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Chapter 1

When I was little, my mom told me I'd have days that'd be so bad that I'd wish I'd stayed in bed. I'm not sure I really understood at the time...but Mom, wherever you are: I know what you mean now.

From *The Collected Journals* of Admiral James Cadwell

Jim Cadwell hung suspended in the control harness of his Atlas Panzer Knight, double-checking his systems as he stepped the thirty-foot tall suit of humanoid-shaped robotic armor out of its maintenance alcove and over to hydraulic catapult, while his Virtual Environment Cockpit showed him that the Atlas was perfectly mimicking his movements in the control harness, as it was meant to. The catapult on the right was in the midst of resetting itself as he stepped his Suit into the clamps of the left one. Quickly, he settled the Panzer Knight into the braced half-crouch that was the standard launch position.

"Knight Three, prepare for launch."

Jim chinned his comlink. "Lieutenant Commander Jim Cadwell, Knight Three, ready."

A blue and white Raptor in Soldier mode entered the right side of his field of vision as it shifted to Fighter mode. Its arms folded between its legs, which tucked up to form engines as its wings and nose extended. Its huge rifle was now hanging from its undercarriage, as the Raptor engaged its boosters and veered away south. Jim watched it briefly as a little counter appeared in the upper left corner of his Heads-Up Display, counting down the seconds until his launch. 5...4...3...2...

"Knight Three, launch."

His world lurched as the catapult shot forward, releasing his Suit as it reached the edge of the launch bay, flinging him out and away from the *Lightbringer*.

"Knight Three, clear."

"Your assignment is ground zone one, Knight Three. Remember that our target will most likely be airborne."

"Understood, control."

Engaging his Panzer Knight's thrusters, he steered it through a controlled fall towards the ground. His assigned position would keep him in a forward guard position on the ground in front of the *Lightbringer* as it moved slowly through the sky. The *Lightbringer* Class assault carrier was the most versatile ship in the United Colonial Fleet, and he was proud to be serving on one. Not to mention that he was serving on the class vessel. It was quite an honor.

Or at least it would have been if the other mechanized squadron onboard weren't the 101st Tactical Air and Space Corps (T.A.S.C.), commonly known as "Skull Squadron". The Skulls were known by everyone in the Solar System...They had been the first squadron of fighter pilots to field test the still-rare Raptor class Variable Geometry Fighters, and were now considered THE squadron to get into if you were a fighter pilot. Which he wasn't.

Jim was a Panzer Knight pilot, and proud of it. His Panzer Knight unit, the 205th Mobile Armored Cavalry "Knights Errant" were to Panzer Knights as the Skulls were to Raptors. Except that, even though the Panzer Knights were a more widely-used unit, the Raptors still took the spotlight because of their transformation abilities. It was depressing.

Or would have been, if he'd had any time to think about it.

His Panzer Knight hit the ground, its knees bending to absorb the shock of impact. His Suit of choice was an unmodified GPPK-2199 "Atlas," the basic General Production Panzer Knight that first saw production in 2199, which used a Beam Rifle, a giant-sized energy rifle that looked like a combat shotgun, instead of the giant machine gun that was the Raptors' standard sidearm.

He lifted it into view to check its charge counter and, content that it was topped off, checked his position. He glanced back at the *Lightbringer* to make sure he was where he was supposed to be, the Panzer Knight's head turning in echo of Jim's head, and found that he'd fallen behind a bit. With deft motions, he quickly got his Atlas moving, the legs switching from manual control to automatic as he pushed the throttle control about three-quarters of the way out to make it move forward at a fast run, the thuds of the huge feet vibrating through the Suit with each impact. Once he was ahead of the *Lightbringer* by 2000 yards, he pulled the throttle back to match the ship's slow search speed and chinned his comlink.

"Knight Three, in position."

"Roger, Knight Three. Maintain point-guard and await further instructions."

"Understood, control."

An hour and a half later, the *Lightbringer* drifted to a halt, its six heat dispersal wings spreading to a wider formation to dump the heat from the engines faster. Jim reigned in his Atlas and looked around, getting his bearings. One of the problems with operating fusion-powered starships in an atmosphere, he knew, was that its engines tended to generate more heat than they could easily dump...A problem which the vacuum of space deftly dealt with, and which otherwise had to be taken care of by special cooling systems, like the *Lightbringer's* six tapered "wings" that angled out from it on either side.

His comlink crackled. *"Knight Three, this is Knight Lead. Skull Leader says she and her boys are going to try to flush the target in our direction. Eyes open."*

Jim blinked, then chinned his comlink. "Um...Sir, no offense to you or Skull Leader, but isn't that a bad idea? I thought we were chasing a flying Genate of some sort. Wouldn't it make more sense for the Skulls to engage it in the air?"

A low chuckle came back over the comlink. *"Of course it would, kid. That's why we're not doing it that way."*

Jim stared at the holographic environment surrounding him, then muttered to himself, "Uh huh. Pure genius. I hope it doesn't get us all killed." Chinning his comlink, he said, "Understood, Lead. Eyes open, aye." He then scanned his surroundings and groaned softly as he looked from one rock spur to another. The landscape made for lots of places to hide.

Almost immediately, a black, red, and yellow Soldier-mode Raptor crashed through one of the rock spurs. One of its back-mounted boosters had been torn off and was belching thick black smoke. It tried to raise its rifle, but was too slow...A winged bipedal creature considerably taller than the fighter leapt out after it and crashed down on it.

Even as he wondered if this creature was the Genate...Genetically Engineered Mutate, many of which had escaped from labs during the Bombardment a century ago...that they'd been sent to bring back (or kill, if it proved too stubborn), Jim swung his Atlas around, raising his Beam Rifle. He quickly fired two shots at the creature, trying to avoid hitting the Raptor. The first shot pierced the thing's wing, but the second missed cleanly. The creature reared up and howled in pain, spotting him and deciding that he was a bigger threat than the damaged variable fighter, then leapt at him.

The Raptor quickly rolled over and fired a burst from its huge machinegun as Jim threw his Atlas aside, crashing into (and partially through) a tall granite outcropping. The creature missed him, its claws scraping across the shield in the Atlas' left hand, and was hit square in the back by the Raptor's shots. Again it roared in pain, and now in anger. It swung around and growled at them.

The damaged Raptor heaved itself to its feet, ejected the spent clip from its rifle, pulled a fresh one from a storage compartment in its left thigh, and slapped it into the rifle. Jim

chinned his comlink to the general frequency. "This is Knight Three. Skull Leader and I have engaged the creature...and we could use some help!"

"This is control, Knight Three. We now have ten hostile contacts. All Skull and Knight units are engaged and are unable to assist at this time. The Lightbringer is unable to lock onto the creatures because of the nature of the landscape. You're on your own. Sorry."

The voice of Skull One's pilot crackled over Jim's private frequency. *"That would roughly be bad. This thing tackled me out of the sky while I was in VTOL mode. It's fast, and it's tough."*

"And it's been breeding," Jim replied dryly, taking note of the creature's powerful musculature and very sharp looking claws. Not to mention the fact that it was a good fifteen or sixteen feet taller than his Atlas and Skull Leader's Raptor..Almost half again their height. "You go left, I'll go right, and we'll try to catch it in a crossfire."

"Good idea. Think it'll let us?"

For a moment, the creature and two robots stood in relative silence, observing each other. A few muted shots and explosions could be heard in the background. It seemed to be trying to decide which of them was the bigger problem, and thus the higher priority.

"Haven't a clue," Jim said finally. "Let's find out." He immediately began walking his Atlas around to the right as Skull One began moving to the left, their foot-falls echoing off the granite spires around them. The Genate looked from one of them to the other, still trying to decide which was the bigger threat.

"Now?" Jim asked, automatically deferring to Skull Leader's rank now that they were moving.

"Wait...NOW!"

Jim opened fire with his Beam Rifle, firing blast after blast as Skull One depressed the trigger on its rifle, cutting loose with a stream of rapid-fire projectiles, then added pulses of laser fire from its four recessed head lasers. The creature was caught in the crossfire and was quickly brought down under their combined fire.

The two robot vehicles looked at one another. Jim grinned inside his helmet. "Nice work, Skull Leader."

"You too, Knight Three. We make a good team. Wanna see if we can find some more trouble to get into?"

"Sure. I'm sure some of our squad-mates need—"

Jimmy was cut off as Knight Leader's CPK-2199 Command Suit, a slightly larger orange and tan Panzer Knight, crashed to the ground between them. Its right leg had been ripped off at the knee, the upper half of its shield had been torn away, and its Beam Saber blazed

hot red in its right hand. Before it could move, however, another of the winged Genates landed on it and drove its claws into the Panzer Knight's chest, killing the pilot instantly.

"NO!" Jim immediately moved, dropping his rifle and reaching to his left hip to draw his Suit's Beam Saber. It hummed to life, glowing yellow, and he swung it in a wide arc towards the creature's neck.

"Knight Three...Look out!" Skull One opened fire across the back of Jim's Atlas Panzer Knight, shooting a third Genate out of the air as Jim decapitated the second with a single blow.

"Thanks, Skull Leader. I owe you one."

"We're even then. You saved my butt first."

Jim grinned in spite of the situation. "Right. So what's..."

The *Lightbringer's* controller cut in. *"Skull group, Knight group, all pilots pull back to the Lightbringer immediately. There are another twenty hostile contacts inbound."*

Skull One turned, its head cocking skyward, then looked back at Jim. *"My computer says I don't have enough thrust to get off the ground, and my transformation circuits were damaged. Give me a boost?"*

"Sure thing." Jim picked up his Beam Rifle and hooked it to the back of his shield, then walked his Atlas over to the damaged Raptor. He gripped the Raptor's hips and braced himself for launch. "Once we're in the air, fire your foot thrusters. It'll help."

"Right."

The two robots crouched together, then leapt into the air. The back and foot boosters on Jim's Panzer Knight flared to life, followed almost immediately by the thrusters in the Raptor's feet. The two mecha rose together and landed neatly in the *Lightbringer's* starboard launch bay.

Jimmy ducked out of the open hatch in the chest of his Atlas and stepped onto the maintenance elevator that was waiting for him. Skull Leader's damaged Raptor was standing in one of two empty Panzer Knight alcoves. Two Knights hadn't come home.

He could see the Raptor pilot walking across the hangar towards him. As the elevator reached the floor, he stepped off of it to shake her hand. She had short red hair, bright green eyes, and was half a head shorter than he. Unconsciously, Jim ran a hand through his own short brown hair, hoping to get rid of the worst of his helmet-hair. Probably futile, but the expression on her face as she reached him suggested that she'd found the gesture amusing.

She shook his hand firmly. "Thanks for saving me out there."

He nodded. "Likewise." He blinked. "By the way, I'm Lieutenant Commander James Cadwell. Call me Jim."

She shook his hand again, still looking vaguely amused. "Okay, Jim. I'm Tina Jodescu."

Jim's eyes widened. "I've heard of you! You're that pilot who defected from the Siberian Independent States and brought their Battlesuit design with you."

She nodded. "That's me. As much as I loved the mobility of those things, I can't say I miss them terribly. The Raptor's a lot easier on my claustrophobia." She looked around. "You lost two."

He turned to stand beside her and nodded. "Yeah. It was Knight Leader that crashed and burned between us earlier." He pointed towards the alcove her fighter was standing in. "The other one was Knight Two."

She looked at him sideways. "That leaves you in charge, doesn't it?"

He nodded slightly, lips tightly compressed. "Not the way I wanted my own command."

She sighed softly as she echoed his gesture. "That's the combat command fast-track. Congratulations." She smiled slightly to show that she was being serious, not sarcastic. "Really."

"Thanks. Really. What do I do first?"

Now Tina's smile was genuine, if tired. "First you come with me to the bridge to report our losses to Captain Marcus." What little smile was on her face faded completely. "I lost three of my birds. Damn it."

He looked at her. "Does it get easier? Losing squad-mates?"

She shook her head. "No. And if you're a good leader, it shouldn't. C'mon, Jimmy. We've got a date with the Captain, whether we like it or not. Then I'll show you the ropes."

"Um...It's Jim, not Jimmy."

"You want my advice or not?"

Together they walked towards the hangar's exit as the rumble from the ship's cannons reached them through the hull.

Twenty minutes later, Jim exited the bridge with Tina not far behind. As soon as the hatch closed, he unleashed a gusty sigh and leaned heavily against the corridor bulkhead.

Tina grinned. "You did good, Jimmy. Most people don't just feel nervous the first time they report to the Captain, they *show* it. You kept yourself well in hand in there." She lightly

thumped his shoulder with her fist, then pulled him away from the wall and aimed him towards the elevator that would take them to the observation lounge above the bridge.

Jim smiled unsteadily as they boarded the elevator and Tina repeatedly stabbed the button for the observation lounge. "It's Jim, not Jimmy. But thanks, ma'am. Believe me, it wasn't easy. And getting a field promotion to commander...it's too fast. We can't even give the boss — my former squad leader, that is — a proper burial."

Tina nodded grimly as the elevator doors opened. "Things like that happen in a combat situation. The odds were overwhelmingly against us. We didn't have time to pick up our dead. It's unfortunate, but there it is."

"That's cold." Jim got a can of soda from the vending machine by the elevator.

Tina walked to the window that wrapped around the upper deck of the bridge tower and pressed one hand against the cool transparisteel surface. "Yeah it is. But because we didn't stop to collect our dead, the pilots who were still alive ARE still alive. We were able to recover the injured because we didn't try to recover the dead." She looked out at the beams of energy that continued to lance out from the *Lightbringer's* cannons, keeping the multitude of Genate attackers at bay.

"I know how you feel, Jimmy...I left three of my friends out there. One of them was one of the best friends I've ever had." She turned to look at him, then took his unopened can of soda and popped the top before handing it back to him. "The only thing you can do is say goodbye to them as best you can, then move on. Because your squadron needs you. You're who they look to now."

Jim sipped his soda, nodding slightly, as Tina continued. "On the lighter side, this fiasco has given me an idea. Up until now, the Panzer Knight and Raptor pilots have stayed pretty much separate. But we proved this afternoon that we work well together..."

He looked up from his can of soda. Hesitantly, she pushed on, "...and you need someone to teach you how to be a good commanding officer. I know you can do the job, because you handled yourself well under pressure out there. But I can teach you the tricks and tactics of the trade. And maybe we can come up with some ways for our two squads to work together as effectively as you and I did."

Again, Jim nodded slightly. "Sounds like a good idea to me, ma'am."

Tina chuckled. "It IS a good idea. And call me Tina! If you call me 'ma'am' again, I'll put your head through the wall."

Jim smiled impishly. "Yes, ma'am."

She shook her fist in his face menacingly, then grinned and thumped his shoulder. "You're a good man, James Cadwell. I think you and I are going to get along just fine."

Five hours passed and found Tina and Jim sitting side by side on retractable seats along the back wall of the bridge. The *Lightbringer's* guns continued to pour beams of energy into the sky surrounding the ship as the winged creatures continued their assault on it.

Captain Marcus sat in his chair at the center of the bridge, raised slightly above the rest of the room. On either side of him were the ship's communications and combat operations stations. Along the front of the bridge were the navigation and flight controls, with the weapons officers sitting along the walls on either side. The first officer, Commander Johansson, paced back and forth in front of his station between the Captain and navigation.

Since this was only the second time Jim had been on the bridge, he took it all in while trying not to look like a wide-eyed little boy. Which was difficult, since he was only twenty-one and looked about nineteen. Tina reclined in her chair, her legs stretched out in front of her and crossed at her ankles. At the moment, her eyes were closed and her hands were folded behind her head, making her look like she had fallen asleep. The thoughtful expression on her face denied this, however.

One of the four weapons officers turned. "Captain, starboard side particle beam cannons are overheating. They'll shut down automatically in another two minutes."

The weapons officer beside him turned also. "Likewise with the port side cannons, sir. That'll reduce us to the ship's pulsed laser turrets."

Jim leaned over to Tina and whispered "How are there so many?"

Without opening her eyes, she whispered back "They've been breeding for a little over a hundred years. You figure it out."

Jim grunted.

A third officer, on the other side of the bridge, turned. "Engineering reports that the ammo supply for the aft missile launchers is depleted. We've only got what's left in them."

The fourth weapons officer reported without turning from his station. "We've drained as much power as we can from the main guns to the shields, but even having done that the shields are only at forty-three percent. And with the constant assault, they won't hold there for long."

The Captain stared out the front of the bridge's wraparound window and ran his fingers through his close-trimmed black beard.

The first officer watched him, his pacing halted for the moment.

Jimmy leaned over again and whispered in Tina's ear, "Why doesn't the Captain do something?"

Without opening her eyes, she replied, sounding almost sad, "He will. Be patient."

Commander Johansson leaned forward slightly. "Orders, Captain?"

Captain Marcus looked down at him. "Prepare the ship for retreat, Commander."

The first officer nodded, quickly sitting and activating the ship-wide intercom. "All hands, prepare for retreat. Double repair crew coverage on the engines and shield generators."

Without turning, the Captain said "Captain Jodescu, Commander Cadwell...Your squadrons will have to cover our retreat. Are you up to it?"

Tina and Jim were immediately on their feet. Tina replied, "Yes sir. We'll do our best."

The Captain nodded. "Get going then."

Tina turned and headed for the hatch, Jim close behind her. After it closed behind them, and they were rushing down the stairs towards the launch bays, Jim said "He doesn't expect us to make it, does he?"

Tina shook her head and replied in a tone of voice that was just shy of bitter. "Nope. Not one of us. We're his sacrifice on the altar of saving his crew."

They reached the launch deck. Tina paused. "They moved my fighter back to the starboard bay. I hope the repairs are done." She smiled. "Don't worry, Jimmy. You'll do fine. Trial by fire and all that nonsense."

He grinned unsteadily and proffered his hand to her. She shook it firmly. "See you outside, Tina."

She grinned in response. "Give 'em hell, Jimmy."

They went in opposite directions.

Jim tugged his helmet onto his head as he primed his Atlas' hydraulics. Once his helmet was attached to the collar of his flight suit and he was sure he was secured to the control harness, he toggled the power switches for the weapons and other systems, then powered up the cameras. Immediately, the holographic cockpit lit up, surrounding him with a 360-degree view of what was outside his suit. Though he'd been a Panzer Knight pilot for almost two years, the Virtual Combat Environment cockpit never ceased to amaze him.

He quickly turned his Suit and grabbed its shield and Beam Rifle from the wall of the alcove, then stepped it out and into the catapult's locks. Again, he was hurled out into the air. This time, however, the air was full of the winged Genates and Raptors. He doubled back and landed on the hull of the *Lightbringer's* port-side launch bay. He saw Tina's black Raptor with its distinctive red and yellow highlights zoom by in VTOL mode, looking for all the world like some kind of bizarre rocket-powered hawk. A jet with arms and legs, the boosters mounted on its back flaring as she chased one of the creatures, blasting away at it with the

Raptor's rifle and the rapid-fire laser cannon that extended from the right booster. He chinned his comlink. "Control, this is — this is Knight Leader. I'm in position."

"Understood, Knight Leader. You and your squad will hold your positions on the hull while the Skulls provide air cover."

"Understood, control."

Another Panzer Knight, this one an HCPK-2200 Heavy Combat model, nicknamed "Zeus," a bulkier unit with a pair of heavy particle beam cannons mounted on its shoulders, was flung out of the launch bay. It engaged its boosters and turned to land near Jim - and was broadsided by one of the flying creatures. The two combatants tumbled towards the ground, smashing at one another with giant fists and feet. Before the Panzer Knight could beat off its attacker, they slammed into the ground with the Zeus on the bottom. It exploded fiercely, taking its attacker with it into the afterlife.

Jim winced and chinned his comlink. "Control, we just lost Knight Four. The rear starboard quarter of the ship will be undefended."

"Understood, Knight Leader. Skull Leader, can you release one of your pilots to fill the position?"

Tina's voice replied immediately. *"I'd rather not, control...We're a little busy out here. But if you insist..."*

The Captain's voice replied this time. *"We insist, Miss Jodescu."*

A pause followed. Jimmy fired a half-dozen shots from his Beam Rifle at a passing Genate, holing its wings and sending it tumbling towards the ground.

Tina finally replied, her voice tight. *"Skull five, set yourself down on the Lightbringer and cover its rear starboard quarter. If that's okay with you, Captain."*

"Quite, Miss Jodescu. Carry on."

Jim shot another creature out of the sky as a white Raptor with red highlights zipped past him in fighter mode, transforming to Soldier mode and skating across the hull on its foot thrusters on the starboard engine housing. At the same time, he noticed that the security light on his private comm channel was blinking, indicating that someone wanted to talk to him on a secure line. He took a moment to scramble the line, then opened it. He was immediately flooded by the sound of Tina cursing rapidly and violently. Some of what she said made him blush.

Finally, she stopped cursing and shouted *"Yes! Got it! That bastard was tougher than the others. Jimmy...do me a favor and take care of my boy while he's helping you cover the Lightbringer. That dreck-head captain of ours might not appreciate us, but I'm very protective of my pilots."*

Even as Jim replied, he gunned down another creature. "Not a problem, Tina. Frankly, I'm glad for the help. If you don't mind my saying so, you seem to have a problem with the Captain."

"Really? Gee, what tipped you off? My sarcasm, or his dry hostility?"

Her black, red, and yellow Soldier-mode Raptor flew backwards across his field of vision, solid slugs streaming from its rifle and energy blazing from its booster-cannon, which had flipped down over its right shoulder. One of the winged creatures evaded her shots, trying to get close enough to her to attack her. Jim blew its head off with the pulse lasers built into his Atlas' left forearm, saying, "Both, actually."

"Thanks. The captain has a problem with mecha pilots. He doesn't think we're even as good as the maintenance crews on his ship, and resents having to carry us around."

"You're kidding me."

"I kid you not. One from behind."

Jim spun his Atlas and fired a pair of shots from his Beam Rifle, killing another of the flying creatures. "Thanks."

"Think nothing of it."

Jim ejected the spent energy clip from his Beam Rifle and pulled a fresh one from the back of his shield. The battle raged on.

One of the Genates landed on the hull in front of him. He'd exhausted his Beam Rifle's ammo supply twenty minutes earlier, and his forearm pulse lasers had overheated about fifteen minutes after that. Jim lunged his Atlas forward and grappled with the genetically engineered creature. His suit proved the stronger as he bent its arms backwards, finally tearing them off. With a grimace, he knocked the crippled creature off the hull and tossed its arms after it.

Drawing his Beam Saber, he chinned open the main comm channel. "Control, how much longer until we're in the clear? I've already lost Knights Five and Six...It's just me and Skull Five out here now, and we're taking a real beating!" He glanced over his shoulder in time to see Skull Five smash a creature over the head with its depleted rifle.

"Just another few minutes, Knight Leader. These creatures don't seem to be territorial, but they don't seem to be too interested in chasing us, either. Most of them have turned back already."

He closed the line. "Grand. You sit in there, safe and sound, while we die out here to keep you safe. I wonder if the Captain will even say thank you."

Tina's voice replied over the secured line he'd kept open. *"Don't put money on it."*

"Wonderful." A Genate landed in front of him and lunged at him. He burned it in two with his Beam Saber.

"Nice cut." Tina said. *"What's your style? Kendo? Fencing?"*

"Tennis."

"Ah, the classic backhand."

"Hey, it works."

"Wouldn't dream of debating it. Behind you!"

Something slammed into him from behind, knocking him forward several steps. When he regained his balance and turned, he found the burning wreck of a Raptor, caught between modes, spread across the hull. He winced. "Hey Tina...One of your pilots just hit the hull behind me."

"I saw." She was silent for a moment. *"Still alive?"*

Jim scanned the wreck. "No. Looks like it was fast, though, if that's any consolation." He spun his Atlas back around in time to attack the creature that had landed as it lunged towards him. It joined the burned chunks of its kin on the hull. He kicked the pieces off.

"Great. That means it's you, me, and Skull Five."

"Oh, wonderful."

The bridge broke in on the broadband channel. *"Control here, we have two hostiles inbound towards the bridge. Assist immediately!"*

At the same time, a Genate tackled Skull Five to the deck and a second grappled Jim's Panzer Knight from behind.

"Skull five here, I'm busy!"

"Likewise." Jim said, gritting his teeth and struggling to break the creature's grip on him.

"Skull Leader here, this bastard is trying to peel the boosters off my back! I can't reach it! I need assist..." Her transmission cut off sharply.

"Tina!" Jim shouted, redoubling his efforts to break free. Above and behind him, two of the winged creatures landed on the bridge tower and smashed through the broad transparisteel window. Jimmy finally managed to flip the creature over his shoulders, landing it on its back in front of him. Realizing that he'd lost his Beam Saber at some point, he grabbed his shield in both hands and drove the sharp points on the bottom end of it into the creature's chest.

The *Lightbringer's* point defense lasers kicked in finally as the shield flickered and vanished. The two attacking creatures were quickly shot off of the bridge. Seeing this, Jim leaned over the side of the hull and peered down. He could see Tina's Raptor tumbling towards the ground in the tight embrace of one of the creatures. Glancing over his shoulder,

he saw that Skull five had its opponent pinned to the hull with its rifle. He chinned his comlink.

"Skull five, when you're done with your playmate there, get over to the bridge. I'm going after Skull one."

"Roger, Knight Leader. Bring her home safe, okay?"

Jim smiled grimly. "I'll do my best."

He primed his Panzer Knight's boosters and leapt off the *Lightbringer*.

Chapter 2

Important lesson: The best pilot is still only as good as her maintenance crew.

From the *Collected Journals* of Admiral James Cadwell

Jim raised his Atlas Panzer Knight out of its crouch with Tina Jodescu standing in the palm of its right hand, tapping her foot as she looked down at the wreckage of her Raptor and the remains of the winged Genate that had brought her down. Jim had shot the thing off her at about a thousand feet above the ground, giving Tina just enough time to eject so he could catch her. She looked up at him and said something which he missed, having forgotten to turn on his Atlas' external audio pickups. He did so.

"Sorry, Tina...What was that?"

She rolled her eyes dramatically and dropped her helmet onto the Atlas' open palm. *"I said, how are we going to get back up to the Lightbringer. Panzer Knights aren't exactly rated for high-altitude flight, you know."*

Jim blinked. "Uh...I hadn't thought of that."

Tina laughed. "Of course not. That's why you're a ground-pounder and not a fighter jock."

Jim made a face inside his helmet. "Hush, you." He chinned his comlink as Tina turned back to examining the wreckage. "Control, this is Knight Leader, do you copy?" He waited a long moment. "Control, this is Knight Leader, please respond."

The radio crackled. *"Knight Leader, this is Captain Piaget of the Intrepid. We seem to have arrived a little late. Our fighter escort is driving off the last of the Genates now, and a recovery team is on its way to the Lightbringer. We haven't been able to contact them. What is your status?"*

"Grounded, sir. Almost directly below the *Lightbringer*. I dropped off to rescue Skull Leader."

"Skull Five mentioned that when he landed. Is she all right?"

Jim looked down at Tina, who was repeatedly shooting the corpse of the winged creature with her blaster while shouting something at it. Curses, no doubt. "She's just fine, sir. But we're going to need a pickup."

"Understood, Knight Leader. I'm having my launch crew drop you a sled. When you reach our altitude, call me, and I'll let you know which ship to land on."

"Thank you, Captain."

"Not a problem, son. Looks like you were facing some pretty overwhelming odds."

Jim glanced at Tina and, seeing that she was still emptying her ammo into the dead creature, replied "You could say that, sir. It was bad."

After a moment of silence, Captain Piaget replied *"I understand, son. See you upstairs. Intrepid out."*

Jim toggled the external mike and speakers again just in time to hear Tina's blaster run dry. The repeated clicking of the trigger as she continued to pull it was startlingly loud.

"Um...Tina...I hate to interrupt, but I think it's dead, and I'm fairly sure you're out of ammo."

She stopped pulling the trigger, sighed, and holstered the gun. *"Sorry. Just working off some frustration. Did you get through to them?"*

"Not to the *Lightbringer*, no. The *Intrepid* has shown up though, and has sent a team over to find out why the *Lightbringer* hasn't responded to their hails. They're sending a sled down for us."

"Oh. Do you have any idea what the Lightbringer's condition is, then?"

He considered telling her how he'd seen the assault on the ship's command tower, and decided not to bother...She'd see for herself soon enough. "No. But Captain Piaget...From the *Intrepid*...Said that Skull Five had landed on his ship and reported the situation to him."

Tina relaxed a little and sat down on the palm of his Panzer Knight's hand, folding her legs under her with a sigh. *"Well, at least one of my pilots made it."*

Jimmy looked up at the sky, just barely seeing the two dots that were the twin *Lightbringer* class carriers. Softly, he replied "Yeah. It's a start."

Twenty minutes later, having maneuvered Jim's Panzer Knight until it was lying flat on the sled that arrived to pick them up, they were on their way up to the waiting ships. As they approached, they saw for the first time the true extent of the damage had been done.

The *Lightbringer* and the *Intrepid* floated side by side. When they had left their spacedocks, they had been nearly identical. Now, the *Intrepid's* white hull with red and blue highlights gleamed in the bright sunlight...While the same sunlight served to highlight the dark scars of battle damage that covered the *Lightbringer*. Two of its heat-dispersion wings had been ripped clean off. Another was badly damaged and was venting a vast white cloud of coolant into the air. The port side engine housing had been breached, and a thick, dark

cloud of smoke was billowing from the hole. The bridge tower had been torn open on both sides.

Tina winced. "Ouch."

Jim shuddered and nodded, then looked at the pilot of the sled. "Can I use the radio?"

The pilot gestured at it, intent on not crashing into one of the *Intrepid's* Raptors, which were circling protectively.

Lifting the handset, Jim toggled the transmit switch. "Knight Leader to *Intrepid*. We're now in sight of the ships. Requesting instructions."

For a long moment, all they heard was background static. Then: "*Knight Leader, this is Captain Piaget. I gather that Captain Jodescu is with you?*"

"Yes, sir."

"*Very good. Captain Jodescu, if you could proceed to the Lightbringer, I'd consider it a personal favor if you'd oversee the ship until she reaches port at Fort Amherst.*"

Tina took the handset from Jim. "I take it, Captain, that this means that the bridge crew was killed?"

"*Yes, I'm afraid they were. Two of the genates directly assaulted the bridge tower. No one on the bridge survived. In fact, when the port engine blew, a good number of crew members were killed. Apparently, quite a lot of them were already there fighting a fire.*"

Tina winced again. "Understood, Captain. I'll nurse her back to Fort Amherst."

"*Thank you, Captain Jodescu. Commander Cadwell, I'd appreciate it if you'd stow your Panzer Knight on the Lightbringer and then come over to the Intrepid to brief me on the events of the day.*"

Jim took the handset back from Tina. "Of course, Captain. I'll be over as soon as my Suit is locked down."

"*Very good. Once you've briefed me, you can return to the Lightbringer and help Captain Jodescu get her back to port.*"

"Very good, sir."

"*I look forward to hearing your briefing. Intrepid out.*"

Jim hung the handset back on the console. "Well...If he's putting two pilots in charge of the ship, the command staff must have been completely wiped out."

Tina nodded grimly. "And from the sounds of it, we won't have much of a crew left to work with." She looked at the *Lightbringer* as they approached it. "Or much of a ship left to work with, for that matter."

She leaned forward and tapped the pilot on the shoulder. "Fly us around the ship once, so we can get a better idea of the extent of the damage."

The pilot nodded and immediately altered his course to fly around the crippled ship.

As they flew past the port engine housing, Jim leaned against the window and whistled softly. "Looks like most of the engine blew up. It really says something about these ships that the housing is still mostly in one piece."

Tina moved over beside him. "True enough. But that leaves us with only one engine and the Contra-Grav drive to get us back to Fort Amherst. From where we are along the Canadian border, that's a good four or five days."

A sigh from beside her made her turn to Jim as he leaned against the bulkhead. "And don't forget that two of the heat dispersion wings are gone, and another damaged beyond repair from the looks of it." He gestured at the wing in question, which was continuing to vent coolant. "That means that we'll have to stop every six hours or so to let the remaining engine and the C-G drive cool down."

Tina looked at him curiously. "How come you know so much about these ships?"

Jim peered at the damaged wing. "When I was assigned to the *Lightbringer*, I headed over to the library at Fort Amherst and read up on it. I figured it couldn't hurt to know as much as I could about the ship I'd be serving on. I just never thought I'd be putting that information to use like this."

As they flew past the command tower, they could see a repair crew working to replace the damaged parts of the wraparound viewport and fix the command and control stations. Tina sighed. "We certainly have our work cut out for us."

Jim nodded solemnly. "You said it, Tina. You said it."

It was nearly three hours later when Jim finally finished briefing Captain Piaget and made his way back to the *Lightbringer*. He stepped carefully through a wrecked hatch onto the bridge just as a repair crew was working to seal the last gap in the damaged viewport, which had left that the bridge was still rather chilly because of the altitude. For the first time since basic training, Jimmy was glad his flight suit was insulated.

He immediately noticed that Tina was sitting at the communications station, since the captain's chair was conspicuously absent. A cylindrical chunk of jagged metal stuck up from the floor where it had been. At the moment, Tina was shouting into the microphone of her headset.

"...And the next time you try to fix a booster, don't tie its cutoff circuit into the main power supply! When I lost my booster, all the rest of my systems went with it!" She tore off her headset and tossed it down on the console. "Goddamn idiots."

Jim sat down at the navigation station and swung the chair around to face her. "Maintenance problems?"

Tina nodded, keeping one eye on the repair team. "Yeah. The moron that did the repairs on my Raptor tied one of the boosters' cutoff directly into the main power supply. When that Genate tore the first booster off, it tripped the circuit and shorted out every system in my fighter. That's why you had to shoot it off my back."

"I had been wondering about that..."

Another member of the repair crew approached and saluted, before saying "We're done, Captain. The life support systems should have the bridge temperature back to normal in just a few minutes."

Tina smiled. "Thanks, Carl." She glanced down at a datapad sitting on the console. "Um...Head down and see if there's anything you guys can do to speed up repairs on the shield. If not, pop over to section five and work on the hull breach there."

"Yes, ma'am." He saluted again, rounded up his crew, and herded them off the bridge.

Jim turned to the navigation console, which appeared to be working properly. "You seem to have things well in hand, Tina."

She chuckled wryly. "Things have ME well in hand. When I got onboard, one of the *Intrepid's* engineering people handed me a datapad with a complete list of all the damage to the ship. All I'm doing is trying to make sure the worst of it has been dealt with before we start moving."

He tapped a few keys on the navigation board. "Looks like someone's already programmed in a safe route to Fort Amherst."

"Yeah," Tina said, "I did that when I finally made it to the bridge. That was only about a half-hour ago. Which reminds me...How'd your briefing with Captain Piaget go?"

