only charitably be called a smile.

"He's also going to comport himself as a perfect gentlemen, isn't that right, Mr. Voniv?"

Voniv recoiled from her like a frightened animal. At his hesitation, Cassandra prompted him with a raised eyebrow.

"Well?"

"Yes...of course. The very...m-model of...um, manners, ma'am."

"You see, Captain? He's at your disposal, as am I."

Ritter noted the man's reaction to the young woman with a combination of curiosity, humor and approval.

"In that case, let's repair to the officer's mess," Ritter said. "I have the notion that I'll need to be sitting down for this one."

* * *

"So, let me get this straight," Ritter said across from Voniv. "Not only are the Oriflammen planning a *coup d'etat*, but we have reason to believe they are already in open revolt. And they might, just *might*, have brought in the Solee Navy – our avowed enemy, I might point out – to help them do the heavy lifting. Now is that what I'm to understand?"

He swept his gaze across Cassandra and Voniv.

"Yes, Captain," Cassandra replied. "That's it in a nutshell."

"Well it sounds like the god-damned *worst case scenario* if you ask me. Now I know Oriflamme can be a galaxy-sized pain in the posterior at times...make that *most* times, but I wouldn't have guessed they'd have the brass below the belt to attempt something like *this*."

Cassandra crossed her arms under her breasts and regarded the man in front of her. He had listened to all the evidence from the victim of current events and one of its instigators. Voniv had poured out his soul, confessing his many sins and emphatically denying that he knew things had been so bad aboard Lambda-3. He had taken in the evidence that Cassandra presented him, from the falsified "Vampires" that *El Dorado* had reported, to the information and reports that *Hornet's* intelligence officer had sent with *Cyllenius* when the two ships had parted company at Kruyter.

The heart of the problem was that the indicators strongly pointed to an armed insurrection, but everything was circumstantial. Where Standridge and Stokes sandbagged themselves behind the many unknowns in the equation, Ritter had looked beyond all that and found the rather bleak big picture behind it all. His musings now stemmed from his disbelief. Deep down, he had accepted

her message for the truth she knew it was. Now he was just coming to terms with it in his own way.

"If what you say is true, then Naval Intelligence really dropped the ball on this one," Ritter gave Racine a pointed stare. "The Coalition may have already fallen while we've been gallivanting around on what is tantamount to an interstellar snipe hunt."

"You'll have no arguments from me on that particular point, Captain," Racine said from where he leaned on the wall. "If not for the valiant efforts of the lovely Lieutenant Mayfield here, then it is likely that events would have continued to slide ever out of control. So, I believe the 'worst case scenario' in my opinion would have been the situation we now face without the slightest knowledge that it was transpiring at all."

"Not exactly the silver lining I was looking for," Ritter said.

"Nor I," Racine answered. "However, as I've heard it said, these are the cards that we've been dealt. Now the question is – how shall we play our hand?"

"We repair, retool and reset," Cassandra said and both men looked at her as she continued. "The Buhler fleet will be here soon, and we'll want to get underway as soon as they arrive. Still, we have a few days. That gives us a window of opportunity to return this fleet to the planet, drop the cargo pod configuration which is now no longer valid, and reset ourselves to the goal at hand."

"Just what are you suggesting?" Ritter asked.

"What I have thought from the beginning. We assemble a fleet of as many ships as we can lay hands on, and jump directly to Aubaine. If the situation is under control, then I will be happy to take full responsibility for upsetting the apple cart and we can chalk it up to a grand fleet exercise."

"And if Aubaine has already fallen when we arrive?" It was Racine that asked the unspoken question Ritter wanted to broach. Being an intelligence officer, his job was to ask questions and seek answers.

"Then we introduce ourselves to the new regime, and see about testing their resolve," Cassandra said without emotion.

"Make the bastards pay for it, eh?" Ritter's eyes burned dangerously. If there was going to be some desperate, last-ditch, shoot-from-the-hip effort to save the Reformation Coalition from certain annihilation, there was no way he was going to miss it.

"Lady, that's *exactly* the kind of thing I like to hear," *Thunderchild's* commanding officer said as he stood. "Well then, let's get this show on the road!"

Line In The Sand

The fleet of *Aurora*-class clippers, escort ships, patrol cruisers and a varied array of other warships returned to Trybec and went about changing their mission profile. Now, instead of carrying as much armament as humanly possible to deal with a Vampire threat, the clippers were being stripped down and converted into jack carriers to bear those that didn't have the legs to make Aubaine in a single jump of four parsecs.