Jim swung his chair back to face her. "Not bad, actually. He was a lot less intimidating than Captain Marcus. I just gave him my impression of the day's events. He offered his condolences on the deaths of our squadmates and shipmates, but didn't seem terribly distressed to hear that Captain Marcus was dead."

"He wouldn't be." Tina picked her headset up and settled it back on her head, listening to it with one ear. "Piaget was supposed to be captain of THIS ship, not the *Intrepid*. Marcus made him look bad during the selection process, and got the position instead. By the time Fleet Command realized what had happened, it was too much of a fuss to shuffle them around, and Marcus was doing well enough that they decided to sweep the whole incident under the carpet."

Jim picked up a headset and put it on and spent a moment listening to the repair crews chatter back and forth. "Do you think they'll give Piaget the *Lightbringer* now?"

Tina considered that for a moment. "I hope so. I wouldn't mind serving under him. He considers the mecha pilots part of the ship's extended family, and treats us like equals onboard. Or so I've heard, anyways. And of course that's assuming he even still wants it... He's made quite a reputation for the *Intrepid* in the two years since it was commissioned."

A warning light began blinking on the navigation board. Jim spent a moment checking it, then brought the headset's microphone to his mouth. "Fire suppression team to starboard engine. Repeat, fire suppression team to starboard engine." He glanced at Tina. "This'll slow things down a bit."

She nodded, in the midst of giving orders to someone over her headset. When she was done, she sighed gustily. "You're telling me. It'll be a miracle if the *Intrepid* doesn't have to tow us to port at this rate."

"Intrepid to Lightbringer, we're about to move in on this group of Genates. The extra squad of Raptors we were promised arrived twenty minutes ago, and now that we know what we're dealing with, they shouldn't cause us too much more trouble."

Jim, now sitting at the communications station while Tina had moved to navigation, adjusted his headset a bit before replying. "*Lightbringer* here, understood, *Intrepid*. Good luck."

"Piaget here, and thanks. No need to worry about us. Will you be okay getting the Lightbringer back to port?"

Jim glanced at Tina, who nodded. "Captain Jodescu says yes, Captain Piaget. We've got the worst of the hull breaches sealed up, life support's back up to ninety percent, and the shield is holding steady at sixty percent. We've got most of the anti-aircraft guns back online, and the forward launchers still have a few missiles in them. We ought to be okay."

"Glad to hear it, Commander. Don't take any unnecessary risks, though."

Jim chuckled. "No, sir. We'll take good care of her."

"Good. We'll see you back at Fort Amherst. Intrepid out."

Jim closed the comm. line and watched as the *Intrepid* pulled away from them and accelerated in the direction they'd come from, surrounded by Fighter and VTOL-mode Raptors. For a long moment, his eyes lingered on the dwindling ship and its fighter escort, before he turned to Tina. "You were right, you know. I wouldn't mind serving under him at all."

Tina looked over her shoulder at him and nodded, then smiled impishly. "You'll find, Commander James Cadwell, if you pay attention to what I'm saying, that I'm right an inordinately large amount of the time."

He chuckled. "I'll keep that in mind. What say we get this poor, injured girl under way?"

Tina nodded and looked back at the navigation station. Jim turned on the ship's intercom and said, "All hands, this is the bridge. Prepare to get under way. Damage repair crews keep an extra eye on the C-G drive and the remaining engine."

Tina flipped a few more switches, then took hold of the throttle control. "Here we go..."

Chapter 3

Some days are worse than others. Then there's those days where you just never should've gotten out of bed...

From the *Collected Journals* of Admiral James Cadwell

"Yes, that's right, just the Contra-Gravity Drive."

"*You have no engines or maneuvering thrusters at all?*"

"None."

"*You're kidding. Right? This is some sort of joke.*"

"Listen to me, you idiot...We have no engines. No maneuvering thrusters. Just the C-G drive, and that's going to overheat and shut down in a little over thirty minutes. Clear us a space to land, or we're going to come crashing down on your heads."

Jim cringed where he sat at the navigation console, keeping a close eye on the remaining flight systems. Tina was still sitting at the communications station, which she had practically taken from him by force, and was in the process of trying to convince Fort Amherst's flight control to let them land.

They weren't really cooperating.

"You listen to me, Captain Jodescu, if that's really who you are...We have no landing orders for you, and you claim to have a burned out IFF Transponder and no database of ID codes, so we can't identify you properly. The last orders on record for the Lightbringer indicate that you should be somewhere along the Free Canadian border right now. Yet here you are, yelling at me to do something I don't have the authority..."

His voice cut off sharply as Tina closed the line, muttering something under her breath that sounded like it might be able to eat through metal, to which she added a moment later something vitriolic about bureaucrats.

"Trouble?" Jim asked without turning, making an adjustment to the Contra-Gravity field that was the only thing keeping them airborne.

Tina tapped away at her keyboard. "No...No problem..." She adjusted her headset and waited a moment. "Yeah, it's me, General Stanton...Tina. Oh...Thank you, sir. Yes, what I said was rather rude. No sir, I'm not exaggerating, the ship really is that badly battered. Yes sir, we'd appreciate that greatly. Thank you, sir." She took off her headset. "Okay, Jimmy...Head for the dry dock. General Stanton says he's going to clear it for us to land in."

Jim whistled softly, adjusting the ship's heading appropriately. *I guess it helps*, he thought, *to know the guy who runs the Fort...*

A moment later, another *Lightbringer* class carrier...The *Excalibur* according to the lettering on its hull...Lifted itself out of the dry dock ahead and drifted to the side before setting down gently again. Immediately, the comm. line from flight control buzzed. Tina opened it.

"This is the *Lightbringer*."

"Apologies for the misunderstanding, Captain Jodescu. You are clear to land in Dock One."

Tina smiled far too sweetly. "Thank you, control." She closed the line. "Haul ass, Jimmy, before this poor ship falls apart around us."

Jim grinned. "Aye, aye, Captain!" He slowly maneuvered the ship over the dry dock, then lowered it carefully down onto the clamps which would hold motionless in the dock. The instant he cut off the Contra-Gravity drive, his controls shorted out, spraying him with sparks. "What the..."

A siren roared in the suddenly otherwise quiet ship.

Tina put one hand to her headset, pressing it closer to her ear. "What's that? I can't hear you over the..." The siren cut out as suddenly as it had started. "Thank you. Now...What did you say?"

A voice replied "I said, ma'am, that the Contra-Gravity Drive just overheated. We've got three fire control teams down here, and it doesn't look like we're going to be able to control it."

Jim toggled his headset. "All available fire control teams to the engine room. Repeating, all available fire control teams to the engine room. Double time!"

Tina looked at Jim. "That wasn't thirty minutes! They said we had thirty minutes before it did that."

Jim shrugged. "Nobody's perfect."

The next afternoon found Jim sitting in the shade of a tree next to the nameless pond in the center of the Fort. After landing, the Fort's damage control and repair crews had swarmed all over the *Lightbringer*, and he and Tina had been dismissed and given a three-day leave of absence to catch up on their sleep. They had, after all, hardly slept during the previous five while they nursed the *Lightbringer* back to Fort Amherst.

Now he was leaning against a tree, half-asleep and enjoying being able to breathe air that wasn't recycled, filtered and purified by life support systems. Content, he relaxed and listened to the sounds of the Fort as he dozed.

Right up until someone lightly kicked his boot.

He opened one eye and saw Tina looking down at him, grinning slightly. "Hey...I understand you're still suffering in enlisted-level quarters."

"When I'm groundside, yeah. When I'm not, I sleep in my cockpit." Jim quipped. "Seriously though, I haven't been an officer long enough to be reassigned."

Tina grinned broadly. "Good thing, too. I have an offer for you."

One of Jim's eyebrows rose fractionally. "Oh?"

She nodded. "Yup. I've been living in an officer's suite, but without a resident for the second bedroom. Interested?"

Jim considered it for a long moment, then shrugged. "Sure, why not. It's got to be better than the closet I'm sleeping in now."

Tina put on an insulted expression. He grinned. "And having such friendly company has to be better than staring at the walls."

Tina laughed. "Friendly? Me? Haven't you heard about my reputation?"

"For being a bitch, if you'll forgive my bluntness?"

She nodded, a distantly sad expression flashing across her face.

Jim smiled. "Of course I have. I'd be surprised if anyone here hasn't. However, until I see hard evidence backing up the rumors about your reputation, I'll keep my own council."

She smiled slightly. "Glad to hear it. Shall we collect your gear?"

He heaved himself to his feet. "Let's go. I'll show you where my apartment is."

She grinned, looking suddenly like a predator. "I already know where you live."

He blinked, startled. She set off in the direction of his apartment. For a long moment, he stared after her...Then hurried to catch up, shouting, "Hey...Wait up!"

Jim stumbled as a pillow whomped into the back of his head.

"There ya go. That's the pillow I swiped from the empty bedroom. Your bedroom, that is."

He turned to look at Tina, leaning against her bedroom's doorframe across the way, grinning at him. He bent and picked up the pillow. "Thanks. We'll have the pillow fight later, if you like. First I want to get my things unpacked." He gestured at the two big boxes that were sitting outside his door.

She nodded. "Sure thing. I'll order up something for dinner."

Jim offered up a silent thanks to the creators of home food delivery as he picked up the first box. He still wasn't quite sure why Tina had invited him to move in with her...She was notoriously reclusive and it was widely said in the Fort that she tended to be obnoxiously arrogant. *Still*, he thought as he set to unpacking his belongings, *I haven't seen OBNOXIOUS arrogance yet. Arrogance, yes...But that's a common trait for pilots.*

He glanced over his shoulder into the living room where he could see her talking on the phone, probably ordering their dinner. He watched her for a moment, then shrugged and returned to emptying the box. *Until I see it, I won't believe it. I think she's sweet...In a harsh and abrasive sort of way.* He smiled and put a photo of his parents and younger sister on the bedside table, along with an alarm clock, then collapsed the empty plastic box and shoved it into the back of the closet.

As he stepped back out into the living room to grab the second box, Tina looked up at him, put her hand over the receiver, and said softly, "Chinese okay with you?"

He nodded, hefting the box. "Sure. Just make sure it's spicy."

She snorted. "You think I'd order it bland?"

Jim grinned. "Just checking."

Tina rolled her eyes and returned to ordering food as he carried the box into his bedroom.

Later, as they lingered over the remnants of their dinner, Jim asked, "So...Do you have any idea what we're going to be assigned to do now? Don't get me wrong...I really appreciate the three days off after the trip back here. But we can't sit around doing nothing forever."

Tina broke open a fortune cookie. "'You will be eaten by a large, furry monster.' Well...That's cheery."

Jimmy chuckled and broke open his own cookie. "Oh, this is good. 'You will shortly find something you didn't know you were missing.' Nice and vague. Who writes these things?"

"Probably some ancient, wizened little man who's bitter about something and has decided to get even by writing stupid fortunes."

Jim popped half of his cookie into his mouth.

"But anyways," Tina continued, "I really don't know where we'll be assigned next. I've been bucking for a spot on the *Freedom* when it leaves dock. I'd love to be part of their

exploration mission. I want to know what's out there. But without a squadron, it doesn't look like that's going to happen, so..."

"The rumors are true then?" Jim asked. "They're really prepping a new class of starship for exploration outside the Solar System?"

Tina nodded. "Yeah. The first manned space flight outside our system...That we know of, at least...In a century. It's pretty exciting." She crunched into her cookie and grimaced. "Speaking of which, these cookies must be older than that."

Jim nodded, tossing the other half of his cookie onto his plate. "That has to be the most stale cookie I've ever tasted."

"You've never tried those hideous things they try to pass off as cookies in our ration packs, have you?"

He shook his head, pushing a slice of pineapple around with a chopstick.

"They were never fresh to begin with." She shuddered. "I've been trying to convince a guy I know in R&D to come up with a cookie that'll never go stale. He says it's a lost cause."

Jim chuckled. "I'm not surprised. I once heard that back in the 20th Century, they had these things called 'Twinkies' that had a shelf life of a decade."

Tina made a dismissing motion with one hand. "I've heard that one too. It's gotta be an exaggeration."

Jim shrugged. "Who knows. We lost a pretty decent amount of Earth's 20th Century cultural history a hundred years ago. Maybe they were able to make foods like that."

"Even if they could," Tina conceded, "It couldn't have tasted all that good. But who knows. Until that nutcase with the long scarf at Fleet HQ R&D builds a working time machine, we won't know for sure."

Jim nodded. "I met him briefly last year...In the cafeteria. He's a real lunatic, isn't he? He kept babbling about being absolutely sure that time travel was possible, and how he was going to prove it even if it killed him. Seemed like a nice enough guy though."

Tina laughed. "Yeah. But the guys in charge think he's onto something, so...Who are we to argue."

"Too true, too true. So anyways, if you don't know where we're being assigned next, and I don't know where we're being assigned next..." He trailed off, not entirely sure where he'd been going with that point.

"Well," Tina said thoughtfully, "I suppose I could go bother General Stanton about it. He's got enough clout to at least get something moving for us. I'll tell you one thing, though...No matter where we go, we're going to have to rebuild our squadrons first."

"Maybe they'll just assign us to a couple without squad leaders. And heck...I haven't even had my field promotion ratified yet. I might get bumped back down to executive officer rank."

"Nah," Tina said, again dismissing his thought with a wave of her hand. "First of all, you've more than proved yourself capable of leading a squad. I'll bet your command rank is pretty much a sure thing. Second of all, Skull Squadron and the Knights Errant are elite squads. They'll probably have us hand-picking our pilots from amongst the best the Colonial Fleet has to offer."

"That's daunting. And a little exciting."

Tina chuckled softly. "Yeah...But it's also a real pain sometimes. It's not as easy as it sounds to decide who's the best of the best." Tina smiled sadly. "I clearly didn't do such a good job."

Jim returned her smile. "But this time you will, and you can give me a few pointers while you're at it. I can't wait to get started."

They sat together in somber silence for a moment, before Jim said, "Does it bother you? I mean...I feel almost guilty about the whole thing."

Tina nodded. "I do too. It's called Survivor Syndrome. We feel awful because we're just about the only survivors of our squads. It'll fade with time, and with new squad-mates."

Jim made a non-committal noise, like he didn't quite believe her.

"Honest, Jim. Hey...How well did you know them, anyway?"

"The other Knights? To be honest, barely at all. I'd just been promoted into the squad. But they accepted me without a word of complaint...It felt like coming home."

Tina nodded. "I know. It felt like that when I first created Skull Squadron, too. But other than Tethys Dark...Skull Five, who backed you up...There was only one original member of the squad left when we went out... Janice Blair, who died. The rest of my crew had just been rotated into other squadrons...Command and executive officer positions, you know?"

"So," Jim said slowly, "What you're saying is, we feel guilty more because we survived than because our squad-mates died?"

"Basically. There's a little more than that...They were friends, if not close ones...But we can only mourn their loss for so long. And we can't spend a lot of time doing so. They'd all want us to keep going...To keep the names Knights Errant and Skull Squadron alive and honorable. Right?"

Jim smiled. "Right."

Tina shrugged. "Well, then...Let's live, and honor their memories. Shall we?"

"Let's."

Chapter 4

Patient nightly experiences extremely vivid and terrifying nightmares, which may contribute to her almost violently cheerful behavior while on duty. Subject also displays a certain amount of dependant behavior, attaching herself to other people and relying on them to stabilize her, suggesting a desire for help and an inability to ask for it.

We suggest that the officer to whom she answers at any given time keep a close eye on her, as there is a chance that she may display suicidal tendencies if rejected or hurt by a friend.

From the 2199 Psychological Evaluation of Captain Tina Jodescu

Jim opened one eye and tried to focus on the clock by his bed as his body tried to jump-start his brain. It was a painful process. He just wasn't a morning person. The clock read 02:15. *Hell*, he thought, *It's not even morning yet. What woke me up?*

A muffled, terrified sounding scream reached his ears. He threw off his blankets and, clad only in a pair of sweats, headed for the door, muttering, "Yup...That'd be what woke me up."

He quickly opened his door and hurried across the suite's common room to Tina's door. Putting his ear against it, he could just hear her crying. He knocked lightly. "Tina? You okay?"

Muffled by the door, her voice replied, "Go away!"

Jimmy blinked. This was different. He leaned slightly against the door.

"Tina...I'm not going away until I know you're okay." Trying to lighten the mood, he continued, "That's part of having a roommate, you know...Each making sure the other's okay."

He got no reply except a sob muffled by the door between them. He frowned. "Tina...If you don't answer me, I'm coming in."

Again, there was no reply. He tapped the door release, and was rewarded with a soft buzz. He cursed softly. *Damned sliding doors*, he thought. There's just no easy way to go through a locked one.

He turned and gripped the edge of the door with his fingertips, braced himself against the door, and pulled. The thick metal of the door groaned and bent slightly under his grip, then slowly began to curl towards him as though he were peeling it away from the wall. Once he had enough of it curled back to get a solid grip on the door, he grabbed hold of it, leaned back, and slowly pulled it open. When he had it open far enough to get in, he slipped through.

Tina was huddled against her bed's headboard, clad in a long nightshirt. Her face was streaked with tears, and she was shaking uncontrollably, watching him with wide, frightened eyes. He quickly moved around the side of her bed and sat down, expecting her to shy away. Instead, she huddled against him, wrapping her arms around him and burying her face against his chest.

Surprised, Jim hesitated a moment before wrapping his arms around her. "Nightmare?"

She nodded and sniffled.

Lifting one of his arms, he gently stroked his fingers through her short red hair and leaned back against the headboard. "Shhh," he whispered. "Relax. It was just a dream."

Slowly, her shaking subsided and she relaxed against him, closing her eyes and forcing herself to calm down. After a bit, she murmured "You're awfully good at this."

Jim smiled sadly. "Yeah, well...I had a little sister. Used to do this for her when she had nightmares."

Tina tipped her head to look up at him. "Had? Used to?"

He nodded slightly. "She died a few years ago."

"Oh. I'm sorry."

They sat there in silence and darkness, each lost in their own thoughts.

Once again, Jimmy swam back to consciousness with his body screaming at his brain that it was time to get up. His brain replied that it didn't want to deal with the outside world at the moment and that his body should come back later.

Unfortunately, sensory information began trickling in from his arms, legs and neck, forcing his brain to process them.

First, his brain realized that his head was leaning at a very odd angle, and that his neck was quite stiff. This information was filed, roughly, under "Potential pain." He shifted his head to a more comfortable position, an act which did in fact hurt somewhat. It was, his brain reflected briefly, very rude of his body to force him to wake up like this.

His body chose to reply by informing his brain that there was a second body lying stretched out along his side and nestled in his arms. A female body, judging by the parts of it that were pressed against him. He found this quite curious, since he didn't have a significant other and wasn't in the habit of shacking up with women at random. He shifted slightly.

A soft, distinctly female voice said "Move, and you'll be singing soprano. I'm comfortable."

Startled, he opened his eyes and found himself looking down at an extremely fuzzy Tina Jodescu, her head resting on his chest. He blinked a few times, and she was kind enough to come into focus. She was, he noticed, examining the palm of his left hand.

At this point, his body and brain reached a fairly happy medium, and consciousness became a reality rather than just a concept to laugh at. He realized that she was looking at a series of broad cuts along the insides of his knuckles where metal gleamed through the parted skin rather than blood and bone.

It occurred to him that he must have cut his fingers last night when he pried her door open. He flexed his hand and folded it into a fist so that the cuts were covered.

Tina looked up at him. "You're a cyborg? That's how you were able to pry my door open."

He nodded.

She tipped her head slightly. "How much?"

He sighed. "My arms, shoulders, and part of my back. It was three years ago, when my sister died."

"Do you mind my asking how it happened?"

Jim hesitated a moment. "Well...A clan of Dragon Genates had settled outside the town where I grew up. Our militia decided to try to drive them off, and only made them mad. They razed the town. The last thing I remember before waking up in a Red Cross triage tent is trying to get to my father's energy rifle and feeling a searing heat on my back. Then they told me that my sister hadn't made it. I felt helpless, and having lost my arms didn't help. And the cybernetics made me different."

Tina frowned. "You're ashamed of it?"

Jim shrugged slightly. "Not really. Not anymore, anyways. I used to be. But now...It's just something I don't see any reason to advertise. I'm more upset by not having been able to save my sister."

"It's in the past. You need to let go of the pain before you can move forward and be happy." She gently pried his fingers open and held them up for him to see. "And you

shouldn't hide your differences under fake skin. It's part of what makes you who you are. Part of what makes you unique."

He looked at her, wondering at the tone of familiarity in her voice. "The voice of experience?"

She smiled sadly. "Yeah." Then, before he could reply, she threw her leg over him and straddled him, coming into contact with parts of his anatomy that he suddenly wished he had more control over. She shifted her hips slightly and grinned at his automatic response. "Good morning to you too." She quickly rolled all the way across and off of him and headed for her shower. When she reached the door, she glanced back and said "Well? Get moving! We're gonna get that fake skin peeled off of you, then have some fun on our last day of R&R."

With that, she vanished into the small bathroom, the door closing behind her. He flexed his hands and lay there a moment longer, trying to bring his suddenly raging hormones under control and trying to catch up with Tina's rapid mood swings. As he swung his legs over the side of the bed and stood up, he had the distinct impression that this was going to be a very long day indeed.

Tina walked behind him, her hands flat against Jim's back as she shoved him towards the door of the cybernetics lab. He resisted, but his heart just wasn't in it. He was, in fact, finding it very hard NOT to let her have her way.

"C'mon, Tina...Give it a rest. It's not worth the effort."

"Look, you'd have to come down here anyway to get the skin sealed up. There's really no reason for you to have it on there in the first place. Resisting accepting your cybernetics is stunting your growth as an individual."

"It is not!"

"Listen to yourself!"

"But Tina..."

"No buts!" She opened the door and pointed inside. "Go!"

He sighed dramatically and walked inside with her close behind.

When they emerged twenty minutes later, Jim's cybernetic arms were still covered by their false skin and he looked very much relieved. Tina looked annoyed.

"I can't believe you didn't go through with it. Pansy."

"Look, Tina...It was easier just to have them fix the damaged skin than remove it all! Besides...I like it. The synth-skin improves the sensory reception."

Tina sighed heavily. "All right, I give up. Keep the skin." She jumped a step ahead of him, turned around to face him, and kept pace with him by walking backwards. "So...What shall we do now? Wanna go race go-carts? Or hit the VR amusement park?"

Jim watched her, amused. "We could always just go rent a movie. You know...Relax?"

Tina considered this, somehow managing to walk backwards down the stairs and push the door open without breaking her neck. "We could do that. How about hitting the arcade first?"

Jim nodded slowly. "Okay, sure."

She grinned and twisted around so she was going in the right direction again and grabbed his arm, dragging him along. "Come on!"

He laughed, moving faster to keep up with her. "Why the rush?"

"There's a *Battlesuit Attack!* tournament this afternoon. I'll bet I can take first place."

"That sounded like a challenge." He almost tripped on a crack in the sidewalk, but managed to keep his footing.

"That WAS a challenge, ground-pounder."

"Ooh. I love a good challenge."

The tournament judge stepped up on the platform with the two VR *Battlesuit Attack!* game cabinets that the finalists would use. He grabbed the microphone and grinned broadly. "Welcome, ladies and gentlemen, to the final round of the *Battlesuit Attack!* tournament!"

For a long moment, he was completely drowned out by cheers from the crowd that had gathered to watch.

"That's right, folks...This is the moment you've all been waiting for! Pretty exciting, isn't it?"

Again, he was drowned out by cheers from the audience. His grin grew.

"Okay! As you all know, the *Battlesuit Attack!* game is a flight simulator that uses the Siberian Independent States Battlesuit as it's base vehicle. So it shouldn't be a huge surprise to see that the first of our two finalists is the leader of Skull Squadron and former Battlesuit pilot, Captain Tina Jodescu!"

The crowd roared its approval as Tina, forcing a smile, stepped onto the stage and shook the announcer's hand...The expression on her face suggested that she wanted to

crush his hand instead of shake it, though. Jim, watching, raised an eyebrow, wondering what had so annoyed her suddenly.

The announcer motioned for quiet. When the crowd's roar was reduced to a low rumble, he continued. "Her opponent today is the fastest rising young mecha pilot in the Colonial Fleet, the new leader of the Knights Errant, Commander Jim Cadwell!"

Jim, blushing, quickly stepped up onto the stage and shook the announcer's hand, then waved to the crowd as they cheered for him.

"Okay! Tina...Jim...If you'd be so kind as to take your places?"

Tina grinned viciously at Jimmy as she shook his hand. He returned her predatory grin, then turned to his cabinet. He climbed in the open side and pulled the virtual reality visor on over his eyes. Immediately, the simulated Battlesuit's heads-up-display appeared before his eyes. He grabbed the controls and powered up the unit, flexing its arms and legs, extending its wings from its back-mounted flight pack and checking the ammo count on its gauss rifle.

The announcer's voice rang out. "Are you ready?" The crowd roared as Jim flashed a thumbs-up. No doubt Tina did the same, since a lot of people were screaming her name.

"On your marks!"

Jim tightened his hands on the controls and settled his feet more firmly on the foot pedals. Around him appeared a simulated launch bay.

"Get set!"

Jim shifted slightly in the seat, making sure he was comfortable.

"GO!"

His simulated Battlesuit was hurled out of the simulated launch bay. He quickly drew in the wings and skidded it to a halt as a burned out city formed around him, giving them an environment to fight in. He looked around, then pressed the Battlesuit up against a building and gripped the gauss rifle in both hands.

Holding the gun pointed before him, he swung around the side of the building just in time to see Tina's Battlesuit zoom across a side street several hundred yards away, its wings spread wide for better response time.

He quickly trotted to the next side street and, checking to make sure it was clear, ducked into it. As he did, a line of bullets chewed up the pavement where he'd been standing only a moment before. He grinned, and booster-jumped his Battlesuit up onto the building next to him.

Tina's Battlesuit was just dropping off the top of a nearby building. He fired a quick burst at her, missing by only a few feet, and leaped to the next building. Jim looked around for a long moment, then jumped back down to the street.

He took a few cautious steps, then stumbled as shells slammed repeatedly into the back of his Battlesuit. He looked up as Tina zipped overhead, wings extended, and took a sharp turn into a side street to avoid his return fire.

The announcer bellowed over the cheering crowd. "First score goes to Tina early in the game! But Jim's not badly damaged...The winner remains to be seen!"

Jim ducked into the superstructure of a mostly-wrecked building and checked his damage control systems. Like the announcer had said, it wasn't bad...Mostly damage to the cowling on his thrusters. He looked up as something exploded nearby.

Suddenly, the building shuddered and collapsed around him.

The crowd roared, almost drowning out the announcer. "A few well-placed rockets by Tina, and Jim is buried under a ton of rubble! Will he be able to recover?"

Jim grimaced and fired the Battlesuit's thrusters, blasting himself out of the rubble. He was immediately bombarded by rifle fire, blowing away his Battlesuit's left arm which he'd raised as defense and damaging its left leg. *Damn it*, he thought, *I forgot that these things don't have a shield like Panzer Knights.*

He quickly limped behind a nearby building as a pair of rockets exploded against one of his thrusters, wrecking it.

The crowd was silent, waiting to see what would happen next. The announcer spoke softly. "Doesn't look too good for Jim, does it folks. Tina definitely got the drop on him that time."

Jim took a moment to catch his breath and catalogue his damage. One thruster and wing gone, wiping out flight. Left arm gone and leg damaged. Not good. He hefted the gauss rifle in his right hand and waited.

After a long moment, he rounded the corner and opened fire...Winging Tina's right leg as she zoomed past him, flying only a few feet off the ground. He turned, but not fast enough. Rifle fire mauled his Battlesuit as he turned and tried to dodge, the impacting shells making the armor ring like an oversized bell.

His Battlesuit went down as its left leg collapsed, and the VR display wrapped him in darkness. Jim slumped back in his seat as the audience cheered for Tina's victory. Finally, he pulled off the VR visor and climbed out of the cabinet, and chuckled when he saw the announcer gallantly helping Tina out of hers.

"Congratulations, Captain Jodescu! You've won a six-month pass to the Amherst Village Rides and Amusements center, Fort Amherst's premier virtual reality theme park!"

Tina grinned and leaned over to the microphone. "Thanks, Bob. I really thought Jimmy had me when he rounded the corner at the end there. A foot to the left and up, and he'd've blown me in half."

Jim walked over. Tina hugged him, then impulsively kissed his cheek, murmuring "You flew that thing like you were driving a Panzer Knight. You're definitely not a fighter jock."

He laughed as the crowd cheered for them. "Thanks, Tina." She grinned at him.

The Fort's PA system suddenly buzzed loudly for attention and the audience quieted down. *"Will the following people please report to the Administration building: All senior staff members; Captain Samuel Piaget; Captain Tina Jodescu; Commander James Cadwell. Thank you, that is all."*

Tina quickly grabbed his arm and pulled him off the stage, all business suddenly. "Come on. Something must be up."

Chapter 5

Tina later compared the briefing for the Freedom Project to having a superior officer hand you a loaded gun, then order you to walk across enemy lines, hand it to the first blood-thirsty enemy soldier you found, and tell him that it was okay with you if he wanted to blow your brains out, but that you'd just like a few minutes to chat with him before he decides whether or not to pull the trigger.

I can't argue that...But I've since realized that the gun we've been handed is one big enough to blow away the entire Solar System if screw up. Which isn't a thought I want to share with Tina. Though I'm sure she's come to the same conclusion by now.

The only good news is that if we do screw it up, we won't be around to watch the Earth get turned into a ball of ash...

From the *Collected Journals* of Admiral James Cadwell

Tina and Jim entered one of the executive conference rooms on the fourth floor of the administration building, and were promptly struck by a single fact...General Stanton, who was in charge of the Fort, wasn't seated at the head of the table. Instead, there was hologram of a person "seated" at that spot...A hologram of Fleet Commander Lucian Anders, to be specific.

Fleet Commander Anders nodded to them. "Captain Jodescu, Commander Cadwell...I apologize for calling you in while you're supposed to be on leave, but this is important." He gestured to two empty seats across from General Stanton and his XO, and next to a man whom Jim recognized as Captain Piaget.

Jim and Tina quickly sat down, and the flat screens in the conference table before them lit up with the Colonial Fleet logo. Fleet Commander Anders leaned back in his chair and rested his hands on its arms...Or appeared to, at least. "General Stanton already knows why you're here...But I'm going to do a quick recap for Tina, Jim and Sam." He nodded down the table towards them and Piaget.

Commander Anders looked around the table again. "The briefing you're about to receive is extremely classified. You are not to talk about it outside this room unless you know your surroundings are secure. Is that understood?"

After receiving affirmatives from everyone at the table, he continued. "I'm broadcasting from the Fleet Headquarters on the moon, where the *Freedom*, first ship of its class, is nearing completion. The public timetable for its construction is down to six months. However, in actuality, it's ready for basic space trials, and will be moving to a specially prepared asteroid base, *Freedom's Nest*, in a few weeks for final construction, and for security reasons."

"All of you, except General Stanton, are going with it. The General has been brought into this to help oversee the reformation of the Skull and Knights Errant squadrons, which Captain Jodescu and Commander Cadwell will shortly commence."

He looked at Jim and Tina. "You have one month to rebuild your respective squadrons and put them through the simulators to make sure they're capable of working together. After that, you'll be transferred to Captain Piaget's command, where you'll spend a month learning to work with him and his crew Earthside."

The Fleet Commander turned to Captain Piaget. "Samuel, you'll be taking command of the *Lightbringer*-class *Excalibur* assault carrier for the next three months. She's been outfitted with the all of the latest systems, so you'll have a chance to get used to them before moving to the *Freedom*. The last month of your stay on the *Excalibur* will be done out in the Asteroid Belt, so that your command will have a chance to get used to working in outer space."

He turned back to Jim and Tina. "The reason we're giving you a month to put together and retrain your squads is because Commander Cadwell's mecha will be unavailable until then. They are being loaded onto a transport as we speak, which will take them to Fleet H.Q. for refitting. When you get them back, they'll be properly outfitted for atmospheric and vacuum flight operations. Additionally, Commander Cadwell, you'll need to prepare the new Knights Errant for flight missions, since your Panzer Knights are being outfitted with larger main thrusters and flight systems."

Jim nodded and made a mental note to borrow some of Tina's training simulation programs.

Commander Anders continued. "After the three months of retraining are up, you'll be transferring to the *Freedom*. Your mission is purely exploration...At least, that's what our computer records report and what we'll be telling the media. Off the record, we want you try to locate and open diplomatic relations with the Ashen'ti."

Piaget stiffened in his seat. Jim twitched, and Tina stared in shock at the Fleet Commander.

After a long moment of silence, Captain Piaget ran his hand over his salt and pepper beard, and asked, "With all due respect, sir, are you sure that's possible?"

Tina hissed and angrily spat out, "How can you calmly ask a question like that? The Ashen'ti should all die for what they did to us."

The Fleet Commander sighed softly. "Captain Jodescu, there are many members of the Fleet High Command that agree with that sentiment. But keep in mind what it was, exactly, that they did to us. Do you really want an open conflict with them?"

Tina stood up and planted her hands flat on the table. "Surely, Commander, with more ships like the *Freedom* and the *Excalibur* at our disposal, we could simply mount an assault..."

The Commander glared her down. "Sit down and be quiet, Captain. Let me remind you that a hundred and ten years ago, in less than one standard hour, an Ashen'ti fleet eradicated nearly two-thirds of the Earth's total population? The major cities like New York, London, Paris and Moscow STILL haven't recovered from the devastation. Even with our new technologies, Fleet High Command, along with the United Nations Colonial Government made the decision that we cannot risk open war against such an enemy."

Tina hesitated, then sat down.

He nodded. "Thank you, Captain. The events of a century ago are exactly what we're hoping to prevent a repeat of. Which is why we want to open diplomatic relations with them instead of openly provoking them."

Tina nodded and finished calming herself down. Jim watched her, concerned.

Commander Anders shifted something in front of him just outside the field of his holoprojector. "Now then...The first leg of the *Freedom's* journey will be a trip to Alpha Centauri, which we believe to be roughly the direction you'll need to go to find the Ashen'ti."

Piaget cleared his throat. "With all due respect, sir, that's a long trip. Two or three years, at least, at top speed. And that's assuming nothing goes wrong with the ship between here and there."

General Stanton smiled tightly. "Captain, trust me when I tell you that it won't take long at all, and leave it at that until you get to the *Freedom*. Please."

Captain Piaget looked at him curiously, but nodded his assent and settled back into his chair again.

"Thank you, General," Commander Anders said. "Now, for the bad news."

"Here it comes," Tina muttered.

"In the past ten years," The Fleet Commander said slowly, "Fleet Command has launched seven deep-space probes from the *Neptune's Pride* space station. Five of them reported spotting Ashen'ti starships in the general vicinity of Alpha Centauri...Shortly before being destroyed."

"How do you know they didn't just hit an asteroid, or develop some problem with their transmitters, sir?" Jim asked.

Commander Anders nodded. "When the first probe stopped responding, that's what we thought had happened. The second and third probes, however, ceased broadcasting in mid-transmission, after sending back images that showed clear space around them. No debris or stellar bodies to collide with. The fourth probe sent back an operations report showing 100% on all of its systems, less than ten seconds before its transmissions stopped."

Jim nodded. "That's enough to suggest an unnatural reason behind their stopping."

The Fleet Commander looked grim. "Yes, Commander, it would have been enough. But the fifth probe's last transmission before its destruction was an image of an Ashen'ti ship firing what appears to have been a plasma stream weapon at the probe."

"Oh." Jim lapsed into thought.

Commander Anders looked around the table. "Which is why I must report that Fleet Intelligence has determined the survivability-rating of this mission at approximately 10%."

Piaget winced. "Ouch."

Anders nodded. "Exactly. Ordinarily, we would never send out a ship on a mission with such horrible odds. However...We have also determined that at our current state of readiness, the Ashen'ti fleet that struck us a hundred and ten years ago could do equivalent damage again today without suffering significant losses. Even projecting ahead another five years, by which time we hope to have the *Freedom* class and *Excalibur* class *Lightbringer* refits in mass production, we don't see ourselves being able to withstand a direct assault for more than a few days."

General Stanton leaned forwards towards them. "This is a desperate move on our part, Sam. But we think it needs to be done."

Captain Piaget nodded. "I'll go, and do my best. But I'll also do everything in my power to bring my crew back alive."

Commander Anders smiled faintly. "That's why we chose you, Captain Piaget...We expected nothing less of you."

He looked around. "Are there any questions?" He waited a moment, and when no one showed any inclination to ask him anything, he nodded. "That will be all for now, then. Captain Jodescu, Commander Cadwell, General Stanton will have pilot dossiers for you first thing tomorrow morning. Please don't let your candidates know the desperate nature of this

mission until after the squads are finalized next month. Anyone who wants out at that point will be allowed to transfer, and we'll do our best to replace them before you leave."

Jim and Tina nodded.

The Fleet Commander stood up, all of them standing with them. He offered them a salute, which they returned, then his image seemed to pixelate and break up, and he was gone.

Jim sat down heavily, shaking slightly.

Captain Piaget rested a hand on his shoulder while Tina looked on, concerned. "You all right, son?"

Jim nodded. "Yes sir, Captain. Just..."

"Shocked? A little afraid? Feeling a bit overwhelmed?"

Jim nodded again. "Exactly that, sir."

Captain Piaget smiled kindly. "Me too. I think it's natural, under the circumstances. You and Tina go get some rest."

Tina tugged Jim to his feet. "C'mon, Jimmy."

General Stanton broke in. "Report to my office at 09:00 tomorrow to get those pilot dossiers. They'll be waiting for you."

Jim and Tina saluted the General and the Captain, then left the conference room.

Two hours later...

The first sub-level of the Fort Amherst Administration Building was a recreational area filled with couches, vid-screens, vending machines, and other assorted items associated with intentionally not working. What most people who visited it were unaware of was the small bar that was tucked neatly away in a corner behind one of the retaining walls. It didn't announce itself, but many of the Fort's pilots frequented it, and eventually it was christened "Downtime."

However, since it was still only 15:30 hours, Jim Cadwell found himself all-but alone in the friendly little bar. He was slowly nursing a beer which, according to the bottle, had been brewed somewhere in Germany, but still managed to taste very nearly unpalatable.

Tina Jodescu was perched on the stool next to him at the bar, also nursing a beer. The bartender was watching them warily, a bit worried by the fact that they hadn't said a word since they'd ordered their drinks, and both looked a little on the stunned side.

Finally, Tina grabbed Jim's arm and dragged him, beer and all, to a secluded booth in a dark corner of the bar. Once they were seated across the table from one another, she asked "What did you think of that?"

Jim sipped his beer. "Do you mean our new assignments, or the fact that this mission has survival rating that they admitted was damn near close to falling below 10%? I think we're all screwed. Five probes...Damn it, we're probably gonna die out there. I know, let's go on a huge bender...Stay drunk until the launch. Maybe they'll deem us unfit for duty."

Tina giggled. That alone was enough to make Jim put his beer down, wondering if maybe she'd snapped. Instead she shook her head. "That's not like you, and you know it. Besides...We do that, and you'll miss out on your first chance to see the wonders of the universe..."

Jim tossed back the last of his beer. "True enough. Well...At least we'll be going out with the best troops and equipment this planet has to offer, and with a Captain who might just be capable of pulling off the impossible."

Tina finished off her beer as well. "Try and relax, roomie. We'll do a good job of putting together our squadrons, then we'll go out there and forge us some peace. And if we can't, we'll make damn sure our names live forever."

"Or at least as long as there're humans around to remember us."

"Jeez...That's depressing."

"True, though."

"Doesn't change the fact that it's depressing!"

Jim chuckled softly. "Yeah. Oh, hey...I meant to ask...Can I copy some of your flight-training sims? I can use them to train my new pilots...And myself...For airborne combat."

Tina sniggered. "Sure. I wanna see how your flying bricks handle."

"You'd better watch out...Next time we go out together, I'll be airborne with you. Keep making remarks like that, and I won't cover you."

Tina snorted. "So? You'll still be eating my contrails."

"Not in outer space I won't."

"Good point."

"So...What's for dinner?"

Tina tapped her fingers on the table-top. "Thai?"

"Not the way my stomach feels after that meeting. Italian?"

"Mexican?"

"Pizza?"

"Works for me. But you're buyin'."

Jim sighed melodramatically.

That evening found Jimmy and Tina on the couch in their apartment, their legs stretched out in front of them, watching a 20th Century sci-fi vid with a bowl of popcorn between them.

"Remind me again why I'm watching this crap with you?"

"Because," Tina said with the patient tone of a parent addressing a particularly recalcitrant child, "The General told us to relax tonight, and you," She poked him in the ribs, "Didn't want to go dancing AND agreed to let me choose the vid!"

"Oh yeah. Right. God I'm dumb."

Tina giggled.

Dramatic music blared from the vid screen as the blond heroine finished her speech and narrowly avoided being turned into a smear by the show's monster du-jour.

Jim looked at Tina. "Does this happen in EVERY episode?"

Tina grinned. "Just about. Wait until you see the characters they add in the last season. They're disturbing." She stuffed a handful of popcorn in her mouth and munched happily.

Jimmy shook his head and chuckled, returning his attention to the show. "You've got some strange fetishes, Tina."

A kernel of popcorn bounced off the side of his head. He looked at Tina just in time for a second kernel to hit the bridge of his nose, right between his eyes.

"Hey!" He lunged towards her, spilling the popcorn and driving her back to the arm of the sofa. She giggled hysterically as he tickled her, frantically (but not too seriously) trying to defend herself.

On the vid screen, a young man in a tuxedo was perched on a street lamp, making a completely incomprehensible speech about love. Neither of them noticed.

Tina wrapped her legs around Jimmy's hips, grabbed his arms, and twisted. They landed with on the floor, in the spilled popcorn, with a thud and some soft crunches, Jimmy on the bottom, his arms and legs pinned. Tina smiled impishly. "Gotcha."

"Uh...Yep. So you do."

Tina leaned in closer to him. "Shouldn't tickle me, you know."

"So I see."

Tina leaned closer. Their lips were almost touching. Her smile became almost predatory. "I'm very ticklish."

"So I noticed."

Their lips touched, a hesitant kiss. After a moment, the kiss deepened. Tina released Jimmy's arms, allowing him to wrap them around her.

"Um...Tina...Are you sure..."

"Shhh..."

On the vid screen, the young man in the tuxedo was injured by the villain, and taken from the blonde heroine.

Neither of them noticed.

Chapter 6

The façade gets harder to maintain every day. And Jim's not helping matters. He's such a sweet guy, always trying to help, always trying to make me feel better...He doesn't deserve all of the baggage I'm lugging around.

So why can't I seem to let go of him?

From the private journals of Captain Tina Jodescu

It was the horrible, annoying buzzing sound filling his ears that finally shook Jim awake. With a typical morning lack of coordination, it took him four tries to hit the alarm clock's "Off" button with a flailing hand. The third attempt was particularly painful, since he somehow managed to overbalance and tumble out of bed...Which was, more even than the alarm, what woke him up.

It might have been easier, he thought, if Tina and I hadn't been up until three o'clock in the morning reading those pilot dossiers. He pushed himself to his knees and stared blearily at the clock, and groaned when he discovered that he'd only gotten three hours of sleep.

He could hear the sounds of papers shuffling from the living room of the suite he shared with Tina, and decided that if she could do it, he could too. He headed for the door.

On second thought, he decided to shower and get dressed first. He scratched his sleep-tousled hair and wondered why he felt like something was wrong.

Mmm...Nope, he thought, Can't put my finger on it. It'll come to me.

With that, he drifted into his bathroom to try to finish waking up.

When he emerged from his room twenty minutes later, cleaned and dressed, he found Tina sitting at the table in their kitchenette with pilot dossiers and empty coffee mugs scattered around her. She looked up and smiled. "Morning, sleepy-head. It's about time you got up."

He grabbed a clean mug and filled it with coffee. "Do you ever sleep?" He poured in a bit of cream, then spooned in some sugar and idly stirred the brew.

For a moment, she was somber. "You know about how well I sleep."

Jim nodded drowsily as that wrong feeling clicked into place, and he mumbled "That'd explain why you never came to bed last night." He leaned against the counter and sipped his coffee. His eyes widened for a moment before he turned and spewed the mouthful of liquid into the sink. "Gah!" He turned on the tap and drank water directly from it while Tina giggled. After he had rinsed out his mouth several times, he turned back to her.

"What the hell IS that?"

She grinned. "It's my special mix of coffee beans. I brew it extra strong when I want to stay awake. You don't like it?"

"It's terrible!" He wiped his mouth with a towel. "What's in there, turpentine?"

Tina laughed. "Nope. Just lots and lots of caffeine. Like I said...It's my own personal mix. There's at least six different types of coffee bean in there."

Jim stared at the mug for a long moment, then carefully placed it in the sink as if he were afraid it might explode or eat through the stainless steel sink if he spilled any. "Uh...I think I'll just have some tea..." He put the teapot on a burner and began rummaging through the cabinets, looking for tea bags.

Tina closed the dossier she'd been reading and tossed it in a pile on the floor, then flipped open another while taking a sip of her coffee. "Ahhh...That's good."

"That's disgusting, you mean."

"You have no appreciation for fine coffee."

"On the contrary. I just prefer to keep my taste buds intact."

Tina nodded absently, thumbing through the file. "Uh huh."

He sat down across from her and stared at his own stack of folders. "So..."

"Hmmm? Ugh, this guy's got serious problems with authority and taking orders." Tina dropped the folder on top of a pile on the floor next to the table.

Jim made a noncommittal sound and opened one of his folders, watching Tina out of the corners of his eyes as he browsed through the dossier. After a moment's consideration, he dropped it into his rejects pile and moved on to the next one.

"So," he started again a few minutes later, "Would you like to tell me what happened the other night?"

"Hmmm? Oh...A few moments of mutual pleasure?"

Jim choked on his tea, caught off guard by her dismissing tone of voice. "A few moments? So that wasn't you screaming my name three hours later?"

She blushed furiously, which Jim decided he found attractive.

"What do you want me to say," she asked, "That we forged an intense connection, the likes of which only exists between soul mates? We had sex. It might happen again, since you WERE rather good at pushing my buttons, so to speak."

"That's all?"

"That's all."

"It was nothing more than that to you?"

An emotion flickered across her face too quickly for Jim to categorize it easily. It could have been disgust, distress or...And then he had it. It had been a combination of fear and longing. He frowned slightly.

"That's right, Jim. It was...Nothing more than that to me." She looked back down at her pile of pilot dossiers, unable to meet his eyes for the moment. "Really."

Jim nodded slightly. "Okay." And with that, opened up another file and started reading it, scratching notes here and there.

Tina looked up at him...And he felt a faint tickling sensation at the back of his neck for a moment before she looked down again and murmured "Saw right through that, did you?"

He shrugged uncomfortably. "Yeah, sort of. But Tina..."

She looked up at him again.

He smiled gently. "No pressure, okay. I like you...And the other night WAS a hell of a lot of fun. And I think there's the potential for something more here. But there's no pressure, and I'm in no hurry."

Tina relaxed a little bit, then smiled and leaned across the table to lightly punch his shoulder. "You're a good man, James Cadwell. Too good for me."

"Nah. I'm not too good for you."

"Sure you are. You're like...Some kind of pure knight in shining armor."

Jim snorted. "I leave my socks on the floor just like every other guy."

"No!"

"Yup. And I hate watching sports."

"Blasphemy!"

"And..." He leaned forward and whispered, "...I never wash the tub after taking a bath, even if I leave a ring."

Tina leaned back, pressing a hand to her chest and exclaiming, "Why I never...My image of you is permanently, irrevocably shattered. You're right, you're not too good for me. I'M too good for YOU!"

They both managed to hold their poker faces for a long moment, before collapsing into helpless laughter.

It was several minutes before they could look at one another before breaking down into fresh laughter. When they finally calmed down, Tina reached across the table and rested her hand lightly atop his.

"Thank you, Jim. But...I have some trust issues that I'd need to work through before..."

He interrupted her gently. "Shush. If you need help...Or just want to talk about it, you only need to ask. But until then, like I said, there's no pressure, and I'm in no rush."

Tina nodded somberly, and Jim could tell that she was touched by his sentiment, even if she wasn't sure how to show it.

The moment was on the verge of lingering too long when she pulled her hand back. "However, it's your turn to make breakfast."

"Oh hell...C'mon, give me a break...I can burn pasta...The eggs won't stand a chance..."

"Oh no! I cooked yesterday, you cook today."

"Oh god..."

"Just give me a minute to find the fire extinguisher before you start."

"Cute. Really cute."

Tina dimpled adorably and Jim rolled his eyes, then dragged himself out of his chair and over to the refrigerator to see what sort of mess he could make.

Jim tossed another folder onto his pile of candidates and leaned back in his chair. "That's it...If I have to read another of those damned things, I'll get my blaster and shoot holes in it first. I swear, all of these pilots are starting to look the same..."

Tina rubbed her eyes and nodded. "I think I'm done too." She looked around. "The good news is, we've run out of dossiers anyway." She folded her arms on the table and put her head down on them. "Only problem now is, I've got at least five candidates for each open position. You?"

Jim nodded. "Same here. Of course, the upside of this is that it means we've got a good chance of actually getting the best pilots possible."

"Yeah, but we'll have to spend days watching them in simulator exercises."

The horrified look on Jim's face said it all.

Tina giggled. "Oh, don't look so upset. It won't be so bad. After the first round of cullings, we can start taking bets on who'll make the cut and who won't."

Jim snorted. "So you're gonna start taking my money now, huh?"

"It was only a matter of time."

"I wouldn't dream of arguing that point with you."

"Good."

Jim stretched and stood up, then bent down and grabbed up the pile of rejected dossiers.

"Toss them in the incinerator," Tina said. "That should both recycle them and deal sufficiently with security."

He nodded and carried them over to the sink, kicking open a hatch under it with his foot and tossing them in. The hatch shut on them, and uttered a soft thumping sound. "Want me to get rid of yours, too?"

"Please. If I move right now, my head will roll off my shoulders."

Jim chuckled and picked up Tina's stack of rejects, and tossed them in the incinerator, with the same result. He leaned against the counter and rubbed his face wearily. "What time is it, anyway?"

Tina lifted her head far enough to glance at the clock. "Late. Or early, depending on your definition."

Plaintively, he replied, "Did we really have to do this all in one day?"

"Hey," Tina replied, "You've seen the list of candidates we still have to sort through in the simulators. We'll need all the time we have left before these squads are slated to go on duty to actually put them together."

"Even still..."

"Look...This way, we can get our lists on General Stanton's desk first thing tomorrow morning...This morning, rather...And put together a schedule for testing the pilots."

"What happened so sleep?"

"Sleep? Sleep is for nightmares and for the dead."

Jim blinked and turned to look at her. "Tina?"

"I'm fine." She stood up suddenly, looking pale. "Type up my list for me and make sure it gets to the General, okay?" She headed for the front door.

"What? Tina..."

"Thanks, Jim." The door hissed shut behind her, leaving him staring at it, bewildered.

"What the hell..."

Jim placed two datapads on the desk in front of him, then sat heavily in the chair General Stanton offered him. He rubbed his eyes for a moment, struggling to keep from yawning in front of the General.

Stanton frowned slightly. "And where, may I ask, is Captain Jodescu?"

Jim sighed. "If I knew, General, I'd tell you. Frankly, I'm less than happy about her absence myself. She just walked out of our quarters at about half past two this morning,

and I haven't heard or seen her since...And before you ask, she didn't tell me where she was going."

Stanton's frown deepened. "This isn't the type of behavior we typically tolerate amongst our officers..."

Jim snorted. "I should certainly hope not," he muttered.

"...But considering who it is, and the fact that her work is done and here on time..."

"Even though I did it," Jim added helpfully.

"...We'll let it slide just this once. But do let the Captain know when you see her that this sort of grossly negligent conduct won't be tolerated again."

"Believe me, General...She's going to hear about it."

"Good." General Stanton picked up the datapads. "Now then...These lists are complete?"

Jim nodded. "Yes, sir. We managed to cut it down to five candidates per position."

"That's a lot of candidates, Commander."

"Yes, sir. But we wanted to give ourselves some leeway, if you follow. To make sure that not only would we get good pilots, but squads that could work well as groups."

Stanton nodded. "Good thinking."

"Tina also said something about not necessarily taking the very best pilots, but rather the ones with the most...Well, heart, for lack of a better expression. Speaking from experience, that's not a bad idea. The Knights Errant were all technically proficient...Our simulator scores were outrageously good, as you well know. But when it came down to it, we fell apart and got torn to bits."

"And the same thing happened to Skull Squadron." Stanton nodded. "I agree. Technical proficiency isn't the be-all and end-all of being a good pilot."

"Agreed sir." Jim yawned helplessly and made an embarrassed sound. "Excuse me, sir. I didn't get any sleep last night, and only a couple hours the night before."

Stanton chuckled. "Worked you to the bone, did she? Well, the good news is that this gets us a couple days ahead of schedule. That'll give you extra time to select your pilots." He plugged the datapads into two of the ports on the side of his desk. "I'll get the temporary transfer orders under way...The pilots should all be here within two days. Try to have your first battery of tests ready by then."

Jim yawned again and blushed. "Yes, sir. Sorry, sir."

Stanton shook his head. "Go home, Jim. Get some sleep."

Jim stood and saluted. "With pleasure, sir!"

By the time he got back to his quarters, Jim was already half asleep. He only just barely had the presence of mind to get undressed, before falling into bed and into a deep sleep.

Some indeterminate time later...Mid-afternoon, judging by the light streaming in through the closed blinds...Jim was awakened by a sobbing, shaking Tina Jodescu as she slipped under his blankets and nestled against, him, burying her face against his neck. He opened his mouth to say something...But felt her shivering against him and heard her ragged breaths. Felt her tears as they fell on his neck.

He closed his mouth and wrapped his arms around her instead.

After a little while, her sobs faded and she drifted off in his arms, exhausted.

He held her, and drifted back to sleep.

Chapter 7

There's an old saying about the road to hell being paved with good intentions, or something like that. Well, we learned exactly how true that old saying was when the Siberian Independent States finally stopped pretending to be something they weren't and made their intentions very clear.

Oh, we all knew what they really were. Anybody who took a good look at their internal policies would realize the truth in a matter of moments. But we turned a blind eye, because the United Nations Colonial Government's charter said, in no uncertain terms, that everyone had the right to their own beliefs and ways of life.

So we left them alone, and no pressure was placed on them to join the UNCG. If only we'd known how that decision would turn us the first chance it got...

From *The Collected Journals* of Admiral James Cadwell

Jim Cadwell blinked as two of his prospective Panzer Knight pilots experienced the joy of a simulated head-on collision for the second time in their twenty-minute test. He lifted his datapad and scratched both of them off the potentials list.

Tina, standing next to him in the control booth, leaned over and peeked at his 'pad. "Well...That's another hundred credits you owe me. What's that make it now?"

"My eternal soul, I believe. I don't know, really...I lost track around a thousand credits."

Tina rubbed her chin thoughtfully, watching her own series of pilot tests. "Hmm...I think I'll take your soul, and you can forget the cash. I can think of all sorts of fun things to do with it."

Jim glanced sideways at her, seeing the impish expression on her face. "You scare me sometimes, Tina."

"I try." She tweaked a setting on her console, and watched as one of the simulators came to a crashing halt as its pilot was gunned down. "Scratch another one. That was a pathetic display, by the way...How the hell do you run two thirty-foot tall Heavy Combat Panzer Knights into one another. They've got better sensor systems than my Raptor."

"Total lack of Situational Awareness." He winced as they collided again. "Let me rephrase that. Blinding stupidity."

"That's just wrong. How the hell did those guys become pilots?"

"Beats me. If I have anything to say about it, they're going to be bounced back to basic infantry. This is pitiful." Jim made a face and closed down their two simulators a good five minutes before they were supposed to be done.

"Good call."

"Thanks." He pressed a button on his headset. "Send in the next batch of five."

Tina chuckled. "We're blowing through these pilots like there's no tomorrow. We'll be done weeding them out before the end of the week. How many have you got left?"

"These are my last five, actually. I've pretty much decided on which of the others I'm going to pick to fill four of my five slots. I just need one more, and another alternate."

Tina nodded. "I've got three more batches of five. But then, I've got ten spots to fill, as compared to your five."

Jim grimaced. "Don't remind me. It's a lot harder to fill five spots than ten. With ten, you can pick and choose more discriminatingly. I'm practically scrambling to find a good mix of skills."

"Got a demolitions specialist yet?"

He rifled through the datapads scattered around his station. "Um...Yes. Lieutenant JG Kelly O'Neill. Says her Callsign is 'Boom-Boom'."

"I think that says it all."

Jim nodded. "You should've been here for her sim. She actually managed to overheat both of the particle beam cannons on her Zeus 'Suit. And exhausted its supply of rockets." He tapped a key on his datapad. "Says here she likes to carry additional shaped charges on her 'Suit that she can..." He blinked, "...Throw."

Tina choked on the sip of water she'd just taken. "What? That sounds a little... Dangerous."

"You can say that again. But I'm in no position to argue. She's got one of the highest scores so far."

"I'd keep an eye on her, if I were you. How's her psych review read?"

"No worse than yours."

Tina turned to face him. "What did you say?"

"Oh shit."

"You hacked my file?"

"Well...After the way you walked out the other night...And you didn't want to talk about it the next morning..."

Tina glared at him.

"...Sorry?"

She kept glaring.

"Keep that up and you're going to burn a couple of holes in my forehead."

Tina was starting to look a little angry.

Jim sighed. "Tina, I was worried about you, and you weren't talking to me about it. What was I supposed to do? Sit around, wondering if you were going to do something rash one of these days?"

Tina sighed and looked down at her hands, folded in her lap suddenly. "I'm sorry. I understand why you did it. Heck, I'd've done the same thing. It's just...I can't...I have a hard time..."

She looked up as Jim's hands folded gently over hers. He smiled. "Take your time. Let's finish this. We've got plenty of time to talk."

Tina smiled faintly, gave his hands a little squeeze, and turned back to her console just as her next batch of five pilots arrived.

"Well," Jim said, "Here we go again."

"Pray for the simulators..."

It was a week later when the news finally broke.

Jim Cadwell clung to the controls of his Achilles Command Panzer Knight as it rocketed towards the ground at full speed. He frantically yanked the controls around, trying to make the Suit go where he wanted it to.

It wouldn't.

His eyes flickered over to the altimeter. It read 3000 feet and falling like a brick. He pulled the throttle control back as far as it would go, all the way into reverse thrust.

Nothing happened.

He stomped his feet down on the pedals, trying to bring the Achilles' legs around towards the ground rather than its head. *If I can just bring the foot thrusters into play...*

It didn't work.

The ground was getting very, very close.

Jim cursed very loudly and with great zeal. At the same time, he tightened his safety harness, checked the strap on his helmet, and closed his eyes.

A moment later, he was rewarded with the hum of hydraulics and the hiss of escaping air. He opened his eyes to see the spherical cockpit split in half around its circumference, the top half rising away from him to reveal a lab in one of Fort Amherst's R&D buildings. A technician was smiling sheepishly at him from a few feet away.

Jim glared at the tech.

The tech coughed. "If it makes you feel any better, Commander, our computers indicate that you survived the crash. With a 73% chance of escaping serious injury."

Jim pulled off his helmet and started undoing his harness. "Wonderful. Would you like to tell me what just happened?"

The technician looked embarrassed. "Um, well...It's like this, sir...The software package used by the Panzer Knight simulators was never programmed to handle flight situations, let alone high-altitude maneuvers. When you pulled that Full Immelmann at 13,000 feet, it confused the software which apparently decided that you'd taken a critical amount of damage and cut out your controls."

Jim paused, one leg out of the simulator pod. "That's not going to happen in the real thing, is it?"

The tech shook his head frantically. "Oh no, Commander. This was purely a software glitch in the simulator. The real CPK-2201s is MUCH more responsive. And now that we've improved its breaking thrusters..."

Jim finished climbing out of the simulator and tossed his helmet to the tech. "So I won't be digging any more simulated furrows when I come in to land and can't slow down. Grand. How long before you'll have the simulator fixed? I'd rather crash it than the real thing, and I need to know how to fly the upgrade so I can teach my squad how to."

The technician fumbled the helmet for a moment, but finally got a solid grip on it. "Um...Six or seven hours, Commander. We'll need to reprogram that section of the software package. You might as well call it a day."

Jim unzipped his flightsuit to his waist, revealing the flat black skinsuit underneath it. "Sounds like a plan. See you first thing tomorrow?"

The tech nodded. "Yes, sir."

Before either of them could move, Tina Jodescu burst through the lab doors. "Hey! Come on! Something's going on with the S.I.S.! They're about to make some sort of broadcast."

Jim and the technician ran after her as she turned around and bolted back out of the lab, leading them to the lounge a few doors down, where the rest of the lab staff was crowded around the large, flat screen embedded in one wall. It was currently displaying the logo of the Siberian Independent States...A plain red flag with a single gold five-pointed star in the middle of it. The announcer...A voice Jim recognized as one of the Global News Network reporters...Was narrating.

"To repeat the news of the hour, at 15:45 hours Earth Standard Time today, we received a wide-band transmission from the Siberian Independent States informing the U.N.C.G. that they were officially closing their borders and would be making an announcement at 20:00

hours EST this evening, just four minutes from now. We have President Shiro Takashi of the United Nations Colonial Government on channel now...Mr. President, this is Paul Kissan of the GNN. Does the U.N.C.G. have any idea what their announcement is going to concern?"

A different voice, that of President Takashi, replied, "I'm afraid not, Paul. We just don't know. I have been authorized to tell you that we have lost contact with the U.N.C.G. embassy in the Siberian Independent States, which isn't a good sign. We're holding out hope that they may be all right though, and that this is simply some misunderstanding that can be dealt with quickly and painlessly."

Someone in the crowd of lab staffers surrounding the screen snorted. Another muttered, "That'll be the day." A third said, "Oh, please...The President is lying through his teeth. Of course they know what's going on."

"Maybe they honestly don't, this time," Jim whispered in Tina's ear. She shot him a look that made it quite plain that she didn't think that was the case. Jim shrugged.

The GNN reporter continued, "Thank you, Mr. President. I hope you'll stay on the line to comment on the Siberian announcement."

"I will, if I can, Paul."

"And on that note, we're switching to the Siberian broadcast's live audio feed. Their announcement should be taking place within a matter of moments."

Jim discovered that he was holding his breath, and let it out slowly.

"Worried?" Tina whispered in his ear.

"Extremely."

A burst of static came over the speakers. Then a voice.

"This is General Dimitri Solokov of the Siberian Independent States. Having closed our borders to the United Nations Colonial Government, we hereby openly declare war against that organization, which is destroying humanity. By allowing the so-called 'Meta-humans' to live freely amongst humans, the U.N.C.G. is encouraging the gradual decline of the True Human, which will eventually lead to our utter annihilation at the hands of our own creations.

"We created the meta-humans, yet we treat them as equals rather than creations! What madness is this? They are our slaves...Our servants...Not our equals or our betters! We should control them, not let them live freely amongst us! And look at how well the U.N.C.G. has managed to handle the Genate Crisis...It has been over a century since the Day of Devastation, when many of the Genates created by human scientists escaped their pens and fled to create more chaos. Still today they roam our homeworld, bringing death and destruction wherever they go!"

Jim snorted and muttered, "Sure, let's see how well HE does against some of those monsters."

"Shhh!"

"So today, the Siberian Independent States makes this declaration of war and purpose... Only by remaining pure, and using meta-humans and Genates as tools, can we ever hope to prevent another Day of Devastation like the one the Ashen'ti visited upon us. The United Nations Colonial Government has shown itself unfit to rule. So we shall! Our crusade has begun, with the elimination of the U.N.C.G. embassy in our capital city. Those who stand in our way will die. All who wish to join our cause are welcome!"

"That is all."

The broadcast turned to static, then was replaced by a simple blue screen with the GNN logo in the center of it.

It stayed that way for a long, silent moment, before the GNN Newsroom appeared on the screen, with a very pale Paul Kissan sitting behind his desk, staring at the camera. He fumbled with his datapads for a moment, before finally saying, *"Uh...That was an announcement by General Dimitri Solokov of the Siberian Independent States. Mr. President, can you tell us what how U.N.C.G. will respond?"*

Silence.

"Mr. President?"

A different voice whispered, *"He logged off halfway through the announcement, Paul. Cut!"*

Paul swallowed visibly, then composed himself. *"Stay tuned to GNN for updates regarding the announcement made by the Siberian Independent States. This is Paul Kissan reporting for the Global News Network."*

Paul vanished, and was replaced by an ad for the Interstellar Vacations company.

Someone clicked it off.

Someone whispered, "Oh, shit."

Silence reigned.

Chapter 8

As usual in life, bad news travels far more quickly than good. And of course, we had no good news at the time, so it was just one thing after another. Looking back on it, that was probably one of the worst times in my life...But I made life-long friends during those days, so I like to think that it wasn't all bad.

Though I'm still convinced that was one of the longest days of my entire life...

From *The Collected Journals* of Admiral James Cadwell

"Captain Tina Jodescu and Commanders Tethys Dark and James Cadwell, please report to General Stanton's office immediately. Repeating..."

Jim and Tina hurried across the Fort from the Research and Development buildings, on their way to the Administration building and the General's office.

"We heard their announcement the first time. You'd think they'd give it a rest already."

"You'd think," Jim replied dryly, "That they'd want people a little more important than us at a time like this!"

"True enough," Tina replied. "Something's up, that's for sure."

"With the Siberian Independent States moving to a war footing against us? You can say that again."

"That'd be an outrageous waste of breath."

They reached the Administration building and hurried up to the General's office...Only to find that the General himself had stepped out for a minute.

"Typical," Tina said, collapsing into one of the three chairs in front of the General's desk. "We bust our asses getting over here quickly, and he's stepped out for coffee."

Another man entered, slender and dark-haired with distinctly pointed ears, in a flightsuit bearing Skull Squadron patches. He saluted Tina, then offered his hand to Jim. "I'm Tethys Dark, Commander...It's nice to meet you finally."

"He's my Executive Officer, Skull Five," Tina added.

"Ah...Nice to meet you, Commander. Call me Jim."

"You can call me Dark. Most people find it easier to pronounce than my first name." He winked. "It's a tongue-twister. Comes of being an elf...People just won't accept it if you're an

elf with a name like 'Mike' or 'Frank.' It has to be something capable of tying tongues into knots. Blame my parents, they got sucked into that mindset."

Jim and Tina chuckled.

The door hissed open again and General Stanton entered, looking harried. "Please take your seats, we don't have a lot of time, and I have a lot of bad news to give you."

Jim and Tethys sat down on either side of Tina.

"Well, now," the General said, "Things have definitely changed in the last hour. I'm afraid that you're not going to have the next two weeks to retrain your new squadrons after all. Instead, you're going to be proceeding to a Colonial Fleet staging point outside of Old London, England, from where you and the *Excalibur* will be taking up a patrol along the Siberian border."

"What?" Tina leaned forward, shocked. "You can't expect us to field these squads without giving them a chance to get to know one another first!"

"I'm afraid we have no choice, Captain. In light of the General Solokov's profoundly racist statements, we have to field distinctly multi-racial squadrons, preferably highly visible ones. And there're no more visible or multi-racial squadrons than yours, Captain, and Commander Cadwell's. After all, there aren't many squadrons being lead by a telepath and a Cyborg, respectively."

Jim glanced briefly at Tina. *She's a telepath? That explains a few things.*

The General continued, "Not to mention the fact that you've both unintentionally done an exemplary job of building the kind of squads we need on the front lines of this conflict.

"Wonderful," Tina muttered, "It's the 23rd Century, and we're falling back into 20th Century politically correct..."

"That's enough, Captain." General Stanton sighed and rested his arms on his desk. "I tried to get Command to choose different squads, but they want yours. Period, end of story. The good news is that the *Excalibur* is being assigned patrol duties rather than front-line combat missions. They had the sense, at least, not to send an untested ship into combat. So, if it's any consolation, you shouldn't see much combat until your squads have had a chance to coalesce anyway."

Jim nodded. "That IS good news, General. I'd hate to see Skull Squadron and the Knights Errant torn to shreds again their first time back in the field."

"Nor would I, Commander." General Stanton leaned back in his chair and sighed. "I'm afraid I also can't give you any time to pull your squads together here. Captain Jodescu, you'll be briefing yours at the staging area in England...Most of them are on their way there already. Commander Cadwell, you'll be briefing yours on the *Excalibur*...The last of them will

be there in just over forty minutes. Now...Go pack your things, and report to the *Excalibur*. It's leaving port in two hours."

Jim looked up from his datapad as the door of the small conference room he'd taken over on the *Excalibur* hissed open. A young woman with short, almost blindingly bright green hair, matched by the garish color of her flightsuit, and warm-brown cat ears and a long tail of the same color swishing behind her, entered and saluted.

"Lieutenant Commander Crystal Giann, reporting for duty, sir!"

Jim smiled. "Have a seat, Commander. I'm just curious...Is that your natural hair color?"

She smiled. "No, sir. I'm a natural brunette, actually." She tipped her head so he could see the fine brown fur covering the backs of her ears.