Thunderchild would carry the 100-ton *Cyllenius* like a cargo pod along its spine, along with another scout/courier and Trybec's *Shukugan*-class system defense boat, *Valley Forge*. That left very little room for anything else to maintain jump-4 status.

Fast service refueling stations were being fabricated from scratch or built upon the existing facilities. Once the Buhler task force arrived, they would find the turnaround for topping off their tanks with refined fuel dramatically improved. Work shifts ran around the clock in an unceasing coordination effort. Ritter knew how to crack the whip when needed, knowing that the week spent in jump would prove sufficient to make up for any lost hours of sleep in the present.

The serendipity of the situation was that the enemy had unintentionally concentrated Coalition Exploratory Service and Navy units into just two locations. The nearby systems of Rohit, Vezina and Apollo had all been stripped bare to put Ritter's taskforce together. If and when *Norfolk Victrix* arrived, the combined fleet would represent nearly all of the military power on the spinward half of the Coalition. All of which was good, since they were likely to encounter the fleet from Oriflamme's half of the Coalition space.

The unfortunate part of the situation was the numerous Oriflammen servicemen and women that had to be removed from their posts for fear of being mutineers, saboteurs or both. The Oriflammen, at Racine's request, would be left behind on the planet in protective custody until the situation could be sorted out in greater detail. All other crewmembers had to be carefully re-screened in a myriad of ways before being allowed back at their duty stations. Ritter had no illusions that a number of innocent people were going to draw the short straw in this whole affair, but there was nothing to be done about it. He could, however, prevent the situation from degenerating into a witch hunt.

Racine had proven to be quite adept at ferreting out traitors and finding holes in stories. Voniv had even cooperated in the search by corroborating what information he could. Like many of the malcontents that were smoked out, Voniv had been privy to only a piece of a much larger operation. The flow of information had been compartmentalized and tightly regulated to prevent the overall movement from being compromised should a leak manifest itself. Voniv's reward would be to remain behind on Trybec with the others instead of continuing on his journey with the cold-eyed Lieutenant from the Federation Navy.

He found that to be a more than equitable trade.

As for those who did make the cut to come along with the fleet, Ritter had spelled it out for them, sparing no detail and sugarcoating it not at all. There was no way to know what the status of Aubaine would be when they arrived. It might well be a cratered, smoking ruin by the time they precipitated in the system. It would require the ultimate resolve to see this one through, Ritter knew. Any who came along might not come back. They had to know that going in.

There was no room for 'gun-point patriotism' at this stage. It would be an all-volunteer force going to Aubaine, and Ritter would have it no other way. In essence, he had drawn the proverbial line in the sand. Those who crossed it would be in until the end.

Cassandra Mayfield had been the first one to step forward.

Ritter had welcomed her formally to the cause, be it a lost one or not.

As *Thunderchild's* CO pondered these many things in his office, the door chime sounded.

"Come on in," Ritter said.

The door opened and Lieutenant Mayfield stepped into the compartment. She kept her arms clasped behind her in the acknowledgment that she was entering *his* space, the inner sanctum.

"Well, speak of the devil," Ritter motioned for her sit down. "What can I do for you, Your Grace?"

She sat down and crossed her legs, lacing her fingers together over the space above her stomach.

"I have a request, Captain, one of a somewhat...discreet nature."

"Go on."

"I would like to make use of one of your small craft. A shuttle or pinnace would suffice."

"For what purpose?"

"I need to make contact with someone on the planet whose loyalty to the Coalition, in your estimation, is absolutely above reproach."

Ritter leaned back from where he sat and looked out of the viewport.

"I have just the man...name of Horatio Rand. A remnant, in fact, from before the Imperial Collapse. Missed Virus too, since he was making like a icicle in the low berth of an adrift survey cruiser from that time – *Altinak*, I think it was. He thawed a few years back and did a partial tour aboard my old ship, *Ashtabula* as logistician before being medically discharged. From one to another, he's one tough son of a bitch."

Cassandra nodded, "He sounds like exactly what I was looking for, sir. May I ask what post he holds there?"

"As fate would have it, he's the Base Commander. The man doesn't like jump space, makes him ill. Hates low berths even more, so the Admiralty parked him here where he could do the most good for the longest amount of time. Now, will he work?"

Cassandra beamed at him. It was the first, and likely the only time, that he would see such a warm, genuine smile grace the lips of this young woman.

"Yes, Captain. You might say that he's uniquely qualified for what I have in mind."

* * *

Soon afterward, *Norfolk Victrix* and the rest of Stokes's squadron precipitated into the Trybec system with prize crews aboard the ships captured at Buhler...and they were not alone.