"Why the dye job? If you don't mind my asking, of course."

Crystal shrugged. "Have you ever watched any Japanese animation? It seemed like the thing to do."

Jim chuckled. "Okay, I'll buy that. Hmm...It says here your Callsign is 'Ravage'?"

"Yes, sir."

"Where'd that come from?"

She graced him with a rather feral grin, displaying her fang-like canines. "I have reinforced claws grafted onto my Achilles' fingertips. You'll know where my Callsign came from when you see me use them."

"Ah. Can't really argue with that. It says in your file that your last commanding officer booted you from his squad after you disobeyed orders. Care to explain?"

"With all due respect, sir, that jerk filed an incomplete report because I wouldn't sleep with him, and he wanted an excuse to bust my chops. I disobeyed orders to go back and rescue one of our squad-mates, whose 'Suit had been crippled."

Jim nodded. "I have the battlefield report from another squad C.O., who said just that." He smiled. "For the record, Crystal, if I ever order you to leave someone behind, you have my permission in advance to give me a good swift kick."

Crystal relaxed and smiled. "Will do, boss."

Jim shook her hand warmly. "Welcome to the Knights Errant."

"Lieutenant Timothy McConnel, reporting as ordered, sir."

Jim smiled. "Sit down, Lieutenant. Let's see here..." He tapped a button on his datapad. "Seven civilian marksmanship awards in eight years of tournament shooting..."

"It would have been eight, Commander, but I was only ten when I went to my first competition." Tim smiled wryly. "The recoil was a bit much for me."

Jim chuckled. "I can imagine. Joined the Colonial Military when you were eighteen and did a two-year tour with the Infantry as a sharpshooter, then another two-year tour with the Jump Infantry as a sniper. You just finished your first tour with the Armored Cavalry, also as a sniper, with six years of military commendations for marksmanship and sharpshooting under your belt. Impressive."

"Thank you, sir."

"You also have two reports of conduct unbecoming an officer and one drunk and disorderly. Though none of them were official charges."

"I was on leave all three times, sir. I like to party when I can, 'cause we all might die tomorrow."

"Cheerful, but I can't blame you. Just don't give me any excuses to write you up."

"No worries, sir..I'm a consummate professional while on duty."

"Says here your Callsign is Longshot."

Tim nodded. "Yes, sir. I earned that during my last mission with the Jump Infantry. I made a perfect head-shot on a South American Seditonist dictator from just shy of three-quarters of a mile away, with a slugthrower."

"I heard about that," Jim said. "That was you?"

"Yes, sir. It's not in my file because it's technically still classified, but as my new commanding officer, you have the authority to know. Besides, I've never had a chance to brag about it before."

Jim chuckled and nodded. "I see here you're a third-generation metahuman."

Tim smiled. "Yes, sir! And proud of it. Nothing blatant, like my mom, but I've got superb eyesight, I'm extremely agile, and I'm obscenely lucky. Two casinos on the Moon have banned me from playing their tables."

Jim laughed. "Well, I welcome you AND your obscene luck to the Knights Errant. After our last outing, we'll need it!"

"Lieutenant Kelly O'Neill..."

"Junior Grade, sir."

Jim looked up from his datapad and raised an eyebrow.

The shy-looking young woman sitting across from him seemed to shrink slightly. "Lieutenant Junior Grade, sir. I haven't been promoted because my last C.O. reprimanded me for...Um..."

Jim glanced at his datapad and quoted what was on it. "I believe it was 'Extreme overuse of excessive and unnecessary force.'"

Kelly blushed furiously. "Yes, sir. That's correct, sir."

"And do you feel that was the case?"

"Permission to speak freely, Commander?"

"Always, Lieutenant. In fact, I'd like to know if you ever don't feel you can talk to me."

She nodded hesitantly. "Well, sir...Frankly, I was trained to use every weapon at my disposal to kill the enemy as quickly as possible."

"Get them before they get you, is that what you're getting at?"

"With all due respect sir...It's that, or die. Or having one of my squad-mates die. I'd rather overdo it a bit than not apply enough force to get the job done, and have my target turn around and frag one of my friends."

Jim nodded. "Well said, Lieutenant. I certainly can't argue with that. And, to be honest, I've been known to go over the top once in a while myself."

Kelly smiled tentatively.

"So how'd you earn your Callsign?"

"Boom-Boom? Er...I single handedly destroyed a South American Seditonist base during the resurgence in hostilities last year. Honestly, though, it wasn't my fault they stored all of their munitions in the courtyard of their building..."

Jim laughed. "I saw that explosion from six miles away."

Kelly blushed again. "Well...They did have a lot of explosives left when my rockets hit the bunker."

Jim smiled and shook her hand. "Welcome to the Knights Errant, Kelly. We'll put your demolitions expertise to good use soon enough."

Booted feet clunked onto the table-top, just barely missing one of the datapads Jim had there. A toothpick materialized out of a pocket and was flicked between teeth, moving around as its owner got comfortable. Fingers pushed through an unruly mop of hair.

Jim stared, nonplussed. "And you're THE Colthus Delair?"

"The one and only. Unless there's two of me, in which case the universe will probably be coming to an end shortly."

Jim scratched his cheek. "I think I can see why. Um...You'll forgive me for asking, but your file says you've earned SIX battlefield commendations for bravery under fire in the two years since you joined the Armored Cavalry. Is that true?"

"Yup. I may not look it, but I'm an honest to god hero. Saved four of my squad-mates at the Euripides Mining Colony in the Asteroid Belt."

"Euripides doesn't exist anymore."

Delair grinned. "Hey, I was told to save them...Nobody said I had to keep the mining colony in one piece."

Jim made a non-committal noise. "That attitude would explain the eight disciplinary actions during that same period of time."

"Right again, chief. It's also why a pilot with my battlefield record hasn't risen above lieutenant junior grade. Hell, the only reason I got promoted from sergeant is because I broke thirty confirmed kills and wear more metal and ribbon on my chest in full-dress uniform than anybody else my age. Besides...I hear you're not exactly pulling pilots with pristine records."

Jim chuckled. "You've got me there, Lieutenant. But then, in my experience, I've found that the ability to blindly follow orders leads to overwhelming slaughters and absurdly high numbers of casualties. I want people who aren't just good pilots, but are capable of thinking for themselves."

Delair grinned again. "No problem there, chief."

Jim put down his datapad. "That doesn't mean you can stop listening to me here and now. I expect you to follow orders when I give them."

"Uh huh."

"Bear with me. I hate giving orders. I'd rather let my pilots do what they do best...Pilot. So if I give an order, there's a damn good reason for it."

Delair nodded slowly. "I can respect that."

"And," Jim added, "I expect you to tell me if you think I'm doing something stupid."

A boot-heel struck the table for emphasis as Delair grinned delightedly. "I like you, chief. I think we're gonna get along just fine."

"May god have mercy on my soul."

"Too late."

Jim chuckled, relaxing. "So tell me, Delair...It says here your Callsign is 'Ripper.' How'd you get that?"

"I had a drill instructor who said I was too damn fond of ripping into my targets with projectile weapons. He started calling me Ripper, and the nickname stuck."

"Yes," Jim said, picking up his datapad again. "I see your requisition forms include a machinegun for your Panzer Knight rather than a Beam Rifle..."

"That a problem?"

"Not at all," Jim said. "In fact, it's one of the reasons I chose you. I want variety in my squad. At any rate, I'm working on getting one of the new 'Buzzsaw' Vulcan Cannons for you...No promises, but I have high hopes."

Delair looked far too happy about that. "Wicked."

Jim shook his head, then shook Delair's hand. "Welcome to the Knights Errant, Delair."

"Thanks, chief. Here's hopin' you don't regret the decision later!"

"Commander Cadwell, your next appointment has arrived."

"Good, send him in."

The conference room door hissed open...And Jim found himself looking too high as his last recruit stumped in on heavy boots.

"Sergeant Cadmus Orcgrinder, reportin' fer duty."

Jim raised an eyebrow as the dwarf hopped up onto the chair, tucking his long beard into his belt to keep it out of his way. "Orcgrinder? Didn't think there were any 'Orcs' amongst the Genates."

The stubby man gave a deep-throated laugh and thumped the table with a gloved fist. "There ain't any...Me great-granddaddy was one o'the first Dwarven Metahumans. He and me great-grandma decided they couldn't be dwarves without Dwarven names...So they chose 'Orcgrinder'. Sounded classical, they said."

Jim chuckled with him. "Sounds violent, instead."

"Aye, it does, don't it? Maybe that's why Ah went into the military, eh?"

Jim smiled and leaned back. "Maybe. Maybe you just wanted to vent some violent tendencies." He tapped his datapad. "Of course, there's no evidence of that in your record. You've served for thirty years, nothing extraordinary, just good service."

"Aye, well...Heroes die, lad. Ah've got at least another hundred an' fifty years to me. Ah'd like t'live all of 'em."

Jim nodded. "Which is why I chose you." He looked over the table at Cadmus. "Everybody else in this squad have...Shall we say, slightly maverick tendencies. I'm hoping that between the two of us, we can keep them in line."

The dwarf grinned. "And ye want me t'keep ye in line, eh? Is that it?"

"Well," Jim smiled lopsidedly, "I need at least ONE cool head in my squad."

Cadmus nodded. "Done, lad. Ah've been around the block more'n once...Ye're welcome t'make use of me experience."

"Thank you. I'll probably take you up on that before long. At any rate...Says here your Callsign is Hammer?"

"Aye! After the home-made hammer Ah use with me Thor Panzer Knight. A mighty warhammer, for me mighty Thor." Cadmus grinned. "Contact-sensitive electrical discharge, for a little extra kick."

Jim chuckled. "Appropriate. Also says here you're a demolitions specialist?"

"Aye. Me one vice...Ah love blowin' things up."

"Not a problem in this squad...You'll have plenty of chances to. Welcome to the Knights Errant."

Jim collapsed onto his bunk with a hearty groan. Tina's head appeared over the side of the bunk above him. "Rough afternoon?"

"I've recruited a squad of psychos and lunatics."

"Of course you have! That's what it's all about this high up. Only the pilots who're willing to throw themselves directly into the line of fire, and are good enough to survive the experience, make it to this level of the game."

"Some game. So what's that say about us, anyway?"

"Probably that we should be committed." Tina dimpled adorably as she smiled down at him.

Jim groaned. "I'm doomed."

"Nah. You're a squad leader."

"Same difference."

Tina swung down from her bunk and landed lightly beside him. "Well, don't get too comfortable. Remember, we're getting together with the members of our squads that're onboard to discuss some group tactics. That's in ten minutes."

"Can't I call in sick?"

"No."

"Okay, here's what we've got so far," Tina said as she paced around the oval conference table the pilots had taken over. All of Jim's squad was present, as well as Tina and two of her pilots.

Tina paused in front of the large tactical simulator hologram. "Skull Squadron splits up into three flights of four fighters under myself, Tethys Dark, and Ben Slate respectively." She gestured to her Elven second in command and the young, innocent-looking man sitting next to him.

Jim nodded. "Then we split my squad up into two-'Suit units...Cadmus and I go with Skull Flight One, Crystal and Tim go with Skull Flight Two, and Kelly and Colthus go with Skull Flight Three." He paused to frown slightly as Kelly O'Neill slapped away Colthus Delair's wandering hands for the third time in an hour.

Ben Slate raised a tentative hand. "Excuse me..."

Tina smiled slightly. "Speak your mind, Lieutenant."

"Um..." The young pilot paused for a moment, "With due respect, ma'am, how're we supposed to work out effective air-tactics with ground-bound Panzer Knights?"

Tina looked at Jim.

"Actually," Jim said, tapping some keys on his datapad, "Command informed me late this afternoon that we'll have the prototypes in two days. Which gives my squad just enough time to run some simulator exercises before driving the real thing. So with a little luck..." Jim glanced at Tim, who grinned, "...It shouldn't be a problem."

"Grand," Colthus said, leaning further back in his chair and clasping his hands behind his head. "So what miracle will we perform for an encore after making the prototypes function perfectly on their first time OOF..."

Kelly looked entirely too innocent, her elbow held at just the right level to jab Colthus again if need be. There were a few chuckles around the table.

Jim smiled. "No worries, Colthus. I spent days crashing the simulator over and over again so that R&D could see what they were doing wrong. The prototypes we're getting should work just fine."

"Famous last words," Tim mumbled.

Cadmus hopped off of his chair and thumped around to the tactical simulator hologram, keying up the schematics of the upgraded Panzer Knights. "Might be, lad, might be. Might also be that we'll be drivin' the best damn 'Suits ever produced for the Colonial Fleet. Either way, we're gonna do our best no matter what."

Jim smiled.

"Not only that," Crystal added, tapping another key so that the Knights Errant mounted knight crest appeared side-by-side with Skull Squadron's skull and cross-bones crest, "We'll

be working with the OTHER best squad in the Fleet. Even if our `Suits DO have a few problems, what of it? We can handle it, and we'll have good folks flying cover for us."

"Well spoken," Tina said with a smile. "Look, if something does go wrong, Crystal is right...We'll cover you, no matter what, and we'll make sure you get home safe. I'm sure any of you would do the same for my squad."

The various Knights nodded and murmured heartfelt assent. It was no secret that pilots always stuck together, no matter what they piloted.

"Good," Tina said as Cadmus sat back down, and Crystal leaned back in her chair, looking very self-satisfied. "Now that that's settled, let's go over some basic aerial combat tactics..."

Chapter 9

One of my instructors at the Academy once told me "Five days of simulator training is worth roughly five minutes of real combat experience."

Personally, I think he was being a little generous. Five minutes is an eternity when you've got the ever-present specter of death peering over your shoulder. And no matter how good the simulator is, you still KNOW that you're not going to die in it.

That sense of mortality is good incentive to perform better in a real battle. But the fact remains that it's impossible to be prepared for every eventuality...

From *The Collected Journals* of Admiral James Cadwell

Jim Cadwell chinned his comlink as his Achilles Panzer Knight hunkered down on its catapult for launch, and signaled the controller that he was ready to launch. He grimaced as the catapult flung his Achilles out of the launch bay, the gee-forces pressing in on him for a moment before his Suit's systems compensated. Then the large boosters mounted on its back kicked in, and he was flying rather than falling...A novel experience for a Panzer Knight pilot.

He swung his Achilles up and accelerated, pulling alongside Tina Jodescu's fighter-mode Raptor and switching to the private frequency they'd agreed on. "Hey, Tina..."

Jim saw her helmeted head turn towards him through her cockpit canopy.

"Yes, 'Chevalier?'"

He grimaced. "Cut it out. God I hate my Callsign..."

Tina chuckled over the comlink. "What's up?"

Jim hesitated, then sighed. "Are we really ready for this? I mean...Two days of combined simulator training after we got to the staging area, and a day of live training while we came out here to our patrol area..."

He saw her helmet nod. "I know what you mean. And no, I don't think we're ready for this. But I think we've got good pilots with good heads on their shoulders."

"Really?"

"In point of fact, no. We drafted lunatics and nutcases for our squadrons, remember. But they ARE good pilots, and if they can manage to work together better than they did in the sims, then they'll be fine."

"We're doomed, aren't we?"

"Not by half, Jimmy-boy."

With a muted rumble, Cadmus Orcgrinder's Thor Panzer Knight, a more heavily-armored upgrade of the baseline Atlas unit, pulled up on the other side of Tina's Raptor and slowed to match their speed. Another comlink window opened beside Tina's in Jim's display. *"Hey Commander, what's the deal with the minimal training time? We performed miserably yesterday."*

Jim was glad, not for the first time, that the comm channels couldn't hear one another. He selected Cadmus' channel with his chin. *"We're high-profile, Cad. Fleet Command wants us out where the S.I.S. troops can see us."*

"Cause we're 'multi-racial', as it were, eh?"

"That's about the size of it."

"So that's why we're doin' border patrol in the middle of nowhere, eh?"

As Jim grimaced and switched back to Tina's channel, the other three fighters of Skull Flight One pulled into formation behind them. *"Okay, Tina...You're in charge. Lead on."*

The squadron channel came to life. *"All units, this is Skull Leader. Listen up."* Tina paused for a moment until her indicators showed all of the units listening. *"Flight One, we're patrolling the ship's north and east quadrants. Flight Two, you're on guard duty...Stay with the ship, and spread out a little. Flight Three, you're patrolling the south and west quadrants. Take it easy, people, and stay loose...This is just a patrol, not a combat engagement. Keep your eyes open, cover your wingmen, and you'll be fine. Any questions?"*

The channel was silent.

"All right then...Split up, and get to it." She switched over to Flight One's comm channel. *"Flight One, form up and let's go."*

They went.

The organization known as the Siberian Independent States represented a loosely allied group of feudal kingdoms, all of which had formed during the years following the Bombardment in the Siberian region of northern Eurasia. Because of the tenuous nature of the alliances that held the States together, there was little in the way of an organized military. In the average year, the Siberian Army was made up of the soldiers and pilots who

were so bad that their respective kingdoms were almost desperate to get rid of them, and the Siberian Army gave them a way to do so, and still maintain the appearance of goodwill towards their neighbors and fellow members of the States.

On top of that, most of the Siberian region was rather mineral-poor in the wake of the Bombardment, which made it difficult (and expensive) to produce large war machines. As such, the majority of said machines produced were small and poorly armed compared to the weapons of the Colonial Military.

An excellent example is the Siberian Military Systems Armored Battlesuit Mark IV. Essentially a glorified suit of medieval plate armor, the SMS-A4 Battlesuit outperformed its predecessors by having a full life-support system and fairly decent flight capabilities (thanks to a wing/engine backpack). Barely larger than the people piloting it, the Battlesuit had only a pair of light lasers built into each of its wrists, and just enough armor to resist small-arms fire. But because of its size, it could use any weapons designed for infantry, and many vehicle mounted weapons because of its strength enhancement features.

In spite of being a twenty-year old design, the SMS-A4 Battlesuit was still the primary front-line unit of the various Siberian kingdoms, as well as of their collaborative army. With a sufficient numeric advantage (on the order of three or four to one in its favor), it was fast enough and agile enough to take on considerably larger units and triumph.

However, because it had been some four decades since the Siberian Independent States had mounted an open offensive on a member of the United Colonial Government and its military that most of the higher-ups in the Colonial Military had long since ceased to think of them as a threat. After all, Colonial Intelligence resources inside the Siberian Independent States hadn't reported any technological advances in nearly a decade.

Essentially, it was difficult for the U.C.G. to consider the S.I.S. a serious threat to their security.

Which is why it was such a shock to Jim Cadwell when he found himself retreating at high speed from a quartet of humanoid robot vehicles which bore a distinct resemblance to the SMS-A4 Battlesuit with which he was familiar, but were nearly as large as his Achilles Panzer Knight and just as heavily armed and armored.

Desperately evading a hail of machinegun fire, his Suit's backpack, hip and foot thrusters flaring blue-white as he pushed it to the limits of its maneuverability, Jim tried to find a moment to kick in his Achilles' ECCM equipment to punch through the radio jamming that one of the enemy units was pumping out. The keys were so close to his fingers, but just out of reach as long as he needed to hold onto the HOTAS. Continuing to evade the nearly constant barrage of ammo, he made a brief mental note to have a talk with the designers about this frustrating little flaw.

Assuming I survive, of course. As the thought crossed his mind, he felt an odd tickling sensation at the back of his neck.

Give that a rest, Jim...You're not dying on my watch. Now cut your boosters and drop.

"What the hell?" He looked around frantically, confused...That voice had definitely been in his head rather than over the speakers, but had distinctly not been his. His Achilles shuddered as machinegun shells ricocheted off his shield, which was pitted and scarred by the constant assault.

DO IT NOW!

He automatically pulled the throttle all the way back, killing all of his engines in a swift gesture...And fifty tons of Achilles Panzer Knight, without support to stay airborne, suddenly dropped like a brick.

Immediately, Tina's black, yellow and red soldier-mode Raptor barreled through where he'd been an instant before. Her machinegun blazed as she shot two of the hostile units out of the sky, both of them exploding as they plummeted past Jim towards the ground. Jim fired his boosters back up and jetted towards the fight again as Tina physically grappled with a third enemy unit, the fourth recovering its wits and moving to shoot her from behind...

And was blown to bits by a trio of well-placed shots from Jim's Beam Rifle, two of which pierced its chest on either side of the cockpit, blowing away the control systems, while the third blew through its waist, where Jim suspected its power supply was. Judging by the size of the explosion, he was right.

He swung around in time to see Tina's Raptor rip the last enemy unit's arms off, as she brought her fighter's leg up, planted her foot against its chest, and fired the foot's thruster, burning a hole clean through the hostile unit's pilot's compartment. It plummeted away from her as she swung around and gave Jim a thumbs up.

Again, Jim felt that odd tickling sensation at the back of his neck. ***You okay, Jim?***

"Tina?"

Give the boy a gold star. I hope you don't mind the intrusion, but with the jamming in place...

Jim shook his head, glad for the first time that his Panzer Knight automatically echoed such simple gestures.

Somehow, he felt Tina's weary smile without being able to see it. ***Telepathy does have its uses from time to time.***

"So I see. I'm impressed."

I'll be impressed if you remember to kick in your ECCM Package one of these days...This might be convenient, but it's getting to be a strain.

Indeed, he could feel how hard it was for her through the connection she'd created between them. Hastily, his fingers flew over the ECCM controls...And a moment later, with only a little bit of static in the signal, Tina's voice was in his ears instead of his head.

"Thank you. One second..."

Jim felt her mind draw away from his, and for a moment he felt empty...Like some part of him had been torn away...Then the sensation was gone and he was himself again.

"Sorry..."

"That's okay...I rather liked the experience..."

"We'll discuss a repeat performance later, hot shot. Right now we need to find the unit that's pumping out all of the comm jamming."

Something struck Jim suddenly, and he reached out his Achilles' hand to grab the shoulder of Tina's Raptor as she started to move away. "Wait a second...I just realized something...When I trap-shot that fourth robot, I treated it like I was attacking a Panzer Knight. Shots to either side of the cockpit blew out its primary control circuits, and a shot to its waist hit a power supply."

Tina's Raptor turned to face him. *"What are you saying? That we're facing Panzer Knights?"*

He frowned slightly. "Judging from the way they move, the way they're armed, and the way I killed that one...Yeah, I'd say that's exactly what we're facing. Their armor is pathetic compared to ours, but still...The basic layout seems to be too close for comfort."

The line was silent for a moment.

"Well...This can't be a good revelation. But it's something that's going to have to wait until we're safe. Let's find that jamming device and put it out of commission, eh?"

"Right behind you."

"How can you be sure she'll come for us?"

"Because I taught her that teamwork is the most important element in a battlefield victory, and right now our jamming is keeping her squad from working as a team."

"But with all the jamming our Battlesuits are pumping out, how can we be sure she'll be able to find us in this mess?"

"Because she's actually as good as her dossier says she is...Because I trained her myself, and I know that she's more than capable of doing so. Now buckle down and maintain radio silence."

"Yes, sir."

Jim slid his throttle control further forward, his Achilles struggling to keep up with Tina's Raptor, once more in fighter mode. He wasn't quite sure where she was leading him, but they were wending their way deftly through the battle. Moments earlier, he'd spotted Cadmus' Thor Panzer Knight using its gigantic hammer to cave in the chest of a hostile unit, but hadn't been able to reach him before Tina had lead him past. Every so often, he caught side of a Raptor struggling to stay ahead of the multitude of enemies chasing them around the sky.

"We're outnumbered about six to one here," He observed over his open line to Tina, evading a missile that appeared to have lost its original target and was now searching for a new one.

"If not more," Tina replied grimly, her voice tight with concentration. "They sent out an awful lot of troops just to harass a small patrol like us."

"A little odd, don't you think?"

"Just a little. Wait...Here we go, I've got something..."

Jim checked his sensor readouts and saw that indeed, the interference was getting stronger. "Just up ahead, I'd guess."

"Safe bet. You ready?"

"Always."

"You see? Here she comes now, with her new boyfriend in tow. Get ready to cut jamming on my mark."

"Understood, sir."

"There! Those two robots there are generating all of the interference."

"I see. Which do you want?"

"The one on the left. Let's go."

Jim throttled all the way up and hurtled towards the robot on the right, clamping his depleted Beam Rifle to the back of his shield and reaching to his Achilles' left hip to draw its Beam Saber.

Tina swung into a barrel roll as panels slid aside on the back and legs of her fighter-mode Raptor to disgorge a barrage of tiny missiles. Her roll scattered the missiles on their way out, making them harder to evade or otherwise stop.

Jim's target surprised him by drawing an identical Beam Saber from its left hip, just as he had, and parrying his killing blow with it. It then pressed the advantage his surprise gave it, sending him jetting backwards as it forced him to defend himself by blocking blow after blow with his own Saber.

Tina's target deftly evaded some of her missiles, and shot the rest out of the sky with its machinegun.

And suddenly, the jamming was gone. A wide-band broadcast from one of the two robots facing them overrode their radios with a single command.

"Siberian Units, grapple!"

Something collided with Jim's Achilles from behind, and he suddenly found himself held immobile between two of the Siberian robot vehicles. Looking around, he discovered the rest of the present Skull fighters (short one, he noticed) and Cadmus' Thor similarly immobilized.

Tina's black, yellow and red soldier-mode Raptor was the only Colonial unit that remained free. She hovered directly in front of her target, her machinegun pointed at its cockpit.

"Let them go, and I won't blow you away," Tina said to her target, broadcasting over the same frequency.

The male voice that had issued the grapple order replied in a smug tone. *"Drop your weapon and come with me of your own free will, and I'll let your squad mates go. Kill me, and they'll all die here and now. Switch to the sub-channel you know so well, and we'll discuss terms."*

The silence was profound. After a moment, Jim noticed that his comm unit was blinking for his attention. He tapped it, and a second audio channel popped up, with Tina's voice in mid-sentence.

"...Really let them go?"

"Yes, Tina," the male voice said. *"You have my word."*

"Which is worth exactly nothing to me, Sasha, after what you tried to do to me five years ago."

"I understand that, Tina. Nevertheless, you know I'm a man of my word."

"Why me? You could've grabbed any Raptor during that battle."

"Because I want you, Tina, just as my commanding officers want your Raptor."

"So you can try to turn me into your very own Tepe sex toy again?"

Silence. Jim frowned. *I don't really know what that means, but it doesn't sound good*, he thought.

Damn straight it's not good, Tina's voice said in his mind, her telepathic 'presence' suddenly there as it had been earlier. ***Which means you'd better mount a rescue mission in record time, or I swear by all I hold holy I'll find a way to kill myself and haunt you.***

Jim gritted his teeth. "Tina...You can't do this."

I don't have a choice. I won't let you and the others die just because this bastard wants to turn me into his personal toy.

"Tina..." Her presence faded from his mind, leaving behind a feeling of sadness and fear from her. "Tina! No!"

He looked up just in time to see her hand her Raptor's machinegun to one of the Siberian units and allow two others to lead her away from him. A massive white ship rose up in front of them, identical in appearance to a Colonial *Lightbringer* class ship but painted with Siberian Army insignia, and Tina was led into one of its hangars by her two escorts.

Jim struggled frantically, but the two Siberian units had his Achilles completely immobilized. He hung there, watching the Siberian ship pivot and begin to move away. The robot vehicle that had faced off with Tina a moment earlier drifted over to him.

"Hold still, Commander Cadwell, and don't do anything rash. We outnumber your troops eight to one at the moment. You might stop a few of us, but the rest of us will gun you all down. Order your men to stand down, and we'll all walk away from this."

Jim stopped struggling and glared at the Siberian unit. "How do I know you'll let us go? And what do you want with Captain Jodescu?"

The voice sounded amused. *"You don't, Commander, and I have no desire to tell you what I have planned for Tina. You needn't worry about her, though...She'll be well cared for, I promise you, and will not be harmed."*

"I suspect that depends on your definition of harm." The Siberian ship was dwindling in the distance now. Jim resisted the urge to break free, knowing that he had to worry about keeping his remaining pilots alive now.

"I'm not in the mood to argue semantics, Commander. Though under different circumstances, I would gladly do so." The Siberian robot vehicle glanced over its shoulder at the dwindling ship. *"A moment or two longer, and we'll let you go."*

"You're not afraid that we'll blow you to bits the instant you let us go?"

"No, I'm not. I know the ammo capacity of your Achilles Panzer Knight, as well as your friend's Thor. And I have a fair idea of the Raptor's capacity. Judging by the fact that most of you were reduced to close combat with hand-weapons, I'm confident that you don't pose much of a threat to our superior numbers at the moment. Wouldn't you say that's a fair assumption?"

Jim glanced at his ammo counters. They were, in fact, pretty well depleted. His built-in forearm lasers were riding the ragged edge of overheating, even after having had the last few minutes to cool down...His Beam Rifle was completely empty, as was his small supply of rockets. He had no idea what had happened to his Beam Saber, but he suspected it had been dropped when the two Siberian robots had grappled his.

"Yes, I can see that you agree with me." The Siberian ship was almost out of sight now. "Well, it's time for my friends and I to go. With our jamming gone, you'll note that the Excalibur and the rest of Skull and Knights Errant squadrons are on their way and will be here shortly. And I think it would be best for us to not be here when they arrive."

Jim gritted his teeth, but said nothing.

"Very well. It was a pleasure meeting you, Commander. I'll give Tina your best wishes when I see her."

"Bastard."

"Yes, I can be. All Siberian squads, full-retreat."

Jim's Achilles jolted as it was released. He resisted the urge to open fire as the multitude of Siberian units shot past him on their way to catch up with their ship. Their leader saluted him.

"Farewell, Commander. We'll meet again, have no doubt."

"Count on it."

The lead unit turned and boosted away, chasing after his men. Cadmus' Thor and the two remaining Skull Raptors, now in VTOL mode, drifted up on either side of him.

Cadmus voice interrupted Jim's brooding only seconds later. *"Commander? Do we go after 'em?"*

Jim sighed. "No. We're no match for them right now, and by the time the *Excalibur* and the others get here, they'll be long gone. Hold position here until the *Excalibur* arrives, then return to the ship for debriefing." He cut off his comm unit before he could hear their acknowledgements.

He stared after the now vanished Siberian ship. "I'm coming for you, Tina. No matter what, I'm coming for you."

Chapter 10

Life Lessons #62: Sometimes, no matter how hard you try, you just can't stay ahead of the game.

Life Lessons #63: Sometimes, it's impossible to tell whether or not you're playing the right game. Corollary: Make sure you know what the game IS.

From *The Collected Journals* of Admiral James Cadwell

Captain Samuel Piaget leaned back in his desk chair and rubbed his eyes. Jim Cadwell and Tethys Dark sat across from him, looking equally weary, but also grimly determined.

Piaget sighed. "Gentlemen, I called you to my office because I have been ordered by High Command to halt all efforts to track the Siberian warship and squadrons that confronted Skull Flight One, as well as any efforts to retrieve Captain Jodescu."

"What?"

"It took them five days to deliver that order?"

"It's like they're handing her over to them!"

"Of course," Piaget continued, ignoring their interruptions, "I have no intention of obeying those orders. Captain Jodescu is a valued member of the Colonial Fleet, and as such deserves every effort we can make to rescue her."

Jim and Tethys remained silent, waiting to hear what Piaget had in mind.

"As such," Piaget went on, "I went over the heads of High Command to the Fleet Commander himself...Since this project is effectively under his control, I felt he might have some interest in maintaining its status quo, so to speak. He was incensed to learn that orders had been given to NOT rescue Captain Jodescu, and ordered me to use whatever means were necessary to retrieve her."

Jim and Tethys relaxed. It was, they both knew, only a matter of time now.

"He also promised me that he'd look into who drafted the orders, and why."

Jim interrupted, "You think that in doing so, he'll find something related to why we were facing modified Panzer Knights and what looked like a *Lightbringer*, and how they knew exactly where we were going to be, don't you?"

Piaget nodded. "I expect he will, yes. I look forward to hearing about it if he does."

"In the meantime, sir," Tethys said, "How're we going to rescue Tina?"

"I'm leaving that up to Commander Cadwell. As he is well aware, the Mobile Armoured Cavalries were initially designed to function as rapid response teams, and have only recently

become frontal assault units as their numbers have increased. He has training to that end, and I'm confident that he can plan a rescue operation that will both keep as low a profile as possible, while inflicting a minimal amount of damage."

Jim frowned. "Frankly, sir, I'd like to take the *Excalibur* in and hit their base with its main guns."

Piaget nodded. "I know you would, Commander, and I would too. But we can't do that... We have been given two sets of contrary orders. And though we're going to be following the ones from higher up the chain of command, we still need to maintain the appearance of following the others, so that the Fleet Commander can perform his investigation without interruption."

Jim and Tethys both nodded, recognizing the wisdom of that decision.

"So James," Piaget said, "It's up to you now. Do your best for her."

Jim and Tethys stood, saluting. "I will, sir. Tethys, I could use your input."

"Of course, Commander. Anything I can do."

"I don't like this," Tethys was saying a few hours later as the two of them, plus Crystal Giann and the rest of the Knights Errant sat around a table staring at the holographic projection in the center of it. The display was currently showing them a representation of the base they'd tracked the Siberian ship to, and its surrounding terrain.

"Basically," Tethys continued, "You want me to fly recon in an unarmed Mercury Raptor with only one armed Raptor to cover me, while the rest of you go into that?" He gestured at the terrain map as he spoke...The base was built in the center of a large impact crater left over from the Bombardment. It would make sneaking in difficult at best.

Jim nodded. "Dead on target, Tethys. We need the Mercury's long-range sensor package to tell us what we're up against, so we can leave our own offline. It'll make it nearly impossible for us to spot...At least once the techs are done repainting our Panzer Knights for arctic camouflage."

Colthus Delair muttered under his breath, "My beautiful chrome finish, painted over with shades of white and gray. How depresOOF!"

Nobody bothered to glance over...They all knew, after only a few days of working together, that Kelly O'Neill had elbowed him in the side again to get him to stop complaining.

Tethys sighed. "All right. I think it's crazy for you to go in mostly sensor-blind like that, but all right."

Jim shrugged. "It'll keep their sensors from tagging us right away. And the Mercury's long range package will let us know in a timely fashion about anything nasty enough to scare us. Hopefully."

"Count on it." Tethys said firmly.

Jim nodded. "Good. Now... Tim, Colthus, you two set up on the south-eastern ridge of the crater. You're our backup. Anything goes wrong, Tim starts using his Long Rifle to stop whatever's after us, while Colthus uses that gatling cannon of his to lay down cover fire so nothing else COMES after us."

The two men nodded, Colthus grinning viciously. It was obvious he was hoping for a little action.

Jim continued, "Kelly, Cadmus, it's playtime for you two. I want you to leave your Suits under cover at the edge of the base, and plant some explosives. Pick targets that you know will be messy, and that could look accidental...In spite of Captain Piaget's orders, I want them to be so busy cleaning up after us that they don't have time to come after us. I'll take responsibility if Piaget decides to call us on it. And like I said, try to make it look like it might be an accident. Arsenals, anything in a poor state of repair that might be explosive...If it fits the bill, pop it."

"Any civvies, boss?"

Jim shook his head. "No civilians, Cadmus. This is purely a military base."

"Good." Cadmus looked at Kelly, content. She nodded to him...This would be fun for them.

"That just leaves Crystal, and myself. We're going into the heart of that base, and we're bringing Tina out with us. We'll be leaving our Suits concealed at the edge of the base, like Cadmus and Kelly, and going in on foot. If you hear either of us shout for help, don't hesitate, because it'll mean we're up to our necks in it."

This brought nods from around the table.

"Otherwise...Maintain radio silence, take all your sensory cues from Tethys' Mercury, and we should be okay."

"What about insertion, Commander?" This from Crystal, who looked understandably curious, her cat-ears flicking slightly, giving away her otherwise hidden agitation. Something was worrying her.

Jim sighed. "I was hoping nobody would ask until we were ready to go in. The *Excalibur* will be moving up to near Earth orbit...And we'll be doing a HALO drop with our Panzer Knights, while Tethys and his wingman follow us down a little more slowly."

Dead silence.

Colthus broke it after a short moment. "We're going to be doing a High Altitude, Low Open drop in PANZER KNIGHTS? Those things practically reach terminal velocity the instant they drop. Even with reinforced parachutes, the landing would blow their leg actuators."

"I thought you liked doing crazy stunts," Kelly whispered in his ear.

"Sure," he whispered back, "But this is suicidal."

"Not really," Jim said. "With the upgraded flight systems in our new Panzer Knights, we should have enough thrust at our disposal to land comfortably, if not lightly."

Tethys nodded. "Tina and I did a simulated HALO drop in soldier-mode Raptors two years ago. It was a rough landing, but not bad, and our fighters were still in pristine condition afterwards, except for a few scratches in the paint."

"Anyway," Jim said, trying to move along, "Tim and Colthus, you'll land here," as he pointed to a spot just outside the crater's rim, "And move into position once you're on the ground. Kelly, Cadmus, you'll land here," Jim pointed to a spot halfway between the crater's rim and the base at its center. "Move your Suits away from the landing site, just in case, then secure them and do your thing. Crystal, you and I will come down here," he pointed to a spot almost directly across the crater from the last one, "And do the same."

He looked around. "Questions?"

Nobody moved.

"Good. Grab a few hours of sleep, then prep your mechs. We drop at 01:15 hours."

After the Bombardment, the planet Earth still looked much as it always had from orbit...A peaceful, blue-green sphere. Weather patterns continued to move across its surface as they always had, and except for a few large and visible craters (and, of course, a great deal of smoke for quite some time, but which was long-since gone), the planet looked unchanged. Many visitors to Earth Orbit, both first-timers and veteran spacefarers, took the time to pause in their routine and just contemplate how peaceful their homeworld appeared to be, making it the center of their attention for a while.

In fact, the Earth was currently the center of Jim Cadwell's attention, and he was certain that it was for the other five members of the Knights Errant as well...Though for an extremely different reason.

After all, it was hard to meditate on the peaceful appearance of the Earth when you were piloting 50 tons of robot vehicle that was plummeting towards its surface at a rate of speed which promised to smash you flat when you finally reached it.

"This," Jim said to himself as he watched the ground approach, "Was probably not one of my better ideas."

Jim knew from the sole simulation they'd had time to run that the first reinforced parachute would open, then break away, at five thousand feet. This was higher than normal, for two reasons: First, the Panzer Knights were rather on the heavy side, and needed a little extra time to slow down; Second, the first parachute had a tiny electronics package attached to it that would make its sensor shadow look like a Panzer Knight if anything picked it up.

Basically, it was there to get shot at, and blown to bits. Not a bad idea tactically, since it would make anyone shooting at it from a distance think they'd successfully dispatched a Panzer Knight. Under the circumstances though, having it make itself known would be bad... If nobody spotted it at all, they'd have an easier time getting in quietly. To that end, they'd had the first parachutes' computers reprogrammed to not activate unless they were actively targeted.

This was all well and good. What bothered Jim was that the second parachute wouldn't open and break away until five hundred feet above the ground, which meant they'd be relying heavily on their Panzer Knights' thrusters to slow them down enough to land rather than crash.

That meant that they'd be visible on above-ground high-energy sensors for a few seconds each. Not a lot of time in the long run, but enough to let a really alert sensor operator know they were there.

Jim had decided to take the gamble based on the fact that it had been four days since Tina's abduction. He fervently hoped that the Siberian forces wouldn't be expecting them to try anything at this late date.

He also fervently hoped that Tina was still okay. He'd heard ugly rumors about the Metahuman Conditioning program that the Siberian Independent States had been quietly funding for years, and feared for her. He liked her just the way she was.

Jim was jerked out of his thoughts when his heads-up display beeped to let him know that the first parachute was about to deploy. He quickly checked his safety harness and helmet, then braced himself...

And with a soft thump, the parachute billowed out, jerking the Panzer Knight around so that its feet were facing the ground. Jim spent a moment being glad of the Suit's inertial dampeners, before he felt the little thud that indicated the release of the parachute...Then he looked down at his feet, and found himself falling towards the ground again, only feet-first now. Granted, he wasn't moving quite as fast as he had been, but it was still just a little too fast for comfort.

Oh well, he thought, Just a few hundred more feet, and the second will deploy. Either that, or I'll make a really spectacular stain on the landscape.

With a suddenness that startled him, a barrage of anti-aircraft fire shot up from the base below and arced to the south, aiming at something Jim couldn't see. It continued for a long moment, then halted, and he fervently hoped they'd only been shooting at a parachute, and not Colthus or Tim.

Before he really had time to worry, he felt the soft thump of the second parachute deploying, and grabbed his controls. After what felt like a far too brief moment, he felt the second parachute release, and turned back to watching the ground approach. Barely a hundred feet above the ground, he kicked in the boosters, and brought his Achilles to a tooth-rattling landing. Crystal's Achilles landed about ten yards away, and after getting up (as Jim himself was doing), gave him a thumbs-up. The two of them began jogging their Suits away from their landing site.

When they had gone about a mile around the perimeter of the base, they brought their suits to a halt again. Crouching down in a thicket of trees, they popped their hatches, and spent a few silent moments pulling camouflaged nets from their cockpits, and spreading them over their Suits.

Moving in near absolute silence, they crept up on the base, and paused just inside the tree-line. Crystal moved close to him and whispered "Well?"

Jim pulled out a small pair of binoculars and scanned the base. He could see plenty of human-sized Battlesuits on patrol here and there, and a few of the larger Panzer Knight-sized Battlesuits parked on a landing strip to the north. The bridge tower of the ship that had confronted them was just visible behind some buildings on the opposite side of the base.

Jim frowned and spoke softly. "We don't know which building she's being held in, damn it. This isn't going to be easy."

"Make an educated guess," Crystal replied calmly.

Jim scanned the buildings again. "Well...The ones nearest us look like barracks. I can see bunks through the windows. And the big one they're surrounding is probably the mess hall..."

Crystal pulled out her own pair of binoculars and started scanning the buildings too. After a moment, she pointed to a building near the center of the base. "Take a look at that one."

Jim shifted his focus to examine the building in question...It was lower than the others, only one story instead of three or four, and had no windows, at least on the side they were

looking at. To top it off, there was a Battlesuit-clad guard stationed every thirty feet along its exterior. Jim grunted. "Oh yeah, that's gotta be it."

They were both silent for a moment. One of Crystal's tall ears twitched a little, and she paused to scratch behind it thoughtfully. Jim rubbed his chin and stared at the building.

"Damn," Jim muttered, "It's a shame we're out of contact with the others. I'd have Cadmus and Kelly blow something up to draw off the guards. It's going to be impossible for us to get in there with them lined up like that."

"I'll give the Siberian Army credit where it's due," Crystal replied in a whisper, "The security on their prison is nice and tight."

Jim nodded, then sighed softly. "Well," he said, "I guess we'll just have to find a way in on our own. Let's move around the side and see if there're any holes in that security line."

Crystal nodded, and silently, they went.

Colthus and Tim had their Panzer Knights kneeling side by side on the rim of the crater, peering down into it at the Siberian base. A long, slender wire connected the heads of their Suits, providing them with a direct connection to one another, allowing them to communicate without broadcasting.

Colthus was just finishing reattaching the long, reinforced ammunition belt that connected his huge six-barreled gatling cannon, fully half as long as his Atlas Panzer Knight was tall, to the large ammo drum that was nestled between the boosters on its back. Tim had been using the time since their landing to examine potential targets, shifting the aim of his Long Rifle, a scaled-up Beam Rifle that was actually longer by several feet than his Suit was tall as he tried to make a decision.

Finally, Tim said "*Okay, I've chosen my primary target.*"

Colthus snapped the last connector into place and checked the breach to make sure it wouldn't jam when he started firing. "What're you gonna blow to bits first?"

"*Bridge tower on that ship,*" Tim replied. "*Without its shields up, my Long Rifle ought to be able to put a nice big hole clean through it.*" His Panzer Knight settled into a more stable position as he locked onto his target, bracing the immense rifle against his Atlas' shoulder.

"Good choice," Colthus said as he gave his cannon's barrels a test spin, then hunkered down next to Tim. "I'm just gonna wing it."

"*I figured as much.*"

"You implying something?"

"Nope," Tim said, his face grinning on the little comm screen in Colthus' cockpit. *"Just try not to hit any of our people."*

Colthus grinned back. "Are you kidding? This is what we call a 'target rich environment'. I don't think friendly fire is going to be a problem here."

Cadmus snuck silently up behind one of the larger patrolling Battlesuits, which had stopped for a moment to visually scan the area. Swiftly, he attached an explosive charge to each of the Battlesuit's ankles, and crept away again in search of another target.

Kelly had hit the jackpot. After planting charges on ground vehicles and small buildings alike, she had stumbled on something that had made her eyes light up with glee...The base's ammo dump. In a shadowy corner of the building, she planted an inactive laser targeting guide and surrounded it with explosive charges. Then, grinning broadly, she crept away to finish planting the last of her explosives.

"Are you sure about this?" Jim whispered.

"They brainwash people like me here, right? Turn us into sex slaves?"

Jim nodded.

Crystal smiled, showing her fangs as she finished stripping out of her flightsuit. This left her clad in the extremely tight, partially translucent skinsuit that was part of the Panzer Knight's control system. "Well, then...This should be a snap. How do I look?"

Jim blushed furiously, visibly red even in the dim light.

Crystal giggled softly. "Right then. Here I go...Don't forget my gear."

Jim just nodded and silently watched her saunter out of the woods towards the prison building. After her first few padding steps, he saw the change in her mind-set...Her hips suddenly swayed enticingly with each step, her tail swishing slowly from side to side as she approached the soldiers. Every motion of her body spoke volumes about her intentions.

Jim chuckled softly and mumbled to himself, "Go, girl, go."

As she sashayed up to the soldiers, Crystal put on her very best sultry expression...One which she'd been told in the past was enough to light most men's pants on fire in a matter of moments.

In a voice throaty with desire, or what she felt sounded like what they expected her to sound like, Crystal said, "Hey there, boys...The General tells me one of you guys has a birthday today. I'm your present. Who's the lucky guy?"

She stood there, hips cocked to the side, one hand resting on her out-thrust hip, silently praying that one of these soldiers actually DID have a birthday today...Or would at least claim it out of pure lust. She was rewarded almost immediately, as one of the young soldiers cleared his throat and nervously spoke. "It's...It's my birthday."

Crystal spread a hot, sultry smile across her face. "Lucky boy..." She looked at the other soldiers. "Give us a little while guys, and everybody'll get a little treat before I go. How's that sound?"

She almost laughed at the fervent affirmatives she got in response, but managed to stay silent as that entire side of the building cleared in a matter of moments, leaving her and the young soldier alone. "Now then, birthday boy..."

A few moments later, with nobody around to see or hear, there was a series of soft thumps, and a dark shadow ran across the space between the woods and the empty side of the prison.

Jim tossed Crystal her flightsuit as he hurried up, and she gladly pulled it back on, muttering "Didn't realize how damn cold it is out here..." as Jim bound and gagged the now-unconscious Siberian soldier, then gave the soldier a sedative shot from his medkit. He grinned up at Crystal as she strapped her equipment back on.

"He'll be out for hours. Nice work."

Crystal smiled, showing her fangs again. "All in a day's work." She lightly kissed the soldier's cheek. "Sorry, kiddo...Maybe next time."

She and Jim then quickly pried up the exhaust grating they'd spotted on the ground next to the building. Jim slipped inside first, then grabbed the soldier as Crystal lowered him in, and helped her down. They secured the soldier in a dark niche near the grate, spent a moment getting their bearings in relation to the prison, then moved towards the center of it, hoping to find a way into the building itself.

Chapter 11

Some missions don't go at all the way you planned. And whether you spend five minutes or five days preparing, everything can go to hell if your enemy does something completely unexpected.

Which is why it's always a good idea to set up some surprises of your own...

From *The Collected Journals* of Admiral James Cadwell

"C'mon, Jim," Crystal whispered, "Let's hurry this along. My tail's getting cramped."

Jim banged his head...For the third time...On a low-hanging reinforcement and whispered back, "Ouch...Damn it...You think I'm crawling around in ventilation ducts for my health, Crystal? I think I'm going to have a permanent lump on my forehead."

"Wonderful. Let's just find a way out of these ducts and into the base."

Cadmus drummed his fingers on the controls of his Thor Panzer Knight, getting impatient. He and Kelly had met back at their Suit nearly fifteen minutes earlier, and had settled in to wait.

"Hey! Cadmus!"

He peered out of his open cockpit at Kelly's hissed call. "Aye?"

"How long're we going to sit here? They could be in trouble in there."

Cadmus grimaced. Jim had, after all, made him the squad's NCO-equivalent, putting him third in the chain of command. Which left it up to him to decide when Jim and Crystal had been in for too long and needed retrieval. He glanced at the chronometer on the side of his heads-up display.

"We wait another ten minutes, Kelly. Then we roll on in."

Colthus grumbled and firmly squelched the urge to get up and start pacing. Under ordinary circumstances, he wouldn't have bothered...But when one was sitting in a thirty-foot tall robot vehicle while trying to stay under cover, pacing stopped being an option.

Tim, on the other hand, was as motionless as he had been since he'd settled on the bridge of the Siberian warship as his target. There wasn't so much as a quiver in the frame of his Atlas, or in the Long Rifle that he held locked onto the ship's bridge tower.

"I hate waiting."

"Settle down, Colthus. You know how long I was sitting, curled up in a tree before I made that head-shot in South America?"

"How long?"

"Four hours."

"...That's a long goddamn time."

"Makes the fifteen minutes we've been sitting here feel like a few seconds."

Colthus settled down to wait. After a few moments, he said, "Hey...Thanks, Tim."

Inside his Panzer Knight, Tim smiled. *"No problem, Colthus. It shouldn't be much longer...Either the Commander or the Sarge will get things rolling. You'll see."*

Jim finished unscrewing the vent cover they'd found. Crystal was already holding onto it, so they were immediately able to lift it out of its socket and slide it ahead of them into the duct. The room beneath them was pitch black.

"Well?" Crystal whispered. "Even with my cat-eyes, I can't see anything in that kind of darkness."

Jim fumbled through his pockets and pulled out a delicate-looking set of infra-red goggles, which he slipped on. He gave his eyes a moment to adjust...And saw temperature patterns that could only be corpses. He grimaced. "Morgue."

"Oh," Crystal whispered dryly, "Wonderful."

"Clear under the vent." He pulled off the infra-red goggles and gestured at the open vent.

"Right." She curled herself around sinuously and slipped feet-first through the opening, landing so softly that Jim wasn't sure she had until she clicked on the flashlight attached to her blaster rifle and swung it around. As she moved away, he followed her through into the room.

"Yup," Crystal said softly as she returned to him. "Definitely the morgue. Lots of metahuman corpses. It's giving me the creeps."

Jim nodded as he unclipped the blaster rifle from his backpack and checked its charge. "You've been briefed on the Siberian Independent States, right?"

"Technically. They tended to skip certain unpleasant details when briefing metahumans like me. Figured there was no point in telling us when we'd probably never have to deal with it."

Jim sighed. "They always skip the important stuff. All right, listen up, because you need to know this before we go any further. In the Siberian Independent States, metahumans... Like you, and like Tethys Dark, and like Tina...Have no rights to speak of. When a metahuman is identified, they're taken away to facilities, possibly like this one, where they're conditioned and programmed using a combination of drugs, hypnosis, virtual reality sims, and genetic modification."

Crystal shivered.

"The programming takes one of two forms. If the metahuman has useful traits, like Tina's telepathy or Tim's luck-enhancement powers, their powers are focused and fine-tuned, and then they're turned into tools, so brainwashed that they can't think for themselves beyond the job they've been ordered to do."

Crystal turned away, pale.

"Hey, listen to me...Because this will be important if we get captured. If the metahuman doesn't have any useful traits, but is attractive, they get turned into sex toys."

"Which is what I was impersonating before...Oh my god...I had no idea. I thought it was just basic 'slavery by threat of death'."

Jim nodded. "Which is what the United Nations wants us to think. Imagine if the general population found out that the other major planetary government...With whom the U.N. has done active business for a century...Not only doesn't believe in individual rights, but turns better than a third of their population into mindless slaves as a matter of course."

Crystal returned his nod. "There'd be a revolution. It makes the U.N. look a little hypocritical."

Jim made a non-committal noise and moved to check the door. As he pressed his ear against it, Crystal softly asked, "So what happens to the metahumans who're neither...Um... Useful," She grimaced at the way that sounded, "Or attractive?"

Jim listened to the door for a moment longer, then gestured to her to turn off the flashlight on her rifle. "Look around you. They're disposed of, Crystal."

She clicked off her flashlight with a shudder. "Why are you telling me this now?"

"Because I don't want you to hesitate to shoot these bastards if it comes to that. And I don't want you to hesitate if faced with a metahuman who's been turned into a living weapon."

"They do that?"

"All the time."

"That's..."

"Barbaric? Repugnant? Horrifying?"

Crystal just nodded.

"Yeah, it is. Let's go."

Jim peered carefully around the corner, the muzzle of his blaster rifle leading along with his eyes, just in case...And saw nothing. He frowned and gestured for Crystal to go. Silently, she slipped around the corner and moved down the wall towards the nearest door. After a moment, Jim followed her, on the other side of the hall. As each of them reached a cell door, they would peek through the slit-window set into each door to see who (if anyone) was inside.

All of the cells had been empty so far. It was making both of them nervous.

They paused at another intersection and looked at one another, equally confused. No words were exchanged, but their body language spoke volumes. Jim was flexing his hands on his blaster rifle, and Crystal's ears and tail were twitching ever so slightly. Their tension was a nearly palpable thing.

Being a four-way intersection this time, each of them poked their heads out in opposite directions, trying to cover the two halls they couldn't see. Jim heard Crystal gasp and, seeing nothing in his direction, swung around and darted over next to her where she had pressed herself back against the wall. She gestured for them to exchange places so he could look, and with a deft, silent motion, they did. Jim looked carefully around the corner.

And saw four uniformed soldiers guarding a double set of doors at the end of the hall. He spent a moment examining the doors, trying to determine the easiest way to get through them, when it struck home...The soldiers weren't wearing the uniform of the Siberian Independent States. Jim blinked and focused on them, then pressed himself flat against the wall and stared at Crystal.

"Am I hallucinating," He whispered to her, "Or are those men wearing Colonial Special Forces uniforms?"

She looked relieved. "You're not hallucinating. They are."

Jim peeked around the corner again, then looked back at Crystal. "Shit...Those are our troops! What the hell are they doing here?"

Crystal arched an eyebrow, as if to say 'How the hell would I know?'

Jim frowned and gripped his blaster rifle tighter. "Right...Well, we either cross the hall and hope they don't see us, or we rush them and find out what Colonial Special Forces troops are doing in a Siberian base. Which..."

JIM! HELP ME!

Jim pressed the heel of one hand to his forehead with a grunt of pain.

Crystal blinked. "Jim? Are you..."

PLEASE!

"...Okay? What's wrong? You're white as a sheet."

"It's...Tina," he whispered hoarsely, "She's..."

Suddenly, he was somewhere else...He couldn't move, couldn't focus, could just make out the shapes of two men moving in front of him, and saw the faint, hazy shapes of four more, just visible through the small windows on a pair of doors...

With a jerk, he was back in his own body, being held up by Crystal, who was shaking him gently and trying not to panic.

"I'm...I'm okay," he whispered. "I think..." he pulled himself upright and tightened his grip on his blaster rifle, "I think Tina's in that room."

Crystal arched her eyebrow again, silently asking the obvious question.

Jim shrugged eloquently. "Ready to go?"

Crystal looked at him carefully, judging his state of mind...Decided that he hadn't gone crazy on her, and nodded, double-checking the charge on her rifle. "Let's go, boss."

They rounded the corner together.

Colthus was trying desperately not to fidget. He glanced at his chronometer again...Two more minutes and they'd move in. Two minutes too long, in his opinion.

Suddenly, the head of Tim's Atlas jerked up. "*Colthus...My high-gain audio pickups just pulled in the sound of blaster fire. Faint...Muffled, like it was inside a building.*"

"Shit...And we're stuck here for two more minutes..."

"*The boss'll let us know if he needs help.*"

"If he can."

Jim stepped over the last body between them and the doors. Whoever was inside knew they were coming, no doubt about it. The Colonial Special Forces soldiers had immediately

drawn weapons and started shooting at them, forcing them to retaliate...Crystal had taken a small but nasty-looking blaster burn on her right shoulder before the last one had fallen. Jim could see the same expression of confused regret on her face that he knew was on his... He'd hated killing fellow Colonial soldiers...But they'd fired first...

He shot out the lock on the doors, and reared back, opening one hand wide...And hurling a flat-handed blow into the seam that divided the doors. With a crunch and the squeal of over-stressed metal, they crashed out of their tracks and into the room.

"Nice trick," Crystal said as they stepped inside, warily watching the two men behind the computer console on one side of the room.

"Thanks. Being a cyborg has its perks." Jim tried hard not to look at Tina at first, strapped naked to a medical bed tipped up at a forty-five degree angle. "Crys, take care of those two."

She nodded and hurried over to them, pointing her blaster rifle. "On the floor, now! Hands behind your heads! Move and die, it's that simple."

Jim hurried over to Tina, frightened by the hazy, unfocused look in her eyes and the distant expression on her face. He grabbed a sheet from the floor and wrapped her up in it, hoisting her over his shoulder as gently as he could. He turned, "Crystal, let's..."

A human-sized Siberian Battlesuit crashed through the ceiling, landing between Jim and Crystal.

"*Nice try, Cadwell,*" a male voice said over the Battlesuit's loudspeaker, "*But you can't have her. You're too late, she's mine now.*"

Jim grinned coldly. "Try and stop me, bastard." His free hand jerked out a pistol with a huge barrel, which he pointed at the Battlesuit.

The Battlesuit pilot laughed. "*You think that pea-shooter will stop me?*"

"Nope." Jim canted it up towards the hole the Battlesuit had made in the ceiling, and pulled the trigger. A blazing-bright red flare shot up and through the hole.

Siberian troops around the base, on-duty but basically relaxed and not expecting anything, stared at the flare in shock. Four pairs of eyes that didn't belong to Siberian troops saw the flare rise. Comlinks and sensors were turned on.

Cadmus sealed his cockpit just as the three faces of his squad-mates appeared in a neat cluster in comm windows to his right. "All right, people. Do your things." He triggered his explosives, and all over the base, the Panzer Knight sized Battlesuits collapsed in heaps, their ankles and feet blown out from under them...

Kelly stood up, her Panzer Knight echoing her motion perfectly, and primed the rocket launcher on her right hip. She got a lock on the laser guide she'd planted earlier and launched a rocket at it, then a second one only a moment later. The first rocket reached the laser guide and detonated, triggering the explosives she'd planted around it and blowing a gigantic hole in the side of the building that housed the base's munitions dump...The second rocket sped through the hole and detonated inside the building, setting off a gigantic explosion...

Tim silently took his shot, a blue beam of energy lancing out from the barrel of his Long Rifle and piercing, barely an instant later, the bridge of the Siberian warship. The resulting explosion took out most of the ship's bridge tower and left it quite crippled. Turning slightly, Tim started looking for another target...

Colthus stood up, uttered a wordless battle-cry, and hurled his Atlas down the side of the crater. A few human-sized Battlesuits rallied in the confusion to try to stop him, and were quickly shredded by his gatling cannon, which spun and roared out a battle-fury to match its wielder's...

The Battlesuit pilot between Jim and Crystal followed the flare up and out through the hole he'd made, realizing his mistake instantly. But not in time...A barrage of fire from Crystal's blaster rifle knocked him off balance and sent him tumbling into, then through the nearest wall. By the time he was back on his feet, there was no sign of Jim, Crystal, or Tina. The pilot growled and launched himself out through the hole in the ceiling.

Jim and Crystal ran madly down hallway after hallway, Tina slung limply over Jim's shoulder. "C'mon Cadmus, where the hell..."

The rectangular head of a gigantic hammer crashed through the corridor in front of them, sending them skidding to a halt. A moment later, the head of Cadmus' Thor Panzer Knight appeared, along with an open hand. "*One of yeh call fer a cab?*"

Crystal laughed and hopped onto the open hand, then hoisted Tina up with Jim's help, wincing a little as the blaster burn on her shoulder rubbed against her flightsuit. A moment later, Jim was standing on the hand as well, and Cadmus' Thor was moving towards the edge of the base. Jim stared around them, awed by the carnage his squad had caused. There was a gigantic, rather deep crater, still burning and smoking, where the building he'd

decided was an armory had been standing. The disabled hulks of Panzer Knight-sized Battlesuits lay where they'd been standing. The bridge tower of the Siberian ship was a smoking ruin, and he could hear the stuttering roar of Colthus' gatling cannon. The burning wreckage of sabotaged ground-effect vehicles littered the base.

Crystal directed Cadmus to where she and Jim had parked their Panzer Knights, and moments later all six Panzer Knights were rocketing skywards on their boosters.

Jim, Tina lying on the 'floor' of his Virtual Environment Cockpit, keyed the *Excalibur's* comm channel. "Mission accomplished. Rendezvous according to plan..."

"Confirmed."

The six Panzer Knights formed up, joined a moment later by a pair of Raptors, one heavily armed and the other decked out with sensor equipment, and veered to the south, heading for their ship.

Chapter 12

...There's nothing I hate more in this universe than being forced to stand by idly, unable to do a damned thing, while someone who desperately doesn't deserve it is suffering horribly. I don't believe this feeling is a bad thing, because people tell me it means that I'm a genuinely decent person. It's just that it happens so bloody often...

From *The Collected Journals* of Admiral James Cadwell

Jim Cadwell paced restlessly outside the waiting room of the *Excalibur's* sickbay. He had brought Tina straight there when the Knights Errant had returned to the ship. That had been a day and a half ago, and Jim had been vigorously trying, on and off, to wear a groove in the waiting room's floor plating. Tethys Dark, sitting and watching him, was getting a little tired of it.

"Jim, for god's sake, sit DOWN. When the doc knows whether or not Tina's going to be okay, he'll tell us!"

As if Tethys had summoned him, the sickbay's inner door hissed open, and the ship's Chief Medical Officer, Commander Daijin Telsa, emerged. The tall, dark-haired elf towered over both Jim and Tethys by nearly six inches, and had to duck to clear the door frame.

Jim stepped up to him anxiously. "Doc?"

"Captain Jodescu is in serious but stable condition. She's still unconscious, and we're going to keep her that way for a while...She sustained some serious injuries. It looks like they may have tortured her, in addition to the effects of the conversion process. And that's just physically."

"Physically?" Jim asked.

Telsa nodded. "We have yet to determine the extent of mental damage caused by the Siberian conditioning process, not to mention the psychological and neurological trauma it would most likely have caused..."

Tethys beat Jim to the punch this time. "When will you know?"

"Soon. I'll let both of you know. Now go get some..."

The sickbay's outer door hissed open. Crystal stood there, out of breath as if she'd just run all the way from the bridge. "Commander Cadwell...The Knights Errant have been

charged with insubordination and excessive use of force...You and I have been ordered to represent the squad at a Military Tribunal."

Jim blinked, surprised. "What?"

Crystal nodded. "The Military Police are going to be here in thirty minutes to take us into custody. The Captain is willing to fight it..."

"No," Jim said. "I'm not sure why this is happening, but I think we'd better roll with it for now. No sense getting the Captain tied up in it too."

Tethys looked from Jim to Crystal and back. "Jim, let me download the data from the Mercury Raptor I was flying, it could..."

A flight technician skidded to a halt behind Crystal. "Commander Dark! Your Raptor's flight recorder's been wiped clean. We just pulled it to download the data in it, and it's as blank as the day it was produced. It couldn't have been tampered with...There wasn't enough time between shifts."

Jim frowned. "Something's going on here. Guess we'll find out what at the Tribunal."

One week later...

"Commander Cadwell, did you or did you not order the pilots under your command to plant explosives around the Siberian Army base in the event that a..." The military lawyer paused to glance at the datapad in his hand, "...I believe you used the word 'distraction'... Was needed during your unauthorized rescue of Captain Jodescu?"

Jim sat stiff-backed behind a nearby table, Crystal Gianni on his right and the military defense lawyer assigned to them on his left. He nodded, "That is correct, sir. By Colonial Army regulations, sir, such actions are considered standard operating procedure during a covert operation like the one we undertook."

"Perhaps your squad was a little overzealous, Commander."

"Under the circumstances, sir, I don't believe so. We achieved our objective, to rescue Captain Jodescu, without a single casualty and only minor injuries."

The prosecuting lawyer looked up from his datapad. "While causing several tens of billions of credits worth of damage to a Siberian Army base..."

"Objection, your honor..." This from the defense lawyer, "...It is common knowledge that the United Nations are on a war footing with the Siberian Independent States. Such things happen during a war, and the soldiers are not to be held accountable."

The prosecuting lawyer sounded vaguely annoyed. "Your honor, the defendants were acting contrary to their orders."

The Military Tribunal chief, having listened to this sort of bickering for the past two days, rubbed the bridge of his nose and sighed. "Objection overruled. Defense, we've been over this several times already...Your clients, both those here and the ones they're representing, have already been found in violation of standing orders. As such, the standard Rules of Engagement no longer apply to them. Try to get around that ruling again, and you'll be found in contempt of court." He turned to the prosecutor. "Please continue, Major."

"As I was saying, Commander Cadwell and his troops caused several tens of billions of credits worth of damage to a Siberian Army base, on sovereign Siberian soil. In addition, they caused hundreds of millions of credits worth of damage to a visiting Colonial Army *Lightbringer* class assault carrier.."

Jim looked up, startled. He felt Crystal tense beside him. That ship had been clearly painted with Siberian colors and symbols.

"...And were responsible for the deaths of four Colonial Army soldiers who were there guarding a Colonial Army negotiator, whose orders were to retrieve Captain Jodescu *without* causing exactly the incident that occurred."

Jim blinked. "Sir, with all due respect, those soldiers opened fire on us first, and the man they were guarding was most definitely not there to see to the release of Captain Jodescu. On the contrary, the video retrieved from our helmet recorders plainly shows that the Colonial Army 'negotiator' was contributing to her conditioning, and that the *Lightbringer* in question was covered with Siberian Army markings.."

The Tribunal chief interrupted him, "The prosecution hasn't asked a question yet, Commander. This court would appreciate it if you would refrain from commenting at random and stick to answering the questions presented to you." He turned. "Speaking of which, Major, we have yet to hear your question, and you are badgering the Commander."

"Apologies, sir. Commander Cadwell, do you feel that the deaths of those four soldiers, not to mention the immense amount of damage caused to the base, was in any way justified?"

Jim grimaced. "Yes, sir. I do."

The prosecutor turned to the tribunal. "Sirs, I have no further questions. Commander Cadwell has been shown to be in violation of direct orders, as well as to have acted with gross disregard for both Siberian Army and Colonial Army property and for the lives of the soldiers of both organizations. Additionally, we have shown that their sensor data indicated the *Lightbringer* as a friendly target, not a hostile one, and that the entire base had been marked neutral instead of hostile due to the negotiations."

The defense attorney spoke up. "Sir, the sensor data used by the prosecution is suspect. As previously stated, it was removed from the pilots' units before it could be properly downloaded and processed by their post, and the video data will show..."

The prosecutor turned, picked up a remote, and turned on a nearby monitor. They watched in stunned silence as the Knights assaulted a *Lightbringer* marked with Colonial insignia.

Crystal whispered in Jim's ear, "That's impossible! We all saw the Siberian Army markings on it. What the..."

Their defense attorney murmured in his other ear, "Someone wants you out of the way, and there's nothing I can do about it. They've got all the data, and proof showing that it's legit. We've got nothing. Sorry, Commander."

The video playback came to an end and the prosecutor spread his arms. "I think the video data speaks for itself. Prosecution rests."

The Tribunal chief gestured for Jim and Crystal to stand. "Commander Cadwell...It is the judgment of this tribunal that you and the rest of the Knights Errant were in violation of direct orders, and acted in a manner improper for Colonial Military soldiers. As such, the Knights Errant are hereby officially disbanded. Its members will be reassigned, and will all be reduced in rank appropriately. You are not to have contact with one another or with the members of the 101st Tactical Air Corps, also known as Skull Squadron. Your new orders will be received before the end of the week, until which time you are all under house arrest."

Jim looked around the small room that had been assigned to him. His belongings, taken from the *Excalibur* and from Fort Amherst, had been dumped unceremoniously in a box on the small desk against one wall. Frustrated, he kicked the desk just as the door hissed open. He spun around, expecting one of the guards that were assigned to watch him...And was startled to find Captain Piaget shaking his head in amusement as the door hissed shut behind him. Jim drew himself up and saluted.

"At ease, James. Mind if I sit down?"

"Of course not, Captain. I'd offer you a drink, but all I have is water."

Piaget sat down in the desk chair while Jim perched on his bunk. "That's all right, Jim. I can't stay long. I'm only here to deliver a message." He took a small, square device out of

his pocket and started to fiddle with it. "Skull Squadron sends their thanks for the rescue of Captain Jodescu, however unorthodox, and their regrets at not being able to come visit in person. The Military Police won't let them."

Jim sighed. "How is she?"

Piaget paused what he was doing to look Jim in the eye. After a moment he shook his head. "She's not good, Jim. She's still unconscious, and...The Siberians were putting her through their conditioning process...They'd already finished modifying her DNA to strengthen her powers, and had her heavily sedated for the beginning of the actual conditioning process. It's taking our doctors quite a bit of work to figure out the extent of the damage they did to her mind." He went back to work on the square device.