Ships from the coreward bases of Fija, Eos and Nike Nimbus had arrived, promptly warned by the messengers from the Aurora base. Virtually every armed ship belonging to Coalition forces that could be reached in time was now present. Ritter wasted no time in getting the ships refueled and retasked to make the run to Aubaine.

The ticking clock was once again their enemy, and work crews continued to defy it as they spent their last reserves to get the combined fleet underway. It was if each of them knew that the chips were truly down and pressed with uncanny resolve. The limited facilities of the scout base were pushed to their upper limits.

But...

They worked miracles. After a much shorter span of time than Ritter would have ever thought, *Thunderchild* found herself as the flagship of a vast fleet, the likes of which had not been seen before in Coalition history.

* * *

Ritter stood on his command deck, his eyes on the tactical display. It dutifully showed his fleet moving out on the final leg of their journey to the jump point. The ships were loaded down and clumsy, the crews worked to the point of collapse, but flew in formation towards the 100AU limit like a flight of eagles. Though he could not openly show it, his heart was bursting with pride at seeing all of those points focused and pointed towards a single goal.

Ritter turned to regard the woman who had made all of this possible. Though she had taken no oath to defend Coalition space, as he had, she had brought them together through force of will and perseverance. Victory, if any was to be had from this venture, would owe Cassandra Mayfield, and big.

"Why?" he asked as he stepped next to her workstation.

She looked up from her mini-comp.

"That's the universal question, sir."

"You know what I mean," he said with a sweep of his hand to indicate the fleet. She tilted her head to the side, considering her words.

"Because I was ready to dismiss the lot of you as a bunch of ignorant, soulless degenerates that should be cleansed from the universe."

Then, her eyes lightened. Ritter could see the journey out of darkness play out on her face.

"Then a man, a *stranger*, was willing to lay down his own life to save mine. He didn't know me, had never served with me, or been my friend...but he was willing to *die* for me, just out of principle. That's when I knew that I was seeing

the world through the wrong eyes. I was awakened; given new purpose. The rest, well...the rest is all in my report.”

“Remind me to give whoever that was a medal when we get back,” Ritter said. “I think he’s more than earned it. Which reminds me, there’s something I gotta know—”

His words were cut off as the contact alarm sounded on the tactical panel a few meters away. As one, they turned to the Tactical Officer.

“Cleo, what’s the word?” Ritter asked. When he looked back at the tactical display, there were new beads of amber light, which indicated that the new arrivals were unknown to their IFF system.

“Several ships just precipitated into the system, sir. They are not attempting to mask their entry at all.” She paused as the ship’s long-range sensors refined the information. When she looked up, there was a trace of fear behind her expression.

“I count twenty-one ships in all, sir. Five of them I’ve identified as relic *Fer-de-lance-class* Imperial destroyers. Another three are Collapse-era *Shieldmaiden-class* fleet escorts. The lead ship is also a relic, sir.”

Cleo looked Ritter in the eyes.

“She’s an Imperial light cruiser, sir.”

There was stunned silence on the bridge. Hull sizes had dropped off dramatically since the Imperium was dismembered. A light cruiser from that age might as well be a battlecruiser in this area of space. By itself, that one ship possessed almost half the tonnage of Ritter’s assembled fleet.

As they watched, the ships formed up and set a least-time intercept course towards them. Packed tight, the fleet was in no shape to counter the threat that pointed at its collective throat like a dagger.

Ritter grunted as he looked back at Cassandra.

“Well now, that certainly changes things, doesn’t it?”

“Yes, sir,” she replied. “It does at that.”

Flash Point

"Get me Landmine on the horn," Ritter said to his comm tech. "He's not going to like what I'm going to tell him."

A moment later, Stokes appeared on main screen on the bridge of *Norfolk*. By the look on his face, it was probable that he had arrived at the same end point as Ritter.

"I think I know where this is headed," Stokes said with a trace of bitterness.

"You know the score," Ritter replied. "The *Auroras* and *Maggarts* have their hands full, and we've got to get clear to jump away."

"And you want us to hold the line while you escape."

"Yes, Captain, that is exactly what I'm saying."

Stokes's scowl deepened into a dark mask.

"You realize that this's a suicide mission, right? There's no way that our maneuverable units can engage alone and survive."

Ritter's eyes narrowed. Those who had served with him for a while knew that the gesture was tantamount to a laser focusing its photons on a target.

"Well, no one ever promised you a rose garden, and skippering a warship ain't exactly without its risks," Ritter replied. "Now can I count on you and your ships, or not?"

"We'll buy you the time," Stokes said coldly. "I hope you can make good on it. Landmine out." The screen returned to the tactical display.