Jim winced. "I wish I could visit her."

The Captain nodded sympathetically. "I know, Jim." The device beeped softly. "Now listen carefully, I only have two minutes before this jamming device will burn itself out, and I have to deliver the real message while nobody can hear us. Don't argue with your orders, they're coming down from the Fleet Commander himself by way of subordinates he feels are loyal. There's something strange going on in the Colonial Military hierarchy, something that involves the Siberian Independent States and whatever it is that they're up to."

Piaget continued without pausing. "We've all been thrown into the middle of something ugly, when there's something a lot more important going on that both governments are trying to ignore. Two Sulian probes have been destroyed at the Pluto Colonial Fleet Outpost. We have reason to believe they're on their way. The Fleet Commander is doing what he can to get our diplomatic mission under weigh, but several high-ranking members of the Colonial Military are doing their best to thwart him. We just don't know why. And that's all I have time to tell you."

Even as he finished speaking, the square device beeped softly again and a tendril of smoke rose up from it as its internal components fused.

"Anyway, Jim," Piaget said, "That's what I came to tell you." He stood up and clapped Jim on the shoulder. "I know you'll do fine wherever you end up. I hope we can work together again someday."

Jim forced a smile and stood up to shake Piaget's proffered hand. "Thank you, Captain. It was an honor serving under you."

The door hissed open again, this time revealing a Colonial Military Courier holding a datapad. "Excuse me, Captain Piaget. Lieutenant Commander Cadwell, your orders have arrived. Gather your belongings and follow me."

Jim leaned back in his seat onboard the shuttle. Launch wasn't for another fifteen minutes, so he pulled out the datapad containing his orders, turned it on, and started reading.

*From: Fleet Headquarters, Colonial Armed Forces
To: Lieutenant Commander James Cadwell
Re: New Orders*

Report to the Colonial Armed Forces Base at Serenity on the Moon. From there, you will be transported to the Olympus Mons Mobile Armored Cavalry training facility on Mars, where you will be acting as flight instructor for the new Panzer Knight training program. There will be a two month unpaid leave of absence at the start of your new assignment, while the new flight-capable Panzer Knights are put into full production, after which time your first group of trainees will be arriving. If there are no further disciplinary measures taken against you in the next year, you will be reinstated to your previous rank accordingly.

Fleet Commander Lucian F. Anders

Jim frowned slightly and re-read the document. Something about it seemed strange to him. It wasn't that they were already discussing reinstating his rank of Commander, or that he was being placed as an instructor for the time being. Nor was it the fact that they were effectively docking him two months' pay as part of his punishment.

Scanning the document again, something caught his eye...A slight difference in the color of the "New Orders" in the headers. Like a hyperlink. He tapped the words.

The screen went blank and blinked a message at him.

Please Hold...Connecting...

Jim blinked, startled. He looked around, and was suddenly very glad that nobody was sitting near him. His eyes moved back to the datapad.

Connection Established

Fleet Headquarters

Jim blinked again. Technically it was possible for a datapad to access a network as far away as Fleet Headquarters currently was, but it was extremely unusual...After all, a network relay from Earth to the Moon was a fairly high-end function for any system. The datapad blinked for his attention.

Orders Summary: Cadwell, James; Commander

Priority: Critical

Security Clearance: Fleet Command Eyes Only

Please Enter Password to Continue...

Jim frowned slightly. *Password?* He pulled out the datapad's stylus and thought about it for a moment before he remembered what Captain Piaget had told him earlier about the diplomatic mission being stymied. He touched the stylus to the datapad and wrote a single word.

Freedom

The datapad blinked in thought.

Password Accepted. Displaying File.

From: Fleet Commander Lucian Anders

To: Commander James Cadwell

Re: Orders

Commander, my apologies for the subterfuge. Upon your arrival at Serenity, follow the instructions in your public orders and board the Mars shuttle. Do not question anything unusual about the flight. Proceed to its destination, where you will receive the rest of your orders.

Commander Lucian Anders

As soon as he finished reading it, the screen blanked, and then he was looking at the original batch of orders again. Jim stared at the datapad, then thumbed it off, shrugged, tucked it into his satchel, and settled in for launch.

The colony known as Serenity was the oldest and most distinguished extra-terrestrial human colony in the Solar System. Originally founded in 2015 and named for the region of the Moon it sat in, Mare Serenitatis (the "Sea of Serenity"), it was originally a scientific outpost and, eventually, a refueling depot for the first Mars mission. In 2024, the first private citizens arrived and in 2025 it was officially declared to be the first of what were then referred to as the "Off-World Colonies". For a long time it was home (or second home) to the Earth's wealthiest citizens, foremost astronomers and astrophysicists, and many of its astronauts.

The first thing Jim saw when he disembarked from the shuttle was a gift shop, proudly displaying a plain white t-shirt with the words "My parents visited Serenity Colony and all I got was this lousy t-shirt!" As far as he was concerned, that pretty much summed up the state of the colony.

He bought one anyway (that said "I visited..." instead of "My parents visited..."), because they weren't terribly expensive, and he had a little time to kill before he had to report to the Colonial Base to catch the shuttle to Mars. As he was walking away from the shop he paused, turned around, and went back to purchase another one that read "My friend visited..."

Tina would get a good chuckle out of it, and he had the feeling she'd need one when she woke up. He just had to find a way to get it to her. But that would have to wait until he was on Mars...Now he had another shuttle to catch.

Chapter 13

What it comes down to is this question: After all is said and done, who determines which actions were right, and which were wrong, from a perspective of pure morality (if such a thing can exist)? This is a difficult question to answer...After all, one of the most well-known facts in the universe is that history is written by the victors. Compounding this is a simple but profoundly confusing truth...Many beings have conflicting concepts of what constitutes honor, virtue, and ethical behavior. This is doubly true when the decisions being judged were being made under the duress caused by war.

In the end, the only true judgment of right and wrong in any given situation is made by two groups of people. Those making the decisions at the time, and their descendants, who have to live with the repercussions of the decisions they made. And, of course, their judgments can differ.

Only rarely is there an easy answer.

From the afterward of *Walking the Fine Line: The Ethics of War*,
by Admiral Samuel Piaget, retired.

The transport *Deep Pockets* shuddered unpleasantly as it pried itself out of subspace, serving as a reminder to its passengers of the danger of traveling faster than light. It was, beyond a doubt, considerably faster than the usual sublight methods of propulsion...But nearly two centuries after the first voyage through subspace, no method had yet been found to prevent the occasional destruction of a ship due to the odd, poorly-understood forces created by distorting the fabric of space-time.

The transition from subspace to normal space might have made a larger impact on James Cadwell, had he not been busy scanning the stars to determine for himself where the shuttle had ended up. He didn't really need to, but the confused state of mind that his double set of orders had left him in six days earlier when this journey had begun demanded that he attempt to bring some semblance of normalcy to his suddenly chaotic life.

He wasn't even sure what his current rank was.

In the end, Jim had ended up stuck at Serenity Colony on the Moon for three days while the transport waited for additional supplies that it would be ferrying to their destination.

With nothing else to do, he'd spent the time trying to find out his flight status...Which was now being listed as classified.

Of course, seeing as he was stuck waiting for the transport...Then stuck on it in subspace...His flight status didn't really matter a whole lot.

As Jim was trying to get his bearings from the stars, the shuttle's navigator came on the PA system. *"Attention passengers and crew...We are currently one hour and thirty one minutes from our destination. Please begin preparations for arrival."*

An asteroid drifted past the portside windows, tumbling lazily. Jim yawned, stretched, and started packing up his gear. Out of the corner of his eyes, he saw two more asteroids go past. He paused.

Wait a second, he thought, standing up straight and moving to the window. Looking out, he saw dozens of asteroids. Peering to bow of the shuttle, he saw hundreds...thousands more.

Jim stepped back, frowning slightly. "Now I'm quite sure there aren't that many asteroids near Mars."

The intercom embedded in his cabin's desk beeped. *"Commander Cadwell, we have an incoming transmission for you."*

"Thanks, I'll take it here." He tapped the receive button on the intercom and a holographic screen leapt up from the desktop to hover in the air in front of him.

A moment later, Jim blinked, startled, when Captain Piaget appeared on the screen.

"Jim, good to see you. We're in a bit of a fix here...I just got word that a trio of assault transports departed Serenity shortly after you did, and jumped into subspace on the same heading. We have reason to believe that they'll be close behind you, and will try to stop you from reaching us. I need you to fly cover for the transport you're on...The supplies it's carrying are necessary to our mission."

"Anything I can do to help, Captain...But...Are you ordering me to fire on Colonial forces?"

"I can't order you to do anything just yet, Jim. You don't know all of what's going on...I'm not sure I do either...And I don't have time to explain it to you now, anyway. All I can tell you here and now is that what we're going to be doing is vital...I can't emphasize that strongly enough...Vital to the survival of the human race. I'm asking you to trust me, and to defend that transport and its cargo to the best of your abilities. We need it, and we need you."

Jim took a deep breath and considered it carefully. What Captain Piaget was asking him to do could mean the end of his career with the Colonial Armed Forces...But at the same time, Piaget had never lied to him. In fact, the Captain had gone out of his way to defend

Jim during the beginning of the Tribunal hearings, and had been the best commanding officer Jim had ever served with prior to that.

"Okay, sir. I'll do it."

Piaget was visibly relieved. *"Thank you, Jim. Just...Do your best not to initiate hostilities. Only fire if they do first."*

"Yes, sir."

Jim twisted his helmet slightly to make sure it was firmly attached to his flightsuit's collar, then pulled down the faceplate and heard the hiss as his suit pressurized. He ran a quick systems check, then brought his Achilles Panzer Knight to life, the cockpit's holo-projectors making him feel as if he were floating in the transport's hangar bay.

"Hey, Commander!"

He looked down, the Panzer Knight echoing his movement, and saw the chief cargo handler standing in front of his feet. "What's up, Chief?"

"Just do us a favor and be careful launchin' that thing, okay? This bay wasn't built to launch combat vehicles. Watch your backwash, and watch where you step."

Jim smiled. "Sure thing, Chief. Now, if you please..."

The cargo handler saluted him and ran for the nearest hatch. Once it was closed and sealed, Jim got a green light to launch and the cargo bay doors opened off to his right. He carefully walked his Achilles over to the hatch and jumped through the big doors, freeing himself from the transport's artificial gravity and engaging his boosters, maneuvering up the side of the transport and taking up a position next to its cockpit.

He chinned his comlink. *"Deep Pockets, Knight One in position."*

His comlink crackled for a moment. *"Be careful out there, Knight One. Keep your eyes open...Asteroids can be tricky."*

Jim smiled. "Will do, *Deep Pockets.*"

They moved through the tumbling asteroids as quickly as they dared, occasionally blowing one out of their path with the transport's cannons. All the time, Jim was constantly scanning the view provided by his Panzer's Virtual Environment Cockpit, carefully watching the nearest asteroids for ones that might be moving towards them.

It was three quarters of an hour later when Jim's sensors started beeping for his attention. Glancing over his shoulder, he saw that the cockpit's integrated Heads-Up Display had bracketed three contacts. He swung his Achilles around so that he was flying backwards

relative to the transport and focused his scanners on the new contacts. He grimaced and chinned his commlink.

"*Deep Pockets*, I've got three new contacts, bearing 180 relative, 37 kilometers and closing. Computer says they're assault transports."

"*We see them too, Knight One. How d'you want to handle this?*"

"Do you think they'll really try to stop us?"

"*Affirmative, Knight One. We've been through this twice already. They've tried to blockade us both times, but backed off at the last second.*"

Jim considered it for a moment...Then blinked as the HUD suddenly displayed six smaller brackets around each of the assault shuttles, then identified them. "*Deep Pockets*, we have multiple launches. Computer has identified eighteen Star Viper class fighters, 35 kilometers and closing rapidly. Is this typical?"

"*Negative, Knight One. This is new.*"

Jim winced and muttered, "Crap." He chinned his commlink again. "I'll hold here and see what they want...Keep going."

"*Understood, Knight One. Be careful.*"

Jim brought his Panzer Knight to a halt and started scanning comm channels, searching for whatever frequency the incoming fighters were broadcasting on. When he didn't find one, he opened his own commlink and broadcasted wide-band.

"Approaching fighters, this is Lieutenant Commander James Cadwell, escorting the cargo transport *Deep Pockets*. Please identify yourselves."

Silence. Jim fidgeted.

"Approaching fighters, please identify yourselves. This is Lieutenant Commander James Cadwell, escorting the cargo transport *Deep Pockets*. You appear to be on a pursuit course for the transport I'm escorting, please advise of your intentions."

More silence. He could see them without magnification now. *This just can't be good*, he thought.

"Approaching fighters, if you do not identify yourselves immediately or continue on your current heading, I will be forced to consider you hostile and act accordingly. Please respond."

"*Lieutenant Commander Cadwell, this is Major General Sasha Suborotov aboard the assault transport Raging Glory.*" Jim frowned, thinking that the voice sounded familiar. "*We are under Fleet Command orders to intercept and stop that transport by whatever means are necessary. Stand down, or you will be destroyed.*"

Jim blinked and tightened his hands on his controls, tensing himself for battle and activating his commlink again. "I'm afraid I can't do that, General. I'm under Fleet Command orders to escort that transport to its destination."

The fighters were closing in on him now, the nearest ones angling towards him. He flicked a switch that activated his Panzer's combat systems and focused on each one for an instant, the computer registering the motions of his eyes and bracketing the fighters in red, marking them as hostile targets. They immediately switched back to the blue of friendly targets, and Jim cursed. "Computer, disable automatic IFF system. Mark transport *Deep Pockets* and squadron units as friendly, all others as neutral until targeted."

The brackets around the fighters turned yellow, indicating neutral targets, then red again.

"This is your last warning, Cadwell. Stand down or be destroyed."

Jim frowned as he chinned his commlink...That voice... "I'd be disobeying my orders if I did, General." He pulled the Beam Rifle from the back of his Achilles' shield and primed its charge.

"Then die."

The two lead Star Vipers opened fire on him, bright streams of pulsed particle beam cannons lancing in towards him. But Jim was already in motion, his Panzer Knight's back and foot-mounted boosters flaring, carrying him up and over the two fighters, flipping over as he did. There was the sharp snap of electricity as he pulled the trigger, and the blue streak of energy from his Beam Rifle blew through the back of one of the Star Vipers, impacting directly between its twin engines. Jim knew instantly that he'd missed hitting anything that would make the fighter explode...Then saw the blue flare from inside the cockpit, which burst outwards. The fighter tumbled away and exploded against an asteroid.

"Knight One, this is the Deep Pockets...Hang tight, we have reinforcements incoming."

Jim didn't have time to respond, as the second Star Viper swung around and launched its payload of a half-dozen missiles at him. Even as he swung back into motion, he activated his Panzer's electronic countermeasures package and fired off a pair of shots at the Star Viper. The first shot grazed one of the Viper's four angular wings...The second shot hit one of its engines, and it exploded violently.

Four of the six missiles were spiraling off into space, their tracking systems jammed by Jim's ECM package. The last two darted in at him, sending him into frantic evasive maneuvers, firing wildly at them. He managed to strike one a glancing blow, sending it off course and causing it to collide with the other. Both exploded, and he turned his Achilles back towards the *Deep Pockets*...

And found the other four Star Vipers from the first flight bearing down on him.

"Shit!" Jim dove towards a nearby asteroid, dodging blast after blast after blast from the Vipers' cannons as he chinned his comlink. "Hey *Deep Pockets*...Where's that backup?"

"Incoming. Move 90 low."

Jim blinked. *That sounded like Tina...*

"NOW!"

Yeah, that's Tina, Jim thought with a smile, as he dove down and flipped his Panzer Knight over so he could cover her. An instant later, Tina's black, yellow and red soldier-mode Raptor blew through the four incoming fighters. Two of them exploded instantly, struck by missiles that Tina had launched while inbound. She peppered a third with solid slugs from her Raptor's huge machinegun, then physically grabbed hold of the fourth and tore it in two, boosting backwards as it exploded. Her Raptor came to rest next to Jim's Panzer Knight, her comm channel still open so he could hear her labored breathing.

"You okay?"

"Just fine," she rasped. *"Where's that bastard Suborotov?"*

"In one of the assault transports."

"He dies. Now." Her Raptor suddenly shifted, folding inwards as it transformed back to its fighter mode, then fired her engines and shot away after the assault transports. Jim cursed and chased after her.

"Hey! What about the rest of the fighters?"

"Go after them if you want. The rest of Skull Squadron has probably mopped them up already. Suborotov has to die."

Jim blinked. "Are you okay?"

"I told you already, I'm fine." She coughed, her fighter seeming to falter for a moment before correcting its heading and accelerating again. They were almost on top of the assault transports. *"Now shut up and help me, or get the hell away."*

"Shit," Jim muttered again, and angled towards one of the assault transports, clamping his Beam Rifle to the back of his shield and drawing his Beam Saber. Tina had already reached the first ship and was blowing bits and pieces of it off with the double-barreled beam cannon that extended from her starboard-side booster. Armored ports opened on her fighter and a barrage of missiles leapt away, sealing the transport's fate.

At the same time, Jim darted up along side one of the other two transports and stabbed his Beam Saber into it, then boosted upwards, dragging his Beam Saber through the ship's hull. When he reached the top, he pushed off with his feet and zoomed away as the gash he'd sliced in the ship belched chemical flames. The hull on either side of the cut seemed to blister suddenly, and the transport exploded.

He looked up just in time to see space around the third assault transport angle itself back towards Earth. Tina's Raptor was approaching it, shifting back to soldier-mode and firing madly with her machinegun...Then space seemed to ripple around the transport, its engines flared, and it vanished.

"NO!" Tina bellowed, still shooting at where it had been.

"Tina, he's gone!" Jim maneuvered up behind her and grabbed hold of her Raptor's shoulders. When she kept firing, he let go again and backed off a little, afraid she might turn on him. Instead, she continued shooting until the machinegun ran dry. Then her soldier-mode Raptor seemed to come unhinged, going limp, its head slumping.

Jim moved towards her hesitantly. "Tina?"

Her voice, raw with emotion and exhaustion, came across the comm line to him, so soft that he had to strain to hear her. "*He escaped. He's still out there. Oh god...*" Her Raptor seemed to tremble and falter suddenly. "*Jim...Help me...I can't...*"

Jim's Achilles darted forward suddenly, latching onto her Raptor as it went limp and started to drift. "Tina? Tina! Answer me!"

The line was silent.

"Shit." He chinned his commlink over to a general frequency. "*Deep Pockets...Anybody...I need help here! Someone send me a homing signal!*"

A beacon appeared on his Heads-Up Display as Captain Piaget appeared in a comm window to his right. "*Follow our signal in, Commander*"

Jim started to push Tina's Raptor towards the beacon, as two more Skull Raptors arrived to help.

"She's all right," Jim whispered to himself. "She has to be."

Chapter 14

Captain Jodescu has undergone a horrible trauma, both physical and mental. It is difficult to determine what effect this will have on her emotional state...Though based on previous psych profiles, I feel safe saying that it won't be good. She already displays dangerously violent and potentially suicidal tendencies, and appears to have distanced herself as much as possible from her friends and squad-mates. Additionally, observations made during her hospitalization following her experience suggests a distinct worsening of her nightmares.

I strongly urge her commanding officer to consider relieving her of active duty until such time as she has sought and received intensive psychological therapy.

From the 2206 Psychological Evaluation of Captain Tina Jodescu

"Doc!" Jim Cadwell hurried after the auto-stretcher bearing Tina Jodescu being escorted by two of the base's med-techs and Doctor Daijin Telsa, Chief Medical Officer of the *Excalibur*. Telsa paused long enough for Jim to catch up with him, then resumed following the auto-stretcher. "Doc? What happened? Is she going to be okay?"

The doctor looked disgusted. "She beat up one of my orderlies, left sickbay against my instructions, overexerted herself after a series of severe physical and mental traumas, and succumbed quickly to exhaustion because her body's in no shape to be doing anything except resting right now. Ms. Jodescu has been unconscious since you returned her to us, and restless even then." He frowned. "I believe we'll have to either keep her sedated or restrained for a while." He sighed. "No, I can't restrain her. Not after what she's been through. Damn all stubborn patients..."

Jim smiled. If she was being stubborn, she was okay. "So she'll be all right, doc?"

"Eventually, Commander."

"Commander!" A female ensign skidded around the corner from the hangar. "Captain Piaget wants to see you in the command center..Level five, section two. Immediately."

Jim glanced at Tina. "Take good care of her, doc."

"Of course."

Jim watched Doctor Telsa follow the auto-stretcher into a lift, then turned to the ensign. "Take me to the captain, ensign."
"Follow me, sir."

"Lieutenant Commander Cadwell, reporting for duty, sir." Jim sketched a sharp salute as he said it, snapping to attention.

Captain Samuel Piaget turned from the large main display screen that dominated the command center and returned Jim's salute. "Welcome to *Freedom's Nest*, Jim. Our first order of business is simple...As of now, consider yourself restored to the rank of Commander."

Jim raised an eyebrow. "Can you do that, sir?"

"Fleet Commander's orders, Jim. Not that I'm asking anyone here to stand on formalities if they don't want to. And that's our second order of business. You need to understand that if you stay here, and help us, you'll effectively be joining a group of pirates."

"I sort of figured that out already, Captain. But - If you don't mind my asking, sir - How can you restore my rank on one hand, and tell me that I'm shortly going to be a pirate on the other?"

Captain Piaget smiled grimly. "Because the Fleet Commander is of the impression that a military coup is about to take place, one which he isn't involved in. And rather than reinforcing his power base...Which I encouraged him to do, incidentally...He decided that the nearly aborted Sulian diplomatic mission was more important. Which is why we're here...He trusts us to do what needs to be done for the good of humanity's future."

Jim nodded slightly. "I was afraid it was something like that."

Piaget looked at him carefully. "You're very perceptive, Jim. I'll have to remember to ask your advice when I need some."

Jim blushed, which made Piaget chuckle. "Anyway, Jim...We're loading your Panzer Knight into the *Freedom* now. Why don't you hit the ready room, grab some food, and then get your gear onboard. We're going to be leaving in several hours, just as soon as the last of the supplies and equipment are loaded."

Jim saluted again. "Yes, sir." He paused, his hand wavering in its salute, then he lowered it and chuckled. "Old habits, sir.."

Piaget nodded and smiled. "I know, son. Go on, now. Dismissed."

Jim smiled. Some habits did die hard. "Yes, sir."

Barely ten minutes later, Jim managed to find his way to the ready room and hit the door release. It buzzed unhappily, and refused to open. He frowned and tapped it again. It made an unpleasant noise, and still failed to open the door.

Jim's right eyebrow went up, caught somewhere amongst confusion, annoyance, and amusement. Nothing ever seemed to work quite right on space stations. He hit the door release again.

This time, the door opened...Revealing a pitch black ready room. He sighed and stepped inside, fumbling for the light switch. After what felt like an eternity, he found it, flicked it, and...

"SURPRISE!"

Jim jumped, startled, and spun around, to find himself staring at the other members of the Knights Errant. He blinked, one hand resting on his chest. "What in the name of..."

Crystal Giann grinned impishly, her cat-ears flicking with amusement. "My idea entirely, Commander."

Colthus Delair cocked one hip against a table and took a sip of his drink. "Yeah, Commander. We wanted to celebrate your court victory, and rapid resumption of command rank."

"Uh huh," Jim said warily. "What's the real reason?"

"It was better than sitting around while our suits get loaded onto the *Freedom*, and since the Skulls are busy flying patrols, we didn't have a whole lot else to do." This from Kelly O'Neill, standing next to Colthus, who gave her a dirty look for ruining his story. He opened his mouth to say something, no doubt caustic, and grimaced as the heel of her foot came down hard on his instep, effectively shutting him up, and making Tim McConnell chuckle.

Cadmus Orcgrinder stepped forward and shook Jim's hand. "Welcome back, boss."

Jim smiled, feeling like everything was settling back into place. "Thanks, guys. Really. I appreciate the sentiment, even if not the reasoning." He winked at Colthus and Kelly, who both grinned in response.

Jim looked around at his squad-mates, then shook his head. "Okay, who can lead me to the food?" There was a general bustle to find something edible that hadn't been shuffled off to the *Freedom* already, which Jim watched with a fond expression on his face.

Yes, everything was coming together again. Now, if only he knew how Tina was doing...

Jim got his first real look at the *Freedom* two hours later as it drifted away from its moorings inside the immense asteroid construction facility, its thrusters flaring as it began to move towards the giant hangar doors. He watched the ship's motion on a small screen in the cockpit of his Achilles Panzer Knight...he and the rest of the Knights Errant were on active alert.

"Commander Cadwell? This is Captain Piaget. I fully expect to find United Colonial Fleet ships and troops waiting for us when we emerge, probably ready to blow us up. Is your squad prepared to defend the ship until we're ready to execute the Space Fold?"

Jim raised an eyebrow at the unfamiliar term, but didn't have time to ask. "Yes, sir. We're ready and waiting."

"Good."

Jim took another moment to familiarize himself with the *Freedom's* appearance...Not that he could ever mistake it for any of the other ships in the U.C. Fleet. It was nearly three-quarters of a mile long from bow to stern, with a tapered appearance...Wide at the stern, where six large thrusters were driving it forwards, and narrowing he looked towards the bow.

He took in the two double-barreled cannons behind the bridge tower, and the three larger triple-barreled cannons in front of it, framed on either side by a pair of aircraft-carrier style launch decks for the ship's compliment of mechanized units. Smaller gun ports dotted the ship, and he expected that an equal number of large cannons were mounted on the *Freedom's* underbelly. He noticed, briefly, a circular hatch at the very front of the ship, but it was out of camera range before he could get a good look at it.

It reminded him of some of the Old Earth naval vessels he'd studied in a history class. Somehow, he expected that it had been designed to do just that. There was something oddly grand and majestic about them...

"Commander Cadwell, Captain Piaget here. Skull Squadron will be launching before you, with Commander Dark in charge for the time being. Then we'll get the Knights Errant airborne, so to speak. The station's external sensors are registering multiple contacts, both starships and starfighters. The Knights and Skulls will run interference for the Freedom... Focus on stopping the starfighters unless we need you to do otherwise. We'll take care of any starships that try to stop us. Understood?"

"Aye, sir."

"Then, when we give the recall signal, get back here immediately, because it means we're ready to Fold. And once we're away, no U.C.F. ships will be able to catch us."

"Understood, sir. We'll be ready."

"Excellent. Prepare to launch on my mark."

"Knights Errant, prepare for launch. Sound off."

"*Knight Two.*"

"*Three.*"

"*Four.*"

"*Five. Can we get a move on, or what?*"

"Stow it, Colt. Knight Six?"

"*Aye. We're all here, lad, and ye know it.*"

Jim smiled in spite of himself. "C'mon, Sergeant Orcgrinder..Military procedure and whatnot."

The dwarf's grumbles came across the comm channel, followed by a gruff, "*Knight Six, ready and waiting.*"

Jim switched frequencies. "Bridge, Knight Leader here. Knights Errant are go for launch." He glanced at the monitor displaying the *Freedom's* progress and saw that they were nearly to the hangar doors.

"*Knights Errant, launch.*"

"Let's rock and roll, boys and girls." Jim stepped his Achilles into the launch catapult, setting its feet into the clamps. "Knights Errant, launching!"

He felt the jolt and acceleration of the catapult as it sent his Panzer Knight hurtling down the port-side flight-deck. His boosters kicked in, lifting him away from the deck and angling him towards the hangar doors.

"*Knight Leader, this is Freedom tactical control. Take point and lead us out. Skull Squadron will be flanking us. Be prepared to for hostile targets.*"

"Understood, control." Jim glanced around him, seeing his squad-mates easing into formation around him. "Okay, people, you heard her. Form up at the bow of the ship, wedge formation. Arm combat systems. Disable your I.F.F. systems and designate the *Freedom*, Knights Errant and Skull Squadron as friendlies. All other targets are to be considered hostile."

They cleared the gigantic hangar...And found that, indeed, their launch was eagerly awaited. Six *Lightbringer* class ships were spread out in front of the hangar, and Jim's heads-up display registered no less than forty starfighters moving in to intercept them.

"Okay, Knights," he said over the comm, "Let's do this."

Even as he said it, the first wave of Star Viper fighters zoomed in at them, blasting away with their guns. The Knights scattered and evaded the shots...

Jim powered his Achilles up and over a Star Viper, swinging his Beam Rifle around and blowing a hole clean through it from the top down. Another one shot past him, chasing Crystal, and he peppered it with automatic fire from his suit's forearm lasers until it

exploded. A third fighter tried to shoot him from behind, only to be smashed to bits by Cadmus' huge hammer, its electrical discharge overloading the fighter's systems, causing them to explode, even as the blunt impact from the hammer shattered the reinforced cockpit canopy and crushed the pilot within.

A quick glance back showed Jim that the *Freedom* had almost cleared the hangar doors, and was starting to take fire from the *Lightbringer* class ships. As he watched, he was surprised to see the *Excalibur* shoot out from under the *Freedom* and strafe one of the *Lightbringers* with its main guns, blasting through the other ship's shields and rupturing its hull. The damaged *Lightbringer* seemed to list to port, then started to turn to escape, and exploded under a broadside barrage from the *Freedom*.

"Knights Leader to all Knights," Jim said, "Mark the *Excalibur* as a friendly target!"

Then he was too busy to watch, as two Star Vipers engaged his attention. One of them strafed pulsed particle beams across his shield as he blew the other to bits with his Beam Rifle. He turned to face the other just in time to see it peppered by automatic fire from a Raptor's machinegun. Skull Squadron had arrived.

"*Knight Leader, this is Knight Six...I've taken heavy damage...One of the Star Vipers caught me with its missiles.*"

"Head for the *Freedom*, Cadmus. We'll cover you. Knights, form up and cover Six!"

Even as he said it, he saw Crystal and Colthus converge on Cadmus' damaged Thor Panzer Knight and cover it as it headed for the *Freedom*, trailing smoke and sparking. Then Tim was beside him, adjusting his grip on his suit's gigantic rifle.

"*What's next, boss?*" Tim asked. "*The Skulls have the rest of the Star Vipers pretty well tied up at the moment.*"

Jim glanced around and saw the *Excalibur* trading broadsides with a heavily damaged *Lightbringer*. The *Freedom* was turning towards another of the remaining five *Lightbringers*, that strange circular port in its bow starting to open. Before Jim could say anything, a broad-band transmission cut him off.

"*This is General Suborotov to the Freedom, Knights Errant and Skull Squadron. Fleet Commander Anders has been...Relieved of duty. If you do not cease and desist in your actions immediately, you will be in violation of orders from the U.C.F. High Command.*"

"*This is Captain Piaget of the Freedom. The removal of Commander Anders is part of a military coup, an unlawful action akin to treason. Our orders stand as they were given.*"

"*As you will, Captain Piaget. What of your crew?*"

"*My crew stands with me.*"

"So do the Knights Errant!" Jim exclaimed.

"*And Skull Squadron!*" This from Commander Dark.

"Very well," Suborotov said, and once again, Jim thought his voice sounded strangely familiar. *"Then we have orders to stop you, by any means necessary. Will you stand down, or fight us? What is your answer?"*

Silence for a moment, then Captain Piaget responded in a cold, harsh voice. *"You assaulted us before declaring yourselves and without provocation, and have attempted to prevent us from following our orders. You are a member of an unlawful action against the United Colonial Fleet High Commander. Here is our answer. Main gun, fire!"*

Jim turned just in time to see that strange circular opening in the *Freedom's* bow start to glow. It seemed to draw into itself motes of blue-white energy, which in turn made the opening glow brighter, and brighter...Until suddenly, a massive beam of brilliant energy blowtorched out of it, leaping at one of the undamaged *Lightbringers*.

It struck the other ship's shields, which looked, for a moment, as though they would hold...then the shields collapsed, and the intense beam of energy struck the *Lightbringer*, blasting cleanly through it and emerging from its stern to continue on. After a long moment, the beam from the *Freedom's* main gun tapered off and died...And so did the previously undamaged *Lightbringer*, explosively.

Jim blinked away the bright afterimage from the beam. His HUD informed him that not a few Star Vipers had been in the path of the beam and destroyed as well, and that the *Excalibur* had finished off its target while they'd been busy watching the *Freedom's* impressive light-show.

"You have our answer, Suborotov," Captain Piaget said. *"Take that back to your co-conspirators and let them know that once we've made peace with the Sulians, we'll be coming back for you. Knights Errant, Skull Squadron, return to the ship."*

"Let's go, people!" Jim shouted, veering away from the action and speeding towards the *Freedom* as fast as his Achilles would go. Tim and Kelly formed up on him, as he sped down the port-side flight deck and braked, gently setting down just in front of their hangar. Inside, he saw Crystal and Colthus propping Cadmus' Panzer Knight into a dock. Another glance around showed him the Skulls landing on the starboard deck and taxiing into their hangar, and that the remaining *Lightbringers* were pulling back.

A transmission came in as Jim stepped into the Knights' hangar. *"This is Captain Jorgen on the Excalibur...We just wanted to wish everyone aboard the Freedom the very best of luck. Wish we could go with you. See you when you get back!"* The *Excalibur* pivoted on its horizontal axis and went to full thrust, headed towards the outer Solar System.

Jim watched it for a moment as Cadmus and Kelly stepped past him into the hangar, then he turned to stare into deep space. "That's where we're going..." He said to himself,

"Out there. It's going to be a long trip." He glanced sun-ward, as though he could see the Earth from where they were, out past Mars.

As the hangar bay doors closed, the stars and asteroids seemed to shimmer and blur.

"All hands, this is Captain Piaget. Space Fold in three...two...one..."

Then the universe seemed to flicker in front of Jim's eyes, and he experienced an eternity of overwhelming vertigo.

Book 2: Freedom's Journey

Chapter 15

Truth be told, very little about the situation we've found ourselves in is all that difficult to cope with. Life goes on; we have a mission to fulfill, friends to protect, and loved ones to worry about. All in all, the strangest thing about the whole situation is the distorted shapes of the constellations we're familiar with.

In purely galactic terms, we're still close to home...Close enough that constellations are still recognizable. But we're far enough away that they don't look quite the same...And it can be a little disorienting sometimes.

From *The Collected Journals* of Admiral James Cadwell

From his first day in the Mobile Armored Cavalry, Jim Cadwell had appreciated the unusual control system that the Panzer Knights used. Many pilots were never able to make the transition from standard controls to the combination of full-body harness and hands-on throttle and stick that the Panzers used.

Once the pilot was strapped securely into the harness...A humanoid-shaped "platform" that flexed and moved with the pilot and looked almost like the back half of a suit of armor... He had on his right the stick that controlled the mech's basic directional controls and weapons systems. On the pilot's left was the throttle control, which worked much like the classic throttle in aircraft of all types...Sliding it forward made the Panzer Knight accelerate, while sliding it backwards slowed it down. Pulling it far enough back would, in flight, activate the mech's braking systems, and so on. Foot pedals activated "macro" commands like jumping and kicking.

The entire interior of the cockpit functioned as a fully encompassing heads-up display. Anywhere the pilot looked, the Virtual Environment Cockpit would overlay the mech's holographic interface and display data about what the pilot was looking at. If there were enemy units surrounding him, the V.E.C. would bracket as many of them as it could, alerting the pilot to their position relative to him. All of the system readouts and controls were projected holographically in front of and around the pilot, so that something which required attention could shift position to be reached more easily.

This left the Panzer Knight's fine motor controls to the pilot's harness. Any motion made by the pilot...From lifting an arm to turning his head...Was echoed by the mecha. This made aiming hand-held weapons easier, and allowed the Panzer Knight to do things previously

unheard of in earlier robot vehicles...It could crouch, side-step, manipulate large objects with a fair amount of precision, and even perform martial arts moves if the pilot was so skilled. One Panzer Knight test pilot had even managed to convince his prototype unit to turn a cartwheel, using a combination of manual controls and pre-programmed motion responses. Such pre-programmed responses made actions like jumping, or retrieving a weapon from storage, easier.

Some pilots claimed that once a Panzer Knight got "used" to its pilot, its performance would improve. In fact, the Panzer's computer was capable of learning from its pilot's behaviors, improving response times and making the mecha almost frighteningly anthropomorphic.

Needless to say, this odd combination of controls confused quite a large number of pilots, who were used to operating under more traditional methods. Which made Panzer Knight pilots...And, more recently, Raptor pilots, since the Raptor used similar systems...A breed apart.

However, it wasn't until he experienced his first Space Fold that Jim Cadwell came to appreciate something about the Panzer Knight's control harness that he'd never really paid attention to before. It kept him upright, no matter what.

"*Oh, god...*" A voice said in his ear - He thought it was Colthus, but he was still too dizzy from the vertigo to be sure. "*...I think I'm gonna throw up.*"

Jim opened one eye. Everything still seemed to be spinning around him. He closed the eye again and struggled to keep from being sick. "Hold it together, people."

A different voice spoke over the comm channel. "*Hang in there, folks. The vertigo should go away in another moment or two. We think you got the worst of it because you were moving around. Most of the rest of the crew has recovered already.*"

"Captain?" Jim asked, his voice thick with the effort to keep his stomach where it belonged.

"*Yes, Jim. Sorry about this...We honestly had no idea about the vertigo. We'd never actually used the Fold Drive before. We didn't know this would happen.*"

Jim opened one eye again. The spinning was slowing, and he saw that a maintenance elevator was rising towards his cockpit. "Where...How long..." He struggled against his disorientation.

"*Easy, son...There's medics on their way to pull you out. We're about ten AUs out from Alpha Centauri, and the Fold took only five minutes.*"

"*That was only...Only five minutes?*" Crystal asked, incredulous, and sounding as awful as Jim felt. "*It felt like an eternity.*"

"Yes," Captain Piaget replied. Jim heard a hiss as his cockpit canopy was manually opened from outside. *"I wish we'd known this was going to happen...I'd've waited a few more moments until you had your Panzers locked down. The Skull pilots are in just as rough shape. The medics are going to sedate you for a little while, to give the effects a chance to fade."*

"Thank god," Jim muttered, feeling an injector pressed against his arm, followed by a soft hiss and a little stab as it did its work. Everything started to feel fuzzy, then faded away into warm darkness, thankfully taking the last of the vertigo with it.

When Jim opened his eyes again, he was delighted to discover that the overwhelming vertigo was completely gone. He slowly pushed himself into a sitting position and looked around, deciding after a moment that he must be in the *Freedom's* sickbay. Even as he sat up, Doctor Telsa breezed through, pausing at the foot of Jim's bed.

"Oh good, you're awake. How are you feeling?"

Jim rubbed the back of his neck. "Not all that bad, really."

"Vertigo?" Dr. Telsa checked the datapad at the end of Jim's bed, then peered into Jim's eyes with a little penlight.

"Feels like it's all gone. Nothing's spinning around me anymore, at least."

"A good sign. Get yourself pulled together, and you're back on duty. You've been lazing around here for eight hours, and it's time to get back to work."

Jim didn't even have time to acknowledge the Doctor's orders before he was gone again, off to check up on someone else, no doubt. Jim shook his head, vaguely amused, climbed out of bed, and started getting dressed.

Once he was decent, he went chasing after Doctor Telsa, and found him checking on Colthus, who was still very distinctly sedated. "Hey, Doc..."

Telsa seemed to wince. "Please don't call me 'Doc.'"

"Sorry. How's Tina doing?"

"Captain Jodescu is...Resting as comfortably as possible and is heavily sedated at the moment. I'm currently planning a course of physical and psychological therapy for her which will hopefully alleviate the worst of her difficulties until such time as she can receive proper therapy back on Earth. Frankly, bringing her with us was a mistake."

Jim raised an eyebrow as Telsa hung the datapad back on the foot of Colthus' bed, then gently pulled the doctor aside, and softly said, "Doc, are you aware of what was done to her?"

Telsa nodded. "Yes, Commander, I am. Probably more so than you are. She is going to have a great deal to cope with during therapy, ranging from having had her telepathic powers increased by - judging from neurological scans, a factor of ten - to the rather intensive psychological conditioning she was subjected to. The Siberian States have very nearly perfected their enslavement process, to the point where even the few days during which Captain Jodescu suffered their tender mercies may have been sufficient to leave her with lasting mental scars."

Jim must have looked worried, because Telsa gently patted his shoulder and continued, "Be at ease, Commander. She's in good hands here, and we'll do our very best to help her recover. And yes, before you start, I understand that we couldn't leave her behind for fear of her being kidnapped again, which is why I'm not complaining TOO loudly about having brought her with us. Please be calm, and let me do my work."

Jim smiled sheepishly. "Sorry, Doc. I'm just worried about her."

"I understand, Commander. I promise you that as soon as she regains consciousness, I'll let you know."

"If she asks for me..."

"...I'll call you promptly. You have my word on it."

"Thanks, Doc. How's the rest of my squad doing?"

"Commander Giann has already returned to duty...One of the fringe benefits of her partially feline heritage is a much firmer sense of balance than the average human. Lieutenant McConnell has also returned to duty...Through a genuinely extraordinary stroke of luck, he was completely immobile at the moment we Folded space, and didn't suffer from the same problems with vertigo that the rest of you went through."

Jim chuckled. "Of course."

"As for the rest, they're all still resting, and should be returning to duty within the hour. You should be able to find Commander Giann and Lieutenant McConnell down in hangar bay two checking on your Panzer Knights."

"Thanks, Doc. I'll head that way too...Send the others there when they wake up, if you would."

"Of course, Commander. And please stop calling me 'Doc.'"

"Someone double-check Cadmus' balancers...It looked like he took that hit because his boosters weren't responding properly."

"Yes, sir!"

Jim smiled, watching Crystal oversee the maintenance on Cadmus Orcgrinder's damaged Atlas Panzer Knight. "Report, Commander Giann."

Crystal turned and smiled, then saluted. "Commander, sir..Good to see you back on your feet. We've been busy down here. Cadmus only took a glancing hit, but it was in the wrong place - Shorted out his thruster backpack. Anyway, we've got that fixed, but we can't account for the poor performance of his Panzer through thruster problems, since we couldn't find any, so now I've got the maintenance crew checking its balancers to make sure they were sending the right sequence of commands to the thrusters. He's a good pilot, but his Panzer was moving pretty erratically before he got hit, so I suspect the balancers malfunctioned."

"Sound thinking. Everything else squared away?"

"Yes, sir. First thing I did when the dizziness went away was make sure the Panzer Knights were all safely docked, rearmed and refueled."

"Thanks, Crystal. Speaking of Tim, where is he?"

"Working on Cadmus' Atlas. Turns out he's got pretty good mechanical skills, too."

Jim smiled. "Hey, I chose my pilots for more reasons than just this side of insane."

Crystal shot him a grin that displayed her fang-like canines. "Shucks, and here I thought all you wanted me for was my staggeringly good pilot record."

Jim chuckled. "You thought I somehow completely overlooked that astrophysics degree that's in your file?"

She looked a little surprised. "To be honest, yeah. Nobody else ever bothered to notice it."

"I wanted my pilots to be capable of thinking for themselves. If you can get a Ph.D. in astrophysics by the time you're twenty-one, you should certainly be able to think for yourself."

Crystal cracked another grin. "Yes, sir. I like to think so."

The intercom suddenly activated. "*Commander Cadwell, report to the Captain's office immediately.*"

Crystal chuckled. "Someone's in trouble."

Jim glared at her. "I am not. He probably just wants to debrief me or something."

Jim rapped politely on the frame of Captain Piaget's door, even though it was open. "Commander Cadwell, reporting as ordered, sir."

Piaget looked up from the holographic screens floating over his desktop and waved a

hand through them, making them disappear. "Come in, Jim. Have a seat."

Jim stepped in, the door sliding shut behind him, and took a seat across the Captain's desk from him.

Piaget folded his hands on his desk. "Jim, when I was looking through your dossier, I noticed that you got top marks in your tactical analysis courses at the Academy. Your instructor even recommended you for Fleet command-staff training."

"That's right, sir. I thought about it, but decided what I really wanted to be doing is getting out into the field and getting my hands dirty. No offense."

Piaget smiled. "None take, Jim. I did my first two tours of duty as a pilot, too. Be that as it may, I'd like to impose on you a little. I'm short a first officer at the moment – mine took command of the *Excalibur* before we left – and I was hoping you'd let me pick your brain a little."

Jim raised an eyebrow. "Come again, sir?"

Piaget chuckled. "That means I want to take advantage of your tactical skills. Would you mind bouncing around a few ideas with me?"

Jim smiled and leaned back in his chair. "Of course, not, Captain. What's up?"

Piaget ran a hand over his beard. "All right, I have an idea that I'd like you to verify for me. Let me build up to it though."

"Go ahead."

"Thank you. Bear with me here." Piaget stroked his beard thoughtfully again. "First, we have the *Lightbringer* being sent after a single large genate which turns out to be an entire colony of them, completely overwhelming the ship. My old ship, the *Intrepid*, was close enough to the area to rescue you...which means, in theory, that we were close enough to deal with the initial problem. Additionally, the *Intrepid* had a full compliment of mecha, while the *Lightbringer* was a half-staff."

He paused for a moment, then continued. "Then, you and Tina were forced to rebuild your respective squads from scratch...and don't take this personally, but I find it a little suspicious that you – without any real command experience – were put in charge of an elite squad. Though, to be frank, you did a magnificent job choosing your pilots."

Jim smiled. "Thank you, Captain."

Piaget nodded and went on. "Be that as it may, neither of you should really have been in charge of that process. You for lack of field experience, Tina for psychological reasons." He looked apologetic. "It's true, I've read her dossier. If it weren't for her long string of successes, she'd never be in charge of anything. At any rate..." he paused for a moment "... Your freshly constructed squads were thrown into action far too quickly, with a ship that was below standard mecha compliment, and which was found immediately by Siberian troops

who weren't even supposed to be in the area, purely for the purposes of capturing Tina."

Jim smiled a little. "Recap episode."

Piaget chuckled. "Sorry. Just bear with me."

Jim nodded. "Go on, I'm with you so far."

"Good. I can see on your face that you're already thinking along the same lines." Piaget leaned back in his chair. "So, you and your squad arrive at the Siberian base and find a Colonial Forces *Lightbringer*-class ship there, and Colonial troops guarding Tina's cell. It was then Fleet Commander Anders who kept your court martial from ending with an execution, incidentally."

"I figured."

"And you know how the whole mess ended when we made our space fold to Alpha Centauri...So tell me, what do you make of it?"

It was Jim's turn to lean back in his chair. "Well...Not intending to sound overly paranoid...It seems to me that the *Lightbringer* was forced into the situation with the genates purely for the sake of leaving the Knights Errant and Skull Squadron without any kind of cohesion. Which made it a lot easier to kidnap Tina. After all, two properly meshed squadrons of elite pilots probably could have obliterated those Siberian robot vehicles. They were pretty flimsy."

Piaget nodded. "Go on."

"Then there was the Colonial presence at the Siberian installation, and the marked resemblance – at least internally – of the Siberian robot vehicles to Colonial Panzer Knights. Which certainly suggest, at the very least, some sort of communication between the two."

"Mm hmm." Piaget smiled a little. "We're on the same page so far. Don't stop now."

Jim paused to consider for a moment. "I guess backtracking a little to wonder how the Siberian army knew where we were, in spite of the fact that we were doing a remote border patrol...The only people who knew were the Colonial command staff."

Piaget nodded again. "That we know of, at least. And then?"

"Commander Anders' orders came through strangely. A set of cover orders, and the real orders buried in a hyperlink connection. And the intrigue involved in taking me into the asteroid belt rather than to Mars..." Jim trailed off, looking past Piaget and out the big transparisteel window behind him. Piaget waited patiently.

After a moment, Jim refocused on Piaget. "Are you suggesting, sir, that there're Siberian forces inside the Colonial command hierarchy?"

"Close," Piaget said. "I'm suggesting that there've been Siberian loyalists in Colonial Fleet Command for quite some time now. A little research I did before we left showed some unusual transfers over the past forty-five years or so, usually ignored by superior officers."

They were pretty innocuous, individually, but when taken together.."

Jim finished for him. "They made a rather disturbing picture." He nodded slowly, thinking. "That certainly explains how the Siberian troops knew where to find us, and why the coup seems to have gone off so smoothly. But – why all the effort to get Tina?"

Piaget shook his head. "Honestly, I'm not sure. I know it has something to do with that Suborotov character, though. According to her dossier, Sasha Suborotov was her commanding officer when she was still in the Siberian army, before it came out that she was a telepath."

Jim sat up a little. "That's it! I knew I recognized the voice! He's the one who was in charge of the big Siberian robot vehicles when Tina was kidnapped. And it was his Battlesuit that crashed through the ceiling of her cell to try and keep us from rescuing her at the base!"

"And it was he who was in charge of both the shuttles that chased the *Deep Pockets* here and the small fleet that tried to blockade us at *Freedom's Nest*." Piaget sighed softly. "Jim, we're up to our eyeballs in something here, and we don't even know what it is."

"Sounds to me like this Suborotov is taking advantage of the coup to get a-hold of Tina. I remember, when he confronted us before kidnapping her, she said something about knowing he wanted to turn her into his own personal sex toy."

Piaget winced a little. "That's Tina. Never use a euphemism when the blunt, honest, gruesome truth will suffice."

Jim smiled and nodded. "That's my girl, all right."

Chapter 16

I used to wonder what sort of person could willingly harm another. When I joined the United Colonial Fleet, I learned not only how to kill, but why. I was instilled with a code of behavior that reinforced the code of ethics I was given by my parents before they died.

I would never hurt an innocent, someone who wasn't involved in a fight with me.

I would never intentionally endanger a civilian.

I would never torture an enemy, no matter how much I wanted to or how necessary it seemed. I know that not all of my colleagues agree with this last...Tina in particular says that my decision there marks the dividing line between being practical and idealistic. We've agreed to disagree on that count, amongst a multitude of others, and fortunately our old-fashioned 'good cop, bad cop' routine is effective enough that she rarely has to resort to violence during interrogation.

Be that as it may, I still don't understand why people would not only willingly choose to do to others what was very nearly done to Tina, but why they would actually WANT to. Granted, Tina has since demonstrated...At excruciating length...The appeal of it. But in play only - I still just don't understand the sort of mentality that would want to completely eradicate another's free will.

The concept is alien to me.

From *The Collected Journals of Admiral James Cadwell*

Jim...

He rolled over and muttered something about not wanting to get up for school.

Jim.

"Wha? Lemme sleep."

JIM!

Jim Cadwell sat bolt upright in his bunk, and smacked his forehead against the ceiling of his quarters. "Ow! What the hell..."

The comlink built into his desk under his bunk beeped. "*Commander Cadwell, please report to sickbay.*"

Jim rolled out of bed, somehow managing to miss the slide-out desk chair he'd left open as he hit the floor. He winced at the cold metal against his feet as his comlink beeped again.

"*Commander Cadwell, please acknowledge. You're needed in sickbay.*"

Jim pushed the slide-out chair under his desk and fumbled for the comlink control.

"*Commander Cadwell, please...*"

"I'm here. I'm on my way. Ten minutes."

"*Understood. Sickbay out.*"

Jim stumbled over to his closet and grabbed one of the flightsuits that doubled as duty uniforms for pilots and headed into the bathroom attached to his quarters. When he emerged seven minutes later, he at least looked awake and alert. As he tugged on his boots, he again heard Tina's voice, crystal clear in his mind, and effortless, unlike her earlier telepathic contacts with him.

Jim?

"I'm coming, Tina. Hang on."

He matched action to words, and hurried out of his quarters.

Jim practically collided with an equally sleeping-looking Tethys Dark outside of sickbay.

"They called you, too?"

"Yeah. I think I heard Tina calling for me telepathically," Jim said.

"Really? That'd be a first. She's not the type to rely on anyone other than herself. You should either feel honored, or worried. Take your pick."

The door hissed open. "That bad, huh?"

"I saw her walk on a broken ankle for two days because she didn't want to bother sickbay with it, back when we were first stationed on the *Lightbringer*."

"Ouch."

"Couldn't have put it better myself. She tends towards being the strong, silent type."

"Stubborn would put it better," Jim added, smiling faintly.

"True. Here's the Doc."

"Gentlemen," Doctor Telsa hurried over, holding a datapad. "Captain Jodescu is awake and asking for the two of you."

"Yes," Jim said dryly, "I noticed."

"I gathered that from the bruise on your forehead, Commander. We have a telepathic dampener surrounding her room now...The initial rush of thoughts that deluged her when she woke up almost sent her spiraling back into unconsciousness. Until she learns to control her enhanced powers, she's going to have to stay inside of it."

Jim and Tethys both nodded.

"Additionally, our resources are fairly limited – sickbay wasn't fully stocked, I'm afraid. So her injuries are still healing, and there're quite a lot of them, so you can't stay for long. Now, gentlemen, this way, please..."

Doctor Telsa led them down a short hall and paused outside a closed door. "I must ask you to be discreet. I don't need to remind you that Captain Jodescu is recovering from a traumatic and exhausting experience. She needs rest and time to recover, and I only sent for you two because she wouldn't calm down until I did. So - As I've said, make this brief, be soft-spoken and laid-back. Do not overtax her; do not react to her appearance or behavior. Understood, gentlemen?"

He received a chorus of "Yes, sir!" along with a crisp, slightly mocking salute from the two pilots, and looked at them for a moment before shaking his head and opening the door for them. "Five minutes, gentlemen. Pilots..."

Tina was propped up in bed, looking worn and weary, but smiling faintly nevertheless. There were fading bruises on her face and arms, alongside healing cuts and lacerations covered in some sort of medicinal gel. However, only Jim noticed her ever so slight flinch as Tethys stepped right up to her bed, and hung back a little to give her the space he suspected she needed.

"You okay, boss?" Tethys asked.

"Yeah, I'm okay." Her smile grew slightly as she turned to Jim. "Thanks. I understand you got court-martialed for rescuing me."

Jim chuckled softly. "Yeah, but it was worth it. You're worth it."

Tina tiredly waved a hand, dismissing the compliment. "Bull. But thank you anyway." She looked back at Tethys. "You gonna have any problem working with Jim while I'm down?"

"I shouldn't think so..." Tethys said. "I gave Jim a crash course in space combat tactics a few hours ago...And he beat me soundly in the simulators. He's got a real talent for zero-gravity combat."

Jim shrugged bashfully. "It wasn't that hard to get used to. Once I wrapped my brain around the fact that 'down' was purely relative, it got a lot easier to handle. Convincing the rest of my squad of that fact...That might be a little harder. But we'll see."

Tina shook her head, smiling a little.

"Besides," Tethys said, "After what Jim and his squad did to save you, I don't think any of the Skulls will have a problem working with him and his. I know I won't. He pulled off a really amazing operation, with no casualties and only very minor injuries."

"I got lucky," Jim replied. "It helped that the base was on minimal alert. If I didn't know better, I'd say..." He paused, blinking. "...I'd say they wanted us to rescue you..."

Tethys frowned, then suddenly saw where Jim was going. "You mean, so they'd have an excuse to...To what? Not to court martial you, you're not important enough...No offense."

"None taken...Though getting both the Knights Errant and Skull Squadron out of the way must've been a pretty nice bonus. No, I think they were looking for an excuse to go after Fleet Commander Anders. They knew he'd never leave a soldier behind enemy lines, so to speak." Jim raked his finger through his hair. "I'll bet that's the excuse they used to remove him from power."

Tina looked from one to the other. "Someone wanna explain this all to me? Remember, I've been unconscious or in therapy for most of the last month."

Dr. Telsa cleared his throat from the doorway. "Five minutes are up. Sorry. Captain Jodescu needs the rest."

"But..."

The Doctor held up his hand. "Relax, Tina. I've been putting together a summary of recent events for you. I'll give it to you as soon as you've eaten and had a full night's rest."

She put on a petulant expression, which made Jim and Tethys smile. That was more like the Tina they knew. But with a longer look, Jim saw that it went no deeper than her expression.

Telsa sighed wearily. "And you can have all the visitors you want, once you've started to get your telepathy back under control. All right?"

"Not like I have much of a choice, is it?" She smiled to take the sting out of her words, and again, Jim could see that it didn't touch her eyes. "I'll be good, I promise."

Jim snorted, trying to lighten the mood a little. "Uh huh. And I'll be dyeing my hair blue." Everyone paused to look at him. After a moment, Tina shook her head. "Nah."

Jim and Colthus sat side by side on a cargo crate, watching the maintenance crews tearing into their Panzer Knights in preparation for installing the last few system upgrades. Colthus was oddly silent, considering his usual boisterous behavior.

After some time, Jim softly asked, "Something on your mind, Colt?"

"Just thinking about that theory you bounced off me when we went on duty earlier."

"Not a nice thought, is it?"

"Not even remotely, boss. But I still feel like something's missing. Or that I'm missing something. I dunno."

Jim nodded slowly. "I have the same feeling." A demolitions disposal team collected one of the explosives and, packing it away safely in their disposal unit, went to see what they could learn from it.

"Details," Colthus said.

"That's where the Devil is, according to our ancestors."

"Huh?"

"Random thought," Jim said, smiling faintly. "Old Earth expression. 'The Devil is in the details.'"

"Oh. It makes some sense, though. I mean...If we pin down the details..."

"We find out who did it...Our 'Devil', so to speak...And why."

"Hopefully." Colthus glanced at Jim. "You really think they wanted us out of the way that badly?"

Jim nodded again. "Yeah, I do. Look at what happened...We were rushed into duty by an emergency situation that nobody seemed to see coming. A detail there which smells rather like a conspiracy in and of itself. Then, someone who wants Tina knows exactly when and where to find us, even though we were operating under radio silence in an area a front-line ship would rarely be sent to."

Colthus nodded, then added, "Then there were those conflicting orders you mentioned before..."

"Yeah," Jim said. "Two sets of orders...One telling us to stand down and leave Tina where she was..."

"Where'd those come from, anyway?" Colthus asked, interrupting.

"Don't know...Captain Piaget didn't have time to tell me then and there, and we've been too busy for it to come up since."

"Ah. Anyway, sorry..."

"S'okay. It was a valid question. Anyway, the second set of orders came from Fleet Commander Anders, and were the exact opposite of the previous ones. Save Tina by any means necessary. Captain Piaget asked me to try to keep a low profile, but I suspect he knew it was futile."

Colthus grinned for a moment, then looked a little embarrassed. "Okay, so we got a little carried away..."

"A little?" Jim asked, obviously amused. "One starship, a dozen of the larger Battlesuits... We really need a different designation for those...The base armory, two dozen infantry

soldiers, and a variety pack of buildings and vehicles blown to bits. I asked for distractions, not a slaughter.”

“You don’t sound too annoyed, boss.”

“I’m not, Colt. I’m amazed, to be honest. When you consider that the entire operation took less than forty minutes from the time we dropped to the time we pulled out, we did something pretty amazing. As for the collateral damage...Well...That’s status quo for the group I put together, and whomever oh-so deftly maneuvered us into that position knew it. They wanted us to make that big a mess, and we obliged with style.” Jim sighed. “If only we knew why.”

“You suggested it might’ve been an excuse to get Commander Anders out of his office.”

“Maybe. It fits the events well enough.” Jim ran a hand through his hair. “But really, we don’t have much to go on other than a chain of reasoning based on recent events, and inspired by poorly attempted sabotage of our mecha.”

Colthus nodded, watching as another scorched chunk of armor from Cadmus' Panzer Knight was carted off. After a moment, he shook his head. “Wasn’t there some Old Earth expression about living in exciting times?”

“Yeah,” Jim said. “‘May you live in interesting times.’ Some people thought of it as a curse, others as a blessing.”

“Goes both ways.”

“True.”

“What are we going to do about all of this, boss?”

Jim sighed softly. “Right now, nothing. All we can do at the moment is diffuse the problem, if you’ll forgive the pun, and then follow Captain Piaget’s orders while he tries to make peaceful contact with the Sulians. We’re too far from home to solve this mystery.”

Colthus was silent for a moment. “Jim...What do you think’s happening on Earth right now?”

Jim rubbed his eyes tiredly. “Nothing good, Colthus. Nothing good.”

Cadmus wandered off, and it was some time before Jim's reverie was interrupted. “It’s awful lonely out there in the darkness, isn’t it.”

Jim blinked and turned to look at the speaker, a young woman in stained mechanic’s overalls. “Hmm?”

She gestured towards the open hangar bay door, where Jim had been watching the stars while Colthus was keeping an eye on the crews that were putting their Panzer Knights back together. “When you’re out there, on patrol or something...It’s very lonely, isn’t it.”

Jim scratched his neck under the collar of his flightsuit. “To be honest, I haven’t done a deep space patrol yet. What brought that up, though?”

"You just looked very lonely, sir. I'm sorry if I offended you." She started to turn away.

"No, hang on a second...You just caught me off-guard and woolgathering. But yeah, any patrol is generally pretty lonely. At the same time, though, you're usually too busy thinking about the patrol to actually get lonely. So it balances out."

She looked up at him. "And that's why you looked lonely?"

"Um, no, I was trying to side-step that comment."

"I figured as much. Anyway, I just wanted to let you know that your Achilles is ready to go. Retooled, recalibrated, upgraded and reassembled. We even tweaked the thrust controls, so you'll get an extra ten percent out of the boosters, and about six percent more maneuverability. Also, we took the opportunity to upgrade the Virtual Environment Cockpit's heads-up display with the latest little tools and memory mods."

Jim chuckled. "Anything else?"

"Yes, sir...We firmly resisted the urge to say something about the very naughty picture of Captain Jodescu we found in its memory banks."

Jim coughed and turned red. "She plugged it in there and programmed my comm system to pop it up at random intervals."

The mechanic giggled. "Yes, we noticed. We tweaked the programming a little, so it won't pop up if the combat systems are engaged."

He smiled, relieved. "Thank you. I was worried about that."

"It'd be distracting."

"Very," Jim agreed. "Very."

"If you don't mind my asking, sir...How's she doing? My sister is a mechanic for Skull Squadron, and they haven't really heard anything."

Jim sighed softly. "She's doing okay. It's only been a few days since she started to get back on her feet, really. And she's got a lot to deal with...Her telepathy being boosted, what was done to her...She's going to be in therapy for a while."

"Any idea when she'll be returning to duty?"

"As soon as she can escape sickbay, no doubt."

"Space," Jim murmured to himself, quoting an Old Earth novel, "Is big. Really, really big." He sighed softly and rested his elbows on the cafeteria table, staring out one of the big transparisteel windows that lined one side of the room. He was on the side of the ship facing away from Alpha Centauri, and so had a crystal-clear view of the depths of space.

"Mind if I sit down?" Someone asked.

Jim looked up to see a young, sandy-haired pilot with the Skull flight patch on the left breast of his flightsuit. "Um...Lieutenant Slate, isn't it?"

"Yes sir. Ben Slate. They call me 'Duck', 'cause I used to be a little timid under fire."

Jim smiled slightly. "Sit down, Lieutenant."

"Thank you, sir." Ben sat down across from him, sipping from a steaming mug of coffee before putting it down. "Sir, do you mind if I ask you something?"

"Sure thing. Like I told the Knights, I expect absolute honesty from the people I work with. Speak your piece."

"Thank you, sir." Ben fidgeted for a moment.

"Out with it, Ben."

"Sir...What do you think the odds of our surviving this mission are?"

Jim sighed. "If you're going to ask me questions like that, you're smart enough to realize that the odds are bad enough to worry about. Which means you're smart enough to know what I'm going to say by way of an answer."

"That bad, huh?"

"Worse, actually. Commander Anders suggested that we had less than a ten per-cent chance of actually getting home in one piece. Of course, I'm inclined to up that ante slightly, based on how easily the *Freedom* blew through those *Lightbringers* back at *Freedom's Nest*."

Ben smiled. "That was something, wasn't it?"

Jim returned his smile. "Yeah, it really was. I've never seen anything like it. I hope it means we stand a fighting chance against whatever we run into out here."

Ben's smile held a moment longer before fading. "But now we probably won't have much of a home to return to, will we?"

Jim's smile faded as well, and he sighed as he propped his elbows on the table again and rested his chin on his folded hands for a moment. "Well...Let's face it, the Siberian Independent States sure as hell blindsided us, and consolidated their power quickly enough to mobilize a half-dozen *Lightbringers*...Which bore Colonial markings, if you didn't notice... And enough fighters to give us a little trouble. They still backed down, but only because they weren't expecting the *Freedom's* raw power output."

Ben nodded. "And the longer we're gone, the more power they'll have when we get home."

"Most likely, yeah." Jim sighed again. "Meanwhile, we're too far away to find out in real-time what's going on. We'll be going home blind, which is crazy. Of course, we came out here pretty much blind too, so there's nothing to be said for our sanity already."

They were silent for a long moment. Ben sipped his coffee.

"So," Jim went on, "All we can do is what we're doing. Try to save humanity from the Sulians. Once we've done that, we can worry about saving humanity from itself."

"I guess that's all there is to it. I hope we're not gone too long, then."

"Mm. I rather hope that myself. The longer we're gone, like you said, the worse our position will probably be when we get home."

The ship's P.A. system interrupted their conversation.

"All hands, attention. This is the Captain speaking. Astrogation has just finished triangulating our actual position, and has informed me of something which I felt everyone should be aware of." He cleared his throat, a harsh sound over the speakers. *"By calculating the positions of known stars and planets in the local cluster, as well as projecting the location of Earth, it has been determined that the Space Fold process took slightly longer than two years of 'real' time rather than the five minutes we experienced. Ship's clocks are being adjusted accordingly. That is all."*

Jim and Ben looked at one another in horrified silence.

"Oh shit," Ben said softly.

Jim nodded grimly. "Yeah...That's about as bad as it gets. God only knows what's happened back home in two years." He grimaced. "Damn..."

"What do we do now?"

"What we've planned to do all along. That's all we can do. Let's just hope there's something left of what we knew as Earth for us to come home to."

Chapter 17

So there we were, all suddenly two years older. We did our best to take it in stride...Generally with humor. My favorite moment was when the cafeteria staff threw the entire crew a birthday party...Then another the next day. It helped a lot.

Still, it was a little weird to be physically one age, and chronologically another.

But then, of course, we were shortly too busy to give it any thought.

From The Collected Journals of Admiral James Cadwell

"Pull up! Pull up!" Jim cringed as Kelly's Atlas Panzer Knight slammed into the side of the *Freedom* at full reverse thrust. "Shit. Okay, people, stand down. Computer, reset Boom-Boom."

Kelly's Atlas, undamaged, materialized in front of Jim's Achilles as the rest of the Knights formed up on them. Vid windows opened in a semi-circle in front of Jim, showing him the other members of his squadron.

"Listen up, people, 'cause this'll make the third time I've explained it. First of all, you're lucky we're doing this in the simulators. If we weren't, the body count due to accidental crashes would be Colthus, Crystal, and now Kelly. Cadmus almost collided with one of the target drones, and it was only Tim's luck that kept one of his shots from blowing me to bits after it went clean through a drone."

Nobody was quite able to meet his eyes.

"Situational awareness, folks, is more important in outer space than it ever was on Earth. You can't only focus on one, or even two axes out here. You've got a collision alarm, listen for it! The Virtual Environment Cockpit gives you a full 360 degree view. Use it! Eyes and ears, people...The VEC simulates the sounds of incoming fire and passing targets. Pay attention to it! And for god's sake, don't just nod at me. I'm not telling you this for my health..." he glanced at Tim "...Okay, so I am telling you this for my own health. But seriously, people...You're using one of the most sophisticated pilot interfaces ever created. Take advantage of it. Got it?"

He was rewarded with a chorus of affirmatives.

"Okay, then...From the top. Form up. Computer, reset hostile targets and engage." The simulator computer beeped as the squad's vid windows closed. "Heads up, people, we have incoming!"

"Okay," Jim said, flipping switches and hitting buttons on his HOTAS array. "Let's get this show back on the road, shall we?" The heads-up display materialize, floating in front of and around him in the Virtual Environment Cockpit. He manipulated some of the holographic controls that were part of the HUD, sliding them into more useful positions as the spherical display of the VEC came to life around him. "I just hope the simulator training was sufficient..."

"Knight One, You're going to be launching from deck 1-a. Catapult launch in thirty seconds."

"1-a confirmed, flight control." Jim quickly stepped his Achilles Panzer Knight into the appropriate catapult. "Knight One, ready for launch."

"Twenty seconds to launch."

"Hey boss..."

Jim glanced to his right to see Colthus stepping his Atlas Panzer Knight into the "b" catapult next to him. "Yeah, Colt?"

"Why the hell do they call them 'Gravity Manipulation Drives' when they're based on electromagnetism, not gravity?"

Jim stared at Colthus' Atlas in stunned silence.

"Knight One from Flight Control, prepare to launch in five...four..."

"Colthus, you're whacked. Keep your mind on what you're doing for a change."

"...One. Knight One, launch!"

The catapult jolted him forward, speeding him towards the down-angled end of the flight deck. Just as the catapult reached the end of its track, Jim pushed his throttle control forward, igniting the boosters and sending his Panzer Knight blasting off the end of the flight deck, along the *Freedom's* main hull, and out into space.

"Aw, come on, boss...Do I have to URK!"