Norfolk Victrix and most of Stokes's Buhler fleet broke away from the main body on a reciprocal course of the Imperial cruiser and its squadron. They seemed so insignificant, so fragile compared to the storm that bore down upon them, but their lines held true, their course did not falter.

Ritter looked at the ships on the display, all full of people whom he had just doomed. *Thunderchild* had never run from a fight until now. He cast a glance down at the patch on his left shoulder, which did not help the situation.

His clipper got its name from the fictional HMS *Thunder Child* from H.G. Wells's book, *War of the Worlds*. She was the ship that placed itself in harm's way to allow a civilian ship time to get out of danger. It was a lesson that all legitimate navies were well to remember. Therefore, the service patch depicted an ironclad steamer sacrificing itself by attacking a Martian tripod.

He was the one supposed to be leading the frontal assault, not leaving it to others to do the dying for him. His hand went to the unique drop wings on his lapel, made of purest gold. It was like the *Ashtabula* all over again...

"Captain?" Cassandra said, looking up from her mini-comp. "I believe I have an idea."

* * *

Ritter looked over her shoulder as Cassandra's hands blazed across her mini-comp's holographic controls. On the screen was a faithful reproduction of the sleek light cruiser bearing down on them.

"She's a *Paladin*-class, sir," Cassandra said as flashes of information appeared and disappeared across the holospace. "I've been able to identify her specifically as the *Halcyon Era*."

"And just how did you manage that feat, Your Grace?"

"Because, she was part of the fleet my great-grandfather commanded during the flight from the onset of Virus. I remember reading in his log books that she misjumped as the fleet entered the Hinterworlds and was never seen again."

"Well, it looks like she came through intact. Perhaps *too* intact."

"That is what I'm hoping, sir."

Ritter saw immediately where she was headed.

"Whatever you need to do, do it...just make it fast. Stokes ain't gonna last forever out there."

"Yes, sir!"

With those words, her hands became a blur.

* * *

Norfolk Victrix let loose the first salvo of the engagement, accompanied by the coordinated fire from the other ships in the squadron. While the range was extreme, Stokes concentrated his fire on one of the fleet escorts towards the center of the enemy formation with the hope of overwhelming her point defense.

Unlikely as it was, the move worked. The escort was the sole recipient of more than twenty missile strikes that penetrated the waves of countermeasures and defensive fire. The escort belched fuel, hull plating and bodies into space as it fell out of formation.

The opposing squadron, however, was not without an answer. Missiles fired from the escorts and destroyers, while a wave of Harrier space fighters followed up behind them.

The Coalition ships weathered the missile storm, though they took a pounding in the process. Then the fighters swept in, slashing at them with their lasers and evading defensive batteries.

Zloga Victrix disappeared in a death shroud of radiation and nuclear fire, but not before she burned three of her killers from the stars.

Mameluke was on fire, with several decks ablaze. While damage control teams risked it all to fight the flames, the ships kept fighting.

At that point, when the ranges aligned, the relic cruiser's spinal mount meson cannon came to life, and things became much, much worse.

* * *

"*Wakizashi* is gone, sir," the sensor tech reported, and Ritter acknowledged it with a nod. He turned an expectant gaze to Cassandra, but said nothing. Every second was precious now, and lives were being lost with each

grain of sand that passed through the aperture of the hourglass. He could not afford to distract her by demanding a progress report.

At her station, Cassandra put the finishing touches on the code she had just engineered. It lacked the elegance of what she might have produced otherwise, but it was functional. In a matter of seconds, she had run more than ten thousand simulations of its effects, and the results were very positive. Proper deployment of it, however, would be another matter entirely.

"I'm ready, Captain," she said to Ritter. "We'll need a direct communications link with that cruiser for this to work."

Ritter ordered the comm tech with a look, and a contact request was sent through space at the speed of light. A reply came back at once. On the screen appeared a man Ritter didn't recognize wearing a dark red military tunic with the golden standard of Oriflamme emblazoned upon his 'fruit salad' shelf.

"Ah, you're just in time, Captain," the man said. "This is Commodore Billingsly of the Technocracy ship, *Inferno*. I was about to beam the signal to the system to stand down and surrender, but perhaps we can avoid all the posturing and drama by having you do it instead."

"That would be awfully convenient, wouldn't it?" Ritter replied, as though he were actually considering it. "But, I'd much rather tell you to choke on your own black blood and surrender yourself. So, consider yourself officially put on notice."

When the reply came back, the Commodore's face wore a sneer.