Jim glanced over his shoulder in time to see Colthus' Atlas make a wobbly launch, and shook his head. "Yes, Colt, you do. And that's why. Now form up, we've got a patrol to fly here."

Colthus' Atlas quickly stabilized and pulled into formation beside and just behind Jim's Achilles. *"Sorry, boss. But damn, those new catapults pack a punch, don't they."*

"Yup." Jim glanced around him and, seeing no unidentified targets bracketed, set his sensors to alert him when something came into range.

"Why do we use them, anyway? I mean...In zero gravity, we could just take off from a stand-still. It's not like modern fighters need to reach flight speed to launch anyway."

"Tradition, Colt."

"No offense, boss, but that's really stupid."

"Probably...But tradition is tradition. Now get your mind on the patrol."

"Right, sorry."

"What's bugging you, Colthus?" Jim glanced over as Colthus' helmeted face appeared in a little vid-box in his HUD.

"Nothing, really. I'm just a little nervous about being able to handle space combat. We've barely had any time to run through zero-gravity tactics in the simulator." Colthus shrugged. *"I guess I babble when I'm nervous."*

"Relax, buddy. It's not like we're going to run into anything awful during this patrol. The *Freedom* just wanted us to have some flight time before we really started searching for the Sulian in earnest."

"So what's this blip on my sensors?"

Jim glanced at the blip in question, bracketed it, and zoomed in on it. He smiled. "It's a vicious, evil asteroid. I think it's here to savagely attack and destroy us for no apparent reason."

"Cute. Real cute."

"Thanks. Now then...Knights, sound off."

"Knight Two, Ravage, good to go."

"Knight Three, Longshot, back in one piece and ready to give my luck a workout."

"Knight Four, Boom-Boom, still on the flight deck. My flight systems failed their last check, so I'm waiting on a diagnostic."

"Understood, Four. Hang tight until you're sure everything's okay."

"Aye, sir."

"Five?"

"What, you missed my piss-poor launch?"

Jim sighed. "No, Colthus, I didn't. But sound off anyway, just to make me happy. Okay?"

A few chuckles came over the squadron's frequency.

"Aye, aye, chief. Knight Five, Ripper, ready to let it rip."

Jim rolled his eyes. "Six?"

"Knight Six, Hammer, bringin' up the rear."

"Lead, this is Four. I'm launching now. Systems check out, looks like I just had a false start on my engines."

"Understood, Four. Keep an eye on them until you're positive they're okay. Otherwise, form up." Jim glanced around as the Panzers formed up on either side of him, then chinned his comlink again. "Skull Five, report Skull Flight status."

"Sleuth reporting," Tethys' voice said, *" All Skulls present and accounted for."*

"Much obliged, Sleuth." Jim glanced over his right shoulder and saw the Skull-and-Crossbones emblazoned fighter-mode Raptors forming up behind him. "Okay people, listen up. We're short two Skull pilots, so rather than short two of the flight groups, here's how we were going to do it: Skulls Two through Six and Knights Four and Six form up on me, group designated Patrol; Skulls Seven through Twelve and Knights Three and Five, form up on Knight Two, group designated Home Guard."

Jim watched for a moment as the mecha jockeyed for position, splitting up into their two groups. "Home Guard One, copy."

"Home Guard One, affirmative," Crystal replied.

"Okay, Ravage," Jim said with a little smile, "We discussed defense tactics, right?"

"Yes, sir."

"Put them to good use."

He could almost hear the smile in Crystal's voice. *"Aye, sir."*

The mecha assigned to Home Guard peeled off and headed back towards the *Freedom*, breaking up into smaller flights of three and four mechs as Crystal gave them their assignments.

"Okay, Patrol group, listen up. Skull Two and Three, Knight Six, form up on me and patrol *Freedom* Y-Axis. Knight Four, Skull Four and Six, form up on Skull Five and patrol *Freedom* X-Axis. Any questions?"

Silence.

"Glad to hear it. Get to it, people."

"Captain Piaget, sir? Sensors register a bogie at forty klicks and holding."

"Holding?" Piaget swiveled his chair towards the sensor station.

"Aye, sir. Maintaining distance. I've been watching it for the last fifteen minutes, sir...I didn't say anything because its composition reads like an asteroid."

"Okay...So why are you bringing it to my attention now. It could just be moving along the same heading."

"Aye, sir..But when we made that course correction a minute ago, it corrected its course to match us."

"Interesting. Weapons readings?"

"Negative, sir. Threat systems can't match it with anything, and we're too far away from it to get anything other than a basic composition reading and a rough sensor outline. It's lumpy and unevenly shaped, sir, like an asteroid."

"Hmm. Comm, get me Commander Cadwell."

The communications officer reported back quickly. "On line, sir."

"Commander Cadwell, this is Captain Piaget."

"Aye, sir?"

"We've got an unidentified contact at Y-150 X-20 degrees, forty klicks, maintaining position. Threat detection computer is ignoring it, and sensors register it as an asteroid. If you'd be so kind as to give it a flyby, I'd appreciate it."

"Understood, sir. On our way."

Jim punched up his throttle, veering away from his flight. "Okay, people, listen up. Skull Two, shadow me at two klicks. Skull Three, Knight Six, swing around and get in front of it, then hold position at five klicks from it. I'm going to do a flyby, and if it doesn't shoot at me, I'll swing back and make another pass. Everybody clear?"

"Yessir."

"Aye, sir."

"Aye, lad. Let's go already."

"Okay, start the sweep." Jim throttled up and accelerated towards the object, shifting power from his combat systems to his sensors. As he got closer, the object was bracketed in yellow by his heads-up display and marked as an unknown target.

"Commander Cadwell, this is Captain Piaget. You should be close enough to get a visual on the object."

Jim ran his fingers through the holographic controls of his HUD and created a small video window to zoom in on the object. "Yes, sir, I have a visual now. It...Looks exactly like an asteroid." He frowned and increased the power output to his sensors. "Okay, Captain...I'm out here scanning an asteroid. I'm not even a hundred meters from it right now...It's big, it's cratered, and it scans exactly like an asteroid." He paused. "Wait a moment. I've got an anomalous reading on the far side of the asteroid. Swinging around."

"Be careful, Jim."

"When am I not, Captain?"

A vid-box bearing Crystal's face popped up next to the Captain's. *"Well, I seem to remember a moment when we were rounding a certain hallway corner...You know, when I got shot? We weren't being very careful then..."*

Jim resisted the urge to sigh and roll his eyes as he gently maneuvered his Achilles over the relative top of the asteroid, turning as he went so that he was always facing it. "That wasn't careless, it was reckless."

"Semantics."

"Commander, Lieutenant, if you two are done bickering, I'd like to get on with this?"

"Sorry, Captain."

"Sorry, sir. Okay, here we go. I've got a spot on this side of the asteroid, at the bottom of a crater..About a meter square..." Jim frowned. "Um...My sensors can't identify it. Whatever it is, though, it's not part of the asteroid. I'm transmitting my sensor readings now."

"Commander, this is Lieutenant Shiel on sensors, I've got your transmission. And you're right, that's definitely not part of the asteroid. But the Freedom's computers can't make heads or tails out of the readings you're getting. I can't even determine its composition. Whatever it's made of, it's not something we've ever seen before."

"Exciting," Jim mumbled to himself. "Well, I did want to explore the universe when I was little. And I suppose this is exploration at its finest."

"Jim, we're going to move in and see if the Freedom's sensors can get anything more out of that thing than yours have."

"Understood, Captain. Holding position."

A moment later, Jim blinked as the asteroid started to drift towards him. "Woah, woah!" He fired his boosters and moved back away from the asteroid.

"Commander?"

"Captain, the asteroid is somehow holding position relative to the *Freedom*. I'm not seeing any sign of motion-generating devices or systems...It's just moving. Towards me." He matched the asteroid's velocity so that it wouldn't collide with him. "Recommmendations, sir?"

"Well, we know it's there, and we suspect that it's watching us...But we don't know what it is exactly, and I'd rather not make any hasty assumptions about that. So, for the time being, I think we should leave it alone and keep an eye on it. Return to your patrol, Commander."

"Aye, aye, Captain. Patrol One, you heard the Captain, return to patrol flight path." Jim boosted up and away from the asteroid, heading back towards the *Freedom* as the rest of his patrol formed up on him.

Chapter 18

A character in an Old Earth television program once said something to the extent of "It'll take a lot more than a hundred years to make a better human." He was responding to someone's comment that even after a hundred years of contact with extra-terrestrial life, mankind was still making war against itself. His commentary was sad, but true. After all, it has been a little over a century since humanity had its brief...and devastating...first contact with the Sulians. And in spite of the fact that we know, beyond the shadow of any doubt, that the Sulians are a threat that we can't just ignore, humanity remains a bigger danger to itself than anything else in the universe.

That we've seen so far, at any rate.

From The Collected Journals of Admiral James Cadwell

"And that was that?"

"Yeah." Jim leaned back in his chair next to Tina's bed in sickbay.

"Captain Piaget just decided to leave it there? So it's still shadowing us?"

"Yeah. I'm not sure what the Captain's up to, but he must have something in mind for it. Maybe we'll get lucky and he'll fill us in." Jim raked his fingers through his hair. "I'd really love to know. If I found something shadowing my ship like that, and couldn't figure out what it was, I'd...Actually, I guess I'd do the same thing. No point in pissing off whomever it belongs to."

Tina nodded solemnly. "True enough. After all, if it's an Sulian probe or something, *not* destroying it might be the best possible thing to do. After all...They must realize that we've spotted it. Maybe by showing that we're not here to fight, by not destroying it, they'll decide not to destroy *us*."

Jim looked at Tina curiously, and with a little worry.

She gave him a weak smile. "Don't worry, I'm not going all optimistic on you. I'm the same old me I always was."

"You don't sound like you quite believe that. I'm worried about you, Tina. Doc Telsa tells me you haven't talked at all about..." He trailed off, not sure how to put it delicately.

"About being kidnapped, beaten and raped, mind and body?"

Jim winced, more at the toneless quality of her voice and the lack of expression on her face than at the words themselves. "Tactfully said."

That got a genuine smile out of her, no matter how tired and weak it was. "And when have you known me to be tactful, hmm? Tact has never really been in my nature."

"Yeah, I know. Doesn't change the fact that I'm worried about you, though. If you bottle that up-"

"I know, I know." Tina sighed softly. "It's hard, Jim. It's hard to deal with. You just don't understand what they did to me. I'm not sure I do, either."

"All the more reason to tell me about it."

Tina looked uncomfortable.

Jim sighed almost silently. "Or someone else if you're not comfortable talking to me about it. I'm sure the Doc has at least one fully trained psychologist-"

Tina shook her head. "Don't take me wrong, Jim. If I want to talk to anyone about it, I'll come to you first. I promise. But I don't even want to think about it right now. I just want to heal."

"Tina..."

"Jim, I just don't know what to say about it yet. I don't have it all sorted out in my mind. You just don't understand...And neither do I...Near the end, just before you rescued me..." She trailed off into silence, gnawing on her lower lip, staring down into her lap.

"Tell me. Please?" Jim reached out for her hand, but she flinched away from his touch.

"I'm sorry...I can't help it. I even have trouble letting the Doc touch me."

"It's okay," Jim said.

"No, it's not. And I don't think it will be for a long time."

"Shh...We can work on that later. Finish what you were saying."

Tina sighed softly, looking down into her lap again, her hands fidgeting restlessly. "Just before you rescued me...I'd started to enjoy what they were doing to me. The programming was starting to work." She shivered and whispered, "It felt good."

Jim sighed softly. "I was afraid of that. We were almost too late."

She looked up at him, tears rolling down her cheeks. "But you weren't! You were just in time. You saved me." She reached out one hand and tentatively rested it on top of his. "You saved me."

Jim watched her, not wanting to move his hand, suspecting how hard the contact had been for her to make.

She closed her eyes for a moment. "Jim? Do something for me?"

"Anything, Tina. Anything at all."

"Hold me. Please."

Slowly, gently, Jim rose and sat beside her and slipped an arm around her shoulders. Tina flinched slightly at his touch, then leaned into him, forcing herself to relax as he wrapped her up in his arms. When he felt her shaking, he started to pull away, only to have her hold him tightly.

After a moment, he realized that she was crying. He tightened his arms around her and gently kissed the top of her head. "Shh, love...It'll be okay. We'll get through this, and you'll be okay. I promise. I promise." He rocked her gently, holding her close as she wept.

Jim sat and watched Doctor Telsa pace back and forth behind his desk. "Doc, would you just tell me what's bothering you, already? Please?"

Telsa sat down finally and leaned on his desk. "The reason that Captain Jodescu has been shying away from physical contact is because she's fighting against the psychological conditioning that was inflicted on her. We've been able to undo a lot of the damage they did to her psyche through classic counter-programming methods, but quite a lot of the conditioning and behavioral triggers they implanted in her mind are still there."

"Okay," Jim said, "Which means..."

"Which means, Commander, that I'm afraid she might be allowing that conditioning to focus itself on you. As near as I can tell, they had progressed to the point where they would have been fixating her on whomever would be...purchasing her. Namely, this Suborotov person. As we understand it, physical contact is one of the major facets of the fixating process, which is why she's been shying away from contact with people."

"And you're afraid that because she let me touch her..."

"That she's allowing the remaining conditioning to fixate on you. To make the process easier for herself, I suspect. She trusts you, after all, and you're about the only one she trusts completely."

Jim folded his hands, rested his elbows on his knees, and his chin on his hands, valiantly trying not to look as uncomfortable as he felt.

"Yeah," the Doctor said. "It's a bit of a quandary. You're not the type of person who would take advantage of her like that, so she probably feels safe taking an easy out and letting it lock onto you. But..."

"But, that's not the best solution to the problem. And I'm not really comfortable with the idea."

Doctor Telsa smiled. "Of course not. Which is why she is. You're safe, and she's so emotionally exhausted that she's willing to give up control to someone she trusts rather than keep fighting the conditioning."

Jim sighed. "What do we do?"

"Well," Telsa said slowly, "To some extent it's too late to do anything. By accepting physical contact with you and opening up to you emotionally, the conditioning has already started to fixate on you."

Jim winced.

"But, it's not complete, at least as I understand it. From what I've been able to determine, it takes at least two days for the conditioning to really take hold and fixate on a single person, with extended physical contact during that time. It apparently involves some classic Pavlovian pleasure/pain conditioning where the pleasure centers of the victim's brain are stimulated during the sessions of physical contact. And because the victim is in such an open, suggestible state at the time, it takes hold much faster than it would under..Well... Ordinary circumstances, for lack of a better term."

"So," Jim said, "I reiterate - What do we do?"

"I think the best thing to do would be to just keep you away from her for a day or two. By that time, with a little luck, the fixation phase of her conditioning will have passed. And since you're the only one she'll actually let touch her, there shouldn't be any problem with her fixating on anyone else."

Jim nodded. "Still, keeping me away from her might be difficult. She's been rather vocal about getting me in here to visit."

"Yes, she has. But she'll just have to cope. We can have the Captain assign you some extra patrols or something."

"I'd like to put in a vote for 'or something.' Those patrols are pretty monotonous."

"Tired of scanning asteroids already?"

"You'd be amazed how much stellar junk there is floating around out there. And so far only just the one has turned up anything unusual."

"Interesting, you mean."

Jim smiled. "Well, there's not much to be said for scanning lifeless chunks of rock."

"Let me see if I've got this straight."

Jim and Dr. Telsa fidgeted uncomfortably in front of Captain Piaget's station on the bridge.

"You're asking me to order the Knights Errant to do space combat simulator training when they're not on patrol or sleeping for the next two days?" The Captain rubbed his forehead. "I'm getting a headache. I can't believe you're asking me to give an order."

"We explained why, Captain." Telsa said. "I'm firmly of the opinion that it's the only way Captain Jodescu will be able to make it through this phase of her recovery."

"I understand that, Doctor, but why do you need me to make this a direct order?"

"Two reasons, sir," Jim said. "Firstly, it's the only way Tina will accept my not being there every moment I'm off-duty." The Captain nodded at that. "Secondly, well...Quite frankly, after watching their performance during that first patrol, I'm inclined to say that the Knights really do need that much extra zero-gravity training."

"Yes," Piaget said slowly. "Lieutenant Delair's launch was particularly interesting."

Jim sighed.

"Very well, Commander, Doctor...Consider the order given. Just don't exhaust your pilots to the point where they can't handle their patrols, Commander."

"Not a problem, sir. Just want to work the bugs out of the system, so to speak."

Jim grabbed a tray of food in the officer's mess and looked around for a moment before approaching the table where Captain Piaget was eating. "Captain...May I join you?"

Piaget looked up and smiled. "Of course, Jim, have a seat." His head tilted a little, looking closely at Jim. "Before you fall down."

Jim uttered an exhausted sound and all but crashed into the chair across from the Captain. "I'm beat. Maybe literally."

"Problems?"

"Yeah. We're having trouble learning to deal with space combat. I mean...I've adapted Tina's space combat sims just fine, and for the most part everybody's performing just fine. But my people keep colliding with one another or the *Freedom* or their targets at all sorts of weird angles. They're just having a hard time keeping track of everything at once."

Piaget nodded. "I understand. I'll never forget the Elementary Space Combat class I took at the academy. It was a humiliating experience...Briefly. Remember, they've only been running the extra sims for one day. Between that and patrols, they'll get the hang of it quickly enough."

"They have to."

"True enough. Self-preservation is one of the finest motivators." Piaget paused, uttering a thoughtful sound. "Hmm...Perhaps we can arrange to have the Skulls jump them tomorrow during their first patrol. A war games setup, if you will."

Jim poked his fork hesitantly in something that looked vaguely like mashed potatoes. "That sounds like a good idea. If nothing else, it'll keep us on our toes."

"Are you going to visit Tina before you hit the sack? I know the Doctor didn't want you with her all the time for the next couple of days, but I doubt a few moments would hurt, and it would certainly help her morale."

Jim nodded, then made a face as he tasted the potato-like substance, struggling to swallow it. "...Oh god, that's disgusting. What is it?"

"Better not to ask."

Jim chuckled tiredly. "Yeah, I'm going to pop by sickbay briefly. If the Doctor'll let me in to see her, I'll spend a few moments with her." He sighed softly. "I wish none of this had happened."

Piaget smiled wryly. "Isn't this where I'm supposed to launch into some overly-dramatic speech about how everyone who lives through such times wishes that?"

Jim smiled. "Yeah, right on target."

"Will you forgive me if I don't? I've never been overly fond of forced motivational speeches."

"Well...I'll forgive you this time, at least. But I expect a motivational speech next time."

"Deal."

Jim poked his head into Tina's room and smiled. "Hey, you're still awake. Doc said I could stop in and say hi if you were still up."

Tina, sitting up in bed, looked up from her datapad. "Thank goodness...Someone other than nurses to talk to. I thought I was going to go crazy from boredom. You know, I've been over the technical schematics for the Raptor upgrades three times since this morning?" She waved her datapad at him. "By the time I get to fly mine again, I'll be so familiar with the new systems that I won't even be thinking about it."

Jim pulled up a chair beside her bed. "Sickbay getting to you?"

"You have no idea. God, you look like hell."

"Gee, thanks. That's what twenty straight hours of patrols and simulator training will do to you. You look a little under the weather yourself, you know."

"How's it going?" She tossed her datapad onto her bedside table, ignoring his return barb.

"Rough." Jim leaned back in his chair. "Until recently, Panzer Knights weren't designed for anything other than ground-based combat. Sort of gigantic infantry and special operations."

Tina nodded.

"Which is what we're trained for. The only airborne experience we had before last month were orbital insertion exercises. Glorified parachuting, basically. Not the greatest way to get aerial combat experience."

"Okay. So?"

"So we're not used to thinking in terms of three-dimensional combat conditions."

"Ah. Crashing into things and almost shooting one another, are you?"

Jim nodded.

Tina chuckled softly. "Congratulations. It'll get easier. Give it time."

Jim grimaced. "Not sure how much time we've actually got. There's an unidentifiable object following us that we're pretty sure is a probe, and god only knows how long before its owners show up to take a closer look at us."

"Someone once told me 'Never waste energy worrying about tomorrow that could be better spent preparing for it.' That said, you *do* look horrible. You should go and get some sleep."

Jim hesitated.

"Look, Jim...Doc says I'll be fine. He's going to let me out of sickbay in a day or two, and I'm sure I'll be back on duty shortly after that."

"Like anyone could keep you away," he replied with a chuckle.

"Damn straight."

"Tina...Are you okay? Really?"

Tina's smile faltered. "Honestly? No, I'm not. Doc explained to me in no uncertain terms what was happening. I'm going to be a long time healing from this." Her eyes darkened with anger. "And I want that bastard Suborotov's head mounted on the nose of my fighter."

"That's disgusting."

"There's historical precedent for it! Vlad the Impaler had his enemies mounted whole on pikes in front of his castle. Lots of feudal lords over the years have done similar things. It's traditional."

Jim shook his head. "Somehow, love, it suits you."

Tina's smile returned a little. "Thanks. Jim...Be careful out there, okay? I need you to help me heal. I think you're the only person I trust enough..."

Jim stood up and smiled slightly. "I'll be careful. You take it easy."

"Like I have a choice."

"So *that's* what the guards outside are for."

Chapter 19

Being in command means having to make the hard decisions on your own. You can ask your subordinates for all the advice in the world, but in the end, the decision rests in your hands and no one else's. You will be held responsible for the end results of your decisions, good or bad...you alone.

That's under the best of circumstances. Sometimes...and you'll hate these times...you have no choice at all. Contrary to popular belief, there are occasions when there's only one course of action to be taken. And no matter how hard you try to avoid it, the no-win scenario will find you.

Although you may not want to accept it or consider it, retreat is an option you can always fall back on thanks to Fold Drive technology. It's not cowardly, it is acceptable...Because it's better to fall back and rebuild your strength than to die. Retreat you can recover from...Death, you can't.

From the introduction to *Walking the Fine Line: The Ethics of War*, by Admiral Samuel Piaget, retired.

Jim grimaced and put a hand to the side of his head. "Crank it down a few more notches, please. God, that hurt..."

Sorry, Tina thought in reply. *Is this better?*

"Much, thank you. Was this really my idea?"

Yes, it was. And thank you...I don't think I'd've been comfortable doing this with anyone else.

"My pleasure. Frankly, I'll be glad when we've got you back on duty...Keeping track of two squadrons is trying at best."

Dr. Telsa frowned slightly and interrupted. "Tina, are your mental shields holding out the background noise well enough?"

She nodded. "Yeah. I've got it to a point where I can't 'hear' either you or Jim thinking unless I focus on it intentionally."

"Excellent. I'm going to turn off the dampening field around the room, then."

"Uh..." Jim said slowly, "...Are you sure she's ready for that?"

Tina smacked his shoulder. "I'm ready. Bring it on, Doc."

Telsa tapped a couple of commands into his datapad...And Tina grimaced, pressing her hands to her temples. "That's...a lot...of voices..."

Jim leaned forward and reached for her, but was held back by Dr. Telsa. "Give her a moment."

She nodded. "I'm...okay." *Really, Jim...I'm okay. Just give me a moment to adjust.*

He slowly relaxed back into his chair.

"Look," Tina said, "If I can't...if I can't do this, I'm no good to...to anybody. I've almost got it..."

Dr. Telsa was watching the little readouts on his datapad, which were displaying a reading on Tina's alpha waves. "Just a little more, Tina. You're almost there."

"I can tell...There. I'm alone in my head again. That feels so good..."

Jim chuckled softly.

Dr. Telsa nodded. "I'm sure it does. Now, how long can you hold that?"

Tina hesitated for a moment, turning her attention inwards. "I think I can hold it indefinitely. Now that I know what I'm doing, it's not much of an effort. It's like...I had to rebuild and reinforce walls around my mind."

Telsa nodded. "An excellent analogy. If you have any troubles, come see me immediately. Otherwise, you're free to return to duty. Against my better judgment, of course, but physiologically speaking I have no more reasons to keep you here. And psychologically, you're not much more disturbed than you were before this incident."

She gave him an evil look.

"I rest my case. However, I want you to stop in every day, after your shift, for a brief checkup. In the meantime, Commander, keep an eye on her, if you please."

"Sure thing, Doc. C'mon, Tina, let's get you out of here before you hurt the chief medical officer here. That'd be insubordination."

She snorted. "Big deal." But she stood up anyway, smoothing her flightsuit a little. "Seriously, though...Thanks, Doc." She offered him her hand.

Dr. Telsa shook it warmly. "My job, and my pleasure, Captain Jodescu. Believe it or not, you weren't as difficult a patient as many I've dealt with."

"Guess I'll have to try harder next time."

Jim feigned panic. "No next times!"

"Commander Cadwell and Captain Jodescu, reporting as ordered, sir."

Captain Piaget smiled tiredly. "Jim, Tina, please, sit down." He waved at the two seats facing the desk in his ready-room. "We've had some developments that you two need to be aware of."

Jim sat down, Tina leaned against her chair and shifted restlessly.

"Since approximately 2100 hours yesterday, that asteroid-probe has been moving closer to us."

Jim tensed. Tina sighed, and muttered, "Bound to happen, far too quiet..."

Piaget continued. "It's not moving so quickly that we couldn't shoot it down if it came to that, nor would it make much of an impact on our shields even if we couldn't, so we're not considering it a threat at this time."

"Couldn't it have an explosive device on it, as well?" Jim asked. "We never really got good readings on it."

"I'm confident that it doesn't. I think whoever it belongs to is about to contact us. So, I have to ask...Are your squadrons ready for action?"

Tina looked to Jim, who cleared his throat. "Well...The Knights are finally getting the hang of space combat. Once I had the techs install those artificial horizon indicators and fix them on the *Freedom's* orientation, it got a lot easier to keep them from colliding with one another. Tethys tells me that the Skulls are pretty much good to go too...The only problem they're having is that even with Tina back on duty, they're still one pilot short, but there's not much we can do about that."

Piaget nodded. "Under normal circumstances, we'd have two wings of StarVipers onboard too, and we could've promoted one of their pilots. As it stands, I'm afraid the Skulls will just have to fly short a pilot. Sorry, Tina."

She shook her head. "It's okay, Captain. We'll make do."

Piaget nodded again. "Excellent. The asteroid will reach us in another hour and a half. We're waiting on it rather than moving to it because our engineers need the extra time to finish tweaking the Fold Drive. They're hoping they can reduce the amount of time it takes to make the Jump, not to mention eliminating the unpleasant side effects."

"I'm hoping so too." Jim said.

"Amen." Tina added.

Jim ran a hand through his hair. "What makes you think we'll see action if they're going to contact us?"

"Just a hunch. I find it odd that they'd destroy our probes and bombard our homeworld, then contact us peacefully after delivering an ultimatum that made it very clear they didn't want us leaving our own solar system. Something odd is going on, but I don't know what, so I'd like to try and be ready for anything."

"Famous last words," Tina said softly.

Piaget nodded. "I know, I know. But we still have to try. We may be the key to humanity's survival. We can't fail...We just can't." He sighed and rubbed his eyes. "I'm sorry. I'm tired."

"None of us are particularly well rested right now, Captain," Jim said. "You should take some time off..."

"Once this is over. In the meantime, here's all the relevant data on the asteroid," Piaget handed each of them a small datadisk. "Brief your squadrons and be ready to launch in one hour."

Jim and Tina stood up, saluting, and chorused "Aye, sir."

"Dismissed."

Jim's Achilles Panzer Knight was already hanging motionless in space off the *Freedom's* starboard bow when Tina's distinctively painted black and yellow Raptor catapulted shakily off the port-side flight deck in fighter mode. It stabilized, verniers flaring slightly, then winged over and shot towards him, boosters flaring. A moment later, it pulled up along side him, shifting to soldier mode and braking as it came up alongside. Jim's communication board showed a signal on the private frequency he and Tina had used previously. He opened it up.

"Hey."

Jim smiled. "Hey yourself. Very professional military there."

There was a moment's hesitation. "*Blow me.*"

He frowned slightly – that was definitely a Tina Jodescu response, but it had been delivered with no real force behind it. He decided not to question it. "What's up?"

Tina dodged the question. "*Watching the asteroid?*"

Jim nodded, his Achilles mimicking the gesture. "Yeah. Twenty more minutes and it'll be in range of the deck guns. Whatever it's gonna do, it'll be soon"

Her soldier-mode Raptor nodded its sensor antennae-studded head. "*Yeah.*"

Silence. Jim let it last for almost five minutes. "Squads'll be up with us in another ten minutes."

"*Yeah.*"

Jim frowned again, deeper this time. "I don't mean to pry, but are you sure you're really up to this?"

Her Raptor's head swiveled to look at him, then back out towards the just-visible asteroid. She was silent again, and Jim was about to ask again when she replied. *"The old me would've told you to go to hell, you know. Might even have taken a few pot-shots at you with my rifle."* She gestured with the Raptor's giant rifle for emphasis.

"But now?"

The head of Tina's Raptor seemed to glance at him, its eyes flickering towards him for a moment. *"Jim..."*

"Here for ya, darlin'."

A comm window suddenly opened up to the right of his HUD, showing Tina's helmeted face. She looked a little frightened. *"Jim, I'm not really sure who I am anymore."*

Jim forced a smile onto his face, hoping the vid-link wouldn't show her how worried he was, and hoping that she wouldn't sense it. "Hey, that's an easy one. You're Tina Jodescu. Captain of Skull Squadron, badass extreme."

An odd expression flickered across her face – first blank, then thoughtful, then amused. When she spoke again, she sounded more like her old self, and it gave Jim chills. *"Thanks, lover. Guess I just needed to hear that from you. And thanks for being worried."* She winked, and her voice floated through his mind. *It's very sweet of you...*

Jim made a mental note to ask Doctor Telsa how far her conditioning had gone and how strongly she'd let it fixate on him. He wondered, simultaneously, if Telsa even knew, and if he'd just forced a behavior on her unintentionally.

Tina lifted a finger and wagged it at him on-screen, her Raptor mimicking the action. *"Hey, stop that! You didn't do anything bad just now...All you did was help me sort myself out a little."*

He sighed. "I'm uncomfortable having that kind of control over you."

Over the comlink, Tina replied "I dunno, I think it's kinda kinky, myself." Telepathically though, her voice was softer and serious. *I know you are, Jim. That's why I'm willing to trust you with it.*

He sighed again. "Thanks, I think."

"You're welcome."

Her vid-window closed and their respective mecha slid into the same reflective, watchful poses that they were in, floating side-by-side in space. Jim felt an odd sensation in his mind as the sense of her thoughts suddenly floated into his perceptions...drifting random thoughts, emotions, just there at the edge of his awareness.

"Um...Tina?"

Sorry...I didn't think you'd mind. I just...being close to you like that makes me feel a little better. He felt her awareness begin to pull away from his.

Hey, he thought. I didn't say you should stop. I just wanted to know what you were doing.

The flood of relief from her was almost tangible. *Thanks, Jim.* He felt her thoughts and feelings settle close to his again, and let his attention drift away from the sensation. After a moment, it felt quite natural.

Actually, he thought slowly, I kind of like it myself. It is a comforting sensation. Like...I'm not alone in here.

He heard her giggle over the comlink and her Raptor shifted a little to look at him. *You're absolutely adorable, country boy. You know that?*

Jim blushed and cleared his throat. *I try.*

There was a warning beep, and the *Freedom's* frequency lit up. *"Captain Jodescu, Commander Cadwell, Skulls and Knights launching in one minute. Asteroid's ETA is now seven minutes and counting. Confirm."*

The asteroid was suddenly bracketed in Jim's HUD and a little window appeared with a countdown in it. He switched to the ship's frequency. *"Knight Leader confirms, asteroid's ETA approximately seven minutes."*

Tina's Raptor shifted to face the asteroid again. *"Skull Leader confirms. Six minutes, forty-five seconds and counting."*

The first Panzer Knights and Raptors came out onto the starboard and port flight decks respectively and prepared to launch. Jim listened to the bridge's frequency while waiting for the asteroid.

"Flight Control to Knights two and three, Skulls two and three, prepare for..."

"Hold it! The asteroid's broadcasting a signal."

Piaget's voice, next. *"Flight Control, delay launch. Comms and Sensors, report."*

"Sensors report asteroid is now holding position."

Jim glanced at the asteroid's countdown timer. Lo and behold, it had stopped in its tracks at six minutes exactly.

"Communications reporting...Hold on, the signal's in Morse Code. It's...It appears to be a set of coordinates, along with a text invitation to meet them for an opening of diplomatic relations."

There was a long moment of profound silence.

Could be a trap. Tina's voice said in Jim's mind, and he smiled in spite of himself.

"Skull Leader, Knight Leader, this is the Captain. Return to the ship immediately and get your squads locked down for the space fold."

"Aye, sir!" Tina's Raptor swung away, shifting back to fighter mode as she headed for the port-side flight deck.

Jim was close behind her, heading for the starboard deck. "On our way, Captain."

"All hands, this is Captain Piaget. Prepare the ship for a space fold. Engineering engines to maximum power. Astrogation, time to fold?"

"Four minutes, twenty seconds Captain. Fold Drive is charging smoothly this time."

Jim skated down the flight deck behind Crystal's and Colthus' Atlases, which had been about to launch, and braked outside the hangar as they went in to dock.

"Excellent," Piaget said. "Skull leader, status?"

"Locking down now, Captain." Tina replied. "Two minutes, and we'll be good to go."

"Superb. Knight leader, status?"

Jim stepped his Achilles into its maintenance bay and felt the docking clamps engage. Looked around and saw the rest of the Knights getting squared away. *"Almost done, Captain. Less than a minute."* He tightened his harness and locked his control frame in place.

"Good. Astrogation, time to fold?"

"One minute, fifty-eight seconds and counting. Small power spike in the Fold Drive, but engineering says it's nothing to worry about."

"Communications here...The asteroid is broadcasting again. It's acknowledging the activation of our Fold Drive and report that it will inform its masters of our acceptance of their proposal."

Piaget sounded excited. *"Fantastic. All hands, this is the Captain. I don't know if the Fold Drive will take us there instantaneously or not, but I do know that we're on our way to forge a new age for mankind. No matter what happens, hold your heads high and be proud...We will succeed."*

Jim grinned. They hadn't made this man a starship captain for nothing.

"Astrogation?"

"Space fold in fifteen seconds, Captain. All sections reporting readiness. Ten seconds. Engineering reports Fold Drive fully charged. Five...four...three...two...one..."

Jim again experienced that strange feeling that the universe was flickering in front of him...Then darkness swallowed him, but he felt no panic. Because even as everything seemed to wink out, he could feel Tina's excitement, her bone-deep exhaustion, her fear, and her lingering pain through the telepathic bond she had created between them. He wasn't alone, and knew he never would be again.

And, thankfully, he didn't feel any vertigo this time, either.