"Sour grapes, Captain? I think we can both see how this will end. In moments we will break through your sacrificial lambs and be upon you. You are too slow to evade us before you get to jump, and we will have the tactical momentum on our side." He shook his head. "That doesn't speak well of your chances, Captain Ritter."

When the Commodore's face froze in place, Ritter looked to Cassandra.

"Please tell me we can dispense with this jackass now."

"The system accepted everything I piggybacked on that comm transmission. The 'execute' protocol is synched with your personal station."

"I'm glad to do the honors," Ritter said, then addressed the Commodore. "I guess it was too much to think you could be reasoned with. Since the olive branch isn't something you seem all that receptive to, I'm more than happy to use the sword. I'll be signing off now, but before I do, let me go ahead and say...*goodnight, hoss*."

Ritter pushed the button.

Admiral Sir Thomas Mayfield had kept all of his records from the Exodus to the Federation, including the override codes that he maintained for all the ships under his command, including *Halcyon Era*. Those codes were kept by a select few ranking Federation admirals, and by his descendants who had joined the Navy. Those codes were hard-coded into the ship's systems, and unlikely in the extreme that they could be defeated by counter-systems of local sophistication.

But overrides weren't the only surprise Lieutenant Cassandra Mayfield had sent them.

* * *

Aboard *Inferno*, strange things were happening. *Something* swept aside their many layers of firewalls like cobwebs, absorbing some critical security systems and obliterating others. Command codes were no longer working.

As Billingsly watched, his control panel's wallpaper, currently displaying the heraldry of Oriflamme, blinked out of existence and was replaced by a black field dominated by the unmistakable golden sunburst of the Third Imperium. It held for a few seconds, and then an imposing man in the uniform of an Imperial Admiral replaced it. The rugged features were there, as well as the straight set of the shoulders, the mantle of command that the man on the screen wore with apparent ease, all of it there, as though the man himself were speaking through time itself. Billingsly recognized him immediately. How could he not?

He was looking into the face of a legend.

"Attention *Halcyon Era*," the man said. "This is Sir Thomas Mayfield. You are in violation of Imperial security protocols, and are ordered to stand down at once."

The Admiral paused to let his command register with the viewer.

"You will find that you are locked out of the ship's computer core, and your maneuver drive is non-responsive. I have taken the liberty of engaging the ship's intruder defense network, but it will not activate unless you attempt to manually bypass the lockouts I've put in place or leave the ship. For now, you can consider yourselves my guests until necessary actions can be taken against you. That is all. Mayfield out."

It took only moments to confirm that what Admiral Mayfield said was true. *Inferno*, or *Halcyon Era* as all the displays now proclaimed, had shut down virtually everything but life support, communications and limited sensors. If that were not enough, someone had also hijacked their command frequencies to upload an information packet to the rest of his ships.

As Billingsly watched in horror, the nested Ice Nine protocols booted up on every other ship in his squadron, right down to the last fighter, shuttle and escape pod. Only *Halcyon Era* was spared.

Something gnawed at him, something he had obviously overlooked. Bringing up the last transmission from *Thunderchild*, he replayed it as chaos reigned around him. Coalition ships were breaking off the attack and resuming their course to jump, but somehow now he didn't care.

"I'll be signing off now," Captain Ritter was saying, "but before I do, let me go ahead and say...*goodnight, hoss*."

He replayed it again, then yet again. His command was disintegrating. He was proverbially fiddling while Rome burned, but something was stuck like a splinter in his mind. He had to find it before he went mad.

There.

He zoomed into the background to the young woman in black. The uniform she wore looked uncannily like that of the Imperial Navy, save for the six-pointed star emblem of the Hiver Federation on her sleeve.

As Ritter made his final pronouncement, the woman looked up at the video pickup. There was something familiar about the lines of her mouth, the shape of her nose, but none of those gave him the final clue as to who it was that had broken him. For that, he had only to look a little higher.

The young woman had the same blue eyes as Sir Thomas Mayfield.

Beneath The Mask

"You're sure I can't tempt you with an engineer's berth aboard *Thunderchild*?" Ritter asked. The relative safety of jump space had him looking ahead. True, he was making an assumption about the state of Aubaine when they arrived, but an assessment needed to start somewhere.

"We'll have to reorganize our order of battle, so I know I can find a spot for you," he continued. "Hell, I'll *make* up a spot if I have to."

"I appreciate the offer, Captain," Cassandra replied. "But I started this aboard *Cyllenius*. I would much rather see it through from her engine room. The Devil you know rather than the Devil you don't, and all that."

"You're preaching to the choir, Lieutenant. Unless *Ashtabula* miraculously shows back up, they'll have to pry me out this ship with a jackhammer and a contragrav unit. So I can appreciate where you're coming from. However, when this all blows over, I'd like you to consider my offer again – assuming, of course, that you're not tearing up space to get back to the Federation."

"And assuming any of us are still alive," Cassandra countered. "But, I would like to have a chance at restoring that light cruiser to active service, if possible. Back in the Federation, I've toured my great-grandfather's flagship, *Empress Porfiria* numerous times. I've even cruised aboard her. Though I only know Sir Thomas from his logs, his journals and historical data, it's almost like I can *feel* him in that ship, infused in every bulkhead, every compartment, every bolt. He still resonates there. If I could help bring *Halcyon Era* back, then I suppose it would be like bringing a part of him back as well."

"Why Cassandra Mayfield," Ritter said, surprised. "I had no idea you were such a died-in-the-wool sentimentalist."

"Too much at times, perhaps."

"Well, if we come through this with our skins intact, I'll make sure you get that chance."

The two shared a look, and Ritter knew that the cornerstone of a new friendship had just been laid down. If the Coalition was to survive, he knew deep-down it would need people of Mayfield's caliber to do so.

"Touching," a voice said from the entrance to the bridge, "but I'm afraid this is the end of the road."

Both of them turned to see Racine standing there with his hands behind his back. Ritter's hackles went up, his subconscious responding to a threat he hadn't fully defined. *Thunderchild's* Captain faced Racine straight on like a gunslinger, his hand straying to the holster at his side bearing *Ashtabula's* phoenix emblem. By contrast, Mayfield stood there statue-still, eyes locked on her target.

"I have an announcement to make," Racine said, sweeping his gaze around the bridge. "As it turns out, my true designation is Knight Commander-3 of the revived Grand Technocracy of the Stars. You should know that each and every one of the ships of the fleet that jumped away at Trybec has been

destroyed. I'm afraid they've suffered a most dreadful accident a few hours after transiting to jump space. Any friends, family or lovers you had aboard are now dead. Only *Thunderchild* remains."

Racine withdrew his hands from behind his back. In his left hand was a silver cylinder that flashed an angry red at one end. Each person on the bridge knew immediately that he held a detonator.

"*Viva La Revolution!*"

Before anyone could draw down upon him, or act against him, his thumb depressed the activation stud.

* * *

Nothing happened.

There was no flash of light, no final explosion to blow them all to kingdom come. There was simply nothing.

Frantic, Racine pressed the button several times, toggling through the back-ups.

It seemed to be working perfectly, unless...

His eyes fixed on Cassandra Mayfield.

"*You!*"

Ritter relaxed his pose, but his hand still hovered near his sidearm.

"That's the funny thing about suicide bombs, hoss. You never know if they're going to work until the moment of truth. By then, it's too late."

Racine gave his most charming smile.

"Well, I must say, this is most embarrassing, Captain, but it doesn't change what I said about the rest of the fleet. Whatever you may choose to do with me, *Thunderchild* will be alone when she arrives at Aubaine. When Gold Fleet—"

"Actually, no," Cassandra interrupted, moving towards him. Coalition Marines appeared on either side of the traitor, but Racine gave them only a perfunctory look.

"The nuclear charges you planted in the cargo pods were cleverly disguised, I'll give you that," Cassandra said. "But I was able to sit down and chat with the Base Commander recently, and helped him to upgrade his radiological detectors. They spotted the 'suitcase' models immediately, including the secondary and tertiary ones you attempted to stow aboard *Cyllenius* and *Valley Forge*. They were all disarmed before they were ever loaded. So, the fleet should precipitate in Aubaine without issue."

Racine gave a cavalier sigh as he put his hands up.

"Beautiful and brilliant," he said. "I lied about a great many things, but never about *that*. From a tradecraft perspective, may I ask how you knew?"

Cassandra considered it for a moment, then shrugged.

"Why not? I first suspected you when my lifeline was sabotaged en route to Buhler. I make a point to check my equipment each time before going into jump, and the lifeline was fine before our precipitation. That meant that it was sabotaged afterwards. Still, that was not enough to convict you, as it were,

because there was always the chance that I had overlooked it, or that Voniv had been the responsible party. Remote, but possible.”

“Do go on, my dear.”

“My next clue was how quickly you managed to discern the nature of the Ice Nine logic bomb without any prior working knowledge of it, or advanced equipment.”

“A little too perfect, eh?” Racine said. “You’re not the first woman to accuse me of that. I suppose it was because I was the one that planted the logic bomb in their systems in the first place, as well as on the kill ships.”

“From there,” she continued, “I suspected that you were helping us to put yourself above suspicion, which meant that I had to let you *think* that your plan was working, which is why I didn’t have the cargo containers removed, merely deactivated.”

“Guilty as well, I’m afraid,” Racine admitted. “Why settle for just a handful of ships in penny packets, when I could gather most of the fleet and dispose of them in one fell swoop? It was simply a case of ‘seeming a saint when most I play the Devil.’ And you, my dear, were the perfect rallying point! Undeniably, you were! The wronged outsider with gifts and expertise far beyond the plebian efforts of the Coalition, one who was willing to join the cause purely on moral grounds. Can you imagine the goldmine you were? Not to mention that you are *very* easy on the eyes as well. Physical appearance cannot be understated in matters like these. Alas, it seems as though I’ve been outfoxed. Pity there wasn’t more time for you and I.”

The Marines relieved him of the detonator and began fitting his wrists into binders.

“In the face of that, what’s a man to do but...improvise?”

There was a blur of motion. Racine moved faster than anyone she had ever seen, human or otherwise. In the span of two heartbeats, both Marines were down. Cassandra now had Racine behind her, both of them facing Ritter. One of the Marines’ weapons was pressed firmly against her temple. For a moment, her mind flashed to Lambda-3. When Corporal Alonzo Black had found her, she was in a similar predicament.

“In my arms at last,” Racine whispered in her ear, then looked to Ritter. “Now, if you’d be so kind as to clear the way to *Cyllenius*, I believe the lady and I will spend the remainder of this cruise on the courier, untouched and undisturbed if you don’t mind.”

Racine noted the placement of Ritter’s hand near his unfastened holster.

“Let’s not be untoward about this, Captain. I would hate to blow Ms. Mayfield’s brains out of her head, but I *will* do so if you give me cause.”

“Exactly where do you think you’re going to go?” Ritter asked, his hand unmoved. “We’re in jump space, you idiot. It’s not as though you can step out the back door, though I welcome you to try.”

“Perhaps I don’t think that far ahead,” Racine said. “Or perhaps there is more drama in being shot while trying to escape than in meekly accepting surrender. Pick one, either way – *oofffff!*”

All the air in Racine's lungs evacuated as Cassandra lowered her center of gravity and drove the hard point of her elbow into his solar plexus with as much force as she could generate. In that moment of disorientation, his grip relaxed and she challenged his hold.

The former intelligence officer had been too tall and broad-shouldered to use Cassandra as effective cover. Ritter drew and fired from the hip, finding Racine just below his right collar bone.

Racine reeled from the hydrostatic shock of the round, but he was still on his feet. His weapon came to bear on the nearest target of opportunity – Cassandra.

Unlike Lambda-3, she was in command of her faculties, and her hands were unbound. As the barrel of the weapon swung around, she seized the thick wrist that held it. She could not match Racine for strength, but she didn't need to. His forward momentum did the work for her, all she had to do was float down and around, avoiding the muzzle and placing a hand on the back of his shoulder. With a rotating twist, Racine's own power became his adversary as she cut out his legs and threw him to the deck face-first.

As he landed with a thud, the weapon came away from his hand. It settled firmly into her grip, at which point she put three bullets through Racine's head from less than a meter away.

The command crew all sat stunned at the carnage which had unfolded so quickly before their eyes. Ritter was the one who finally broke the silence.

"Now," he said, holstering his sidearm, "I *really* want you on my ship."

* * *

Aubaine.

Even from a little more than 100 astronomical units from the planet, it was a perfect sphere of the most vibrant Turkish blue. Here was the seat of the Coalition government, circling the golden G-type star of Halos. At a distance it seemed so peaceful, nestled in a starfield of velvety black.

For Cassandra, it had been her destination for what seemed like a lifetime. She drank in the white swirl of clouds that hinted at the necklace of archipelago islands upon a seemingly boundless sea. It was breathtaking.

Looks, of course, could be deceiving.

As Ritter's fleet precipitated in at a distance, each ship went dark and rigged for silent running. It became obvious, however, that the battle for Aubaine had already started without them.

The enemy fleet had retreated to the rim, while the system defenders had drawn back to the planet's orbit to regroup. There was a lot of damage, but ships flying under the Coalition banner defended the capital still. That fact was the cause for mass celebration across the fleet when it became known.

Aubaine had not fallen! *The Coalition survived!*

"By Gaia, maybe we will win this thing yet," Ritter said more to himself than anyone. "Get me a tight beam laser to FleetCom, using this ident-code,"

Ritter said with a few keystrokes on his panel. "That should tell them our intentions are sincere."

The comm signs and countersigns were those from *Ashtabula*. There was only one person still alive who would recognize the command codes by sight alone – the ship's old Captain, who was surely the one leading the fight against Oriflamme now. The message would also contain a rider with the full order of battle that Ritter had brought with him.

"Recorder standing by, sir," the comm tech said.

Ritter turned to Cassandra, and gestured in the vague direction of Aubaine.

"This is your show, Lieutenant. I'd be pleased if you would start us off."

Cassandra turned towards the audio pickup, speaking in a loud, clear voice.

"Attention, Commodore Lathrop, taccode "Hammer," this is the courier boat, *Cyllenius*, Lieutenant Cassandra Mayfield commanding," she said with a slight pause. "I've brought along some friends, Commodore, I hope you don't mind."

Ritter beamed and grinned ear-to-ear. She had given him the perfect lead in to surprise his old friend and Captain.

"Well, hoss, the cavalry is here," Ritter said. "Looks like we arrived just in time."

New Dawn

It was done. The Oriflammen insurrection had been stopped just short of its goal, and its alliance with the Empire of Solee exposed in full. The epic struggle to preserve the Coalition was over, for now, and a new day had dawned bright, and filled with so many possibilities.

There had been loss, however, through the ultimate sacrifice so many were called upon to give. But the Coalition did not linger upon these deaths, nor allow their sorrow to stop them from building anew. They had buried their heroes, and then, just as they always did, looked to tomorrow.

It had long been the Oriflammen contention that Aubaine's head was lost in the clouds, never focusing on the here and now. But, as Cassandra bore witness, it was that very quality which allowed Aubaine, and by extension the Reformation Coalition itself, to start the journey towards that new horizon.

The little pocket nation, with all its strange ways and traditions, would emerge stronger than before. The ships they had lost would eventually be replaced by the more powerful relic ships that they had recovered from the enemy. The internal tensions that had been building up since before the Coalition was founded had been brought out into the open and diffused. Of course, they would not go away entirely. They would still be plagued by vastly differing opinions and worldviews, but perhaps that was the way it should be.

And now, Cassandra found herself on Aubaine at an event with a much deeper significance than it appeared on the surface.

Hornet had come back from its mission, and played an instrumental role in the Coalition's victory. Unfortunately, the ship's intrepid crew had had no choice but to destroy the vessel of knowledge once they recovered it, to prevent it from falling into enemy hands. Saddened as Cassandra was by the news, *Hornet's* return also brought with it a familiar and welcome face.

Corporal Alonzo "Bonzo" Black.

At the moment, Cassandra stood arm-in-arm with the Marine at an outdoor wedding, both of them clad in their respective dress uniforms, bathed in sunlight. Bonzo's CO was marrying *Hornet's* missile gunner, but there was symbolism here that was lost on no one. The groom was Aubani, while the bride was Oriflammen.

The insurrection, it turned out, had been prosecuted by dissident faction of Oriflamme's government, and many Oriflammen themselves had fallen victim to a rogue Technarch's twisted vision and revolution.

The joining of these two heroes sent a strong statement to millions watching the coverage at home that the recent wounds to their star nation were already on the mend. It would take time, but now time was finally on their side, and Lieutenant Cassandra Mayfield would be staying around for a while.

Bonzo turned to her, nodding towards the space where couples were dancing.

"Would you do me the honor, sir?" Bonzo asked. They were both in uniform, and she was an officer. He even used the male honorific, as was the tradition of his service. In theory he was addressing her rank, not her gender, but the boyish look in his eye told her that he was acutely aware she was female.

"Of course, Corporal. I thought you'd never ask."

The two of them began to move to the sound of the heavenly violin and cello, his arms around her waist, and her hands laced behind his neck. This gave them the opportunity to look deeply into each other's eyes.

When they had first met, there had been an initial attraction, one which had only started to bloom when they were parted at Kruyter. At first she thought it might be an infatuation, an altered form of erotomania, where she harbored feelings for this man just because he had saved her life.

Now she knew that this was not the case. Her feelings for the Marine she held near were as genuine as her devotion to preserving the establishment that had produced him.

"You actually told Ritter that you did all that for me?" Bonzo asked with a trace of embarrassment in his cheeks. "I honestly don't know what to say, um, sir."

"No words are required, Corporal. As I once told you, I owe you a debt of honor. It was simply a matter of tradition and personal integrity that I see it through."

"Well, sir, now that it's over, has that debt been finally paid, do you think?"

She leaned in and kissed him.

"No, Corporal. I'm just getting started."