

TRAITOR

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Chapter 1

Ochrim at Work

Ochrim sat with his ridged forehead planted on his workstation, which had started to beep at him, confused by the unusual input. *If the thing had a smarter AI...* But no. He would never argue for strengthening AI again. Strong AIs couldn't be controlled. Only a superintelligence could design a safe, predictable superintelligence, and that was a textbook example of what the humans would call a chicken-and-egg conundrum.

The workstation's touch controls felt warm against his scales. Pleasant. He exhaled, and the breath's raggedness surprised him. His mind did not feel fully reassembled, following the shocking future that had been revealed to him by none other than Baxa himself. But his work required him to piece his mind back together, and quickly. His work...his cursed work. It needed to be done.

The galaxy's future, such as it was, depended on it.

A soft click, followed by the hiss of the lab's door opening. "Ochrim."

He looked up. *Just another one of Baxa's goons.* The thug's name was Kaklin, though Ochrim had no desire to retain the information. His brain did that—sponged up everything. Especially things he wanted no part of.

Kaklin's muscled frame filled the doorway almost snugly. He was what Baxa and his followers called "pure-bred."

"Speak," Ochrim said.

"You must work. As Scion Baxa has instructed."

Ochrim studied Kaklin through narrowed eyes. The goon was the picture of serenity. That was the most unsettling thing about Baxa's lot: they appeared eternally certain of their inevitable victory. *And they're right.*

"Supposing I refuse to work."

"Scion Baxa already knows that you *will* work."

"Then why did he send you to check on me?"

"The Scion knows you will work, provided you're handled a certain way. My coming here to check on you...it's a necessary application of pressure. Part of the prodding that will spur you to your work."

Ochrim stood. "Do you intend to torture me, then?"

Laughter from Kaklin. Loud, and longer than seemed necessary. As he laughed, the thug's eyes never left Ochrim, and eventually the scientist looked away, at the floor. His forehead ridge burned with shame.

"Your show of bravery is charming, Ochrim. It truly is. If torturing you were necessary, Scion Baxa would order it, and I would carry it out. But the Scion knows, and you know, that it will not be necessary. That analytical brain of yours has already seen the path forward, and it dooms you to walk it. Doesn't it? Your logic compels you, doesn't it, scholar?"

Slowly, Ochrim turned until he faced his workstation. He did not want to speak his next words, but he forced his lips to form them. "I will work."

"Yes. You will." Kaklin turned and left the lab's doorway. The door slid closed, followed by the click of its lock.

Chapter 2

Battle for Coreopsis

Captain Warren Husher caught himself staring at the tactical display with his mouth hanging slightly open. The Coreopsis System was slipping from their grasp.

“It’s no good, Captain,” Commander Vaghn said from the XO’s chair, her wheat-colored hair plastered to her forehead. It had been a long battle. “The Ixa’s upgraded point defense turrets are too much for our Falcons in these numbers.”

Husher blinked hard and rubbed his stubbled cheeks. *Get yourself together, Warren. Think of your wife and son.* “Then I see no solution other than to take out those God-damned turrets. Does that make tactical sense to you, Commander?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Then see that it’s done. Tell Lieutenant Keyes that we’ll provide him with cover while he coordinates alpha strikes. Tell him I want the entire Air Group involved.”

“Aye, Captain.”

Without warning, the UHS *Hornet* shook violently, nearly tossing Husher from the Captain’s chair. Several of his CIC officers did lose their seats.

Battle always made him a little manic, and for whatever reason, the tumult filled him with euphoria. He surged to his feet. “Look alive, everyone. If you’re not going to strap yourselves in for battle then you’d better be ready to ride the bronco.” He turned to his Tactical officer. “Ackerman, can you explain what that was? And you can save your excuses for later about why you failed to warn us about it.”

“Sir, they tricked us. The enemy ship’s posture strongly suggested it meant to target Captain Scavo’s—”

“It tricked *you*, Chief, not us. And I told you to save your excuses. What was it, God damn you?”

Ackerman swallowed. “A broadside from an Ixan destroyer. Their primary laser. It took out one of our main engines and it triggered a chain reaction that destroyed most of our port-side capacitors.”

Husher winced. “Are you telling me the destroyer had its primary charged this entire time and no Fleet ship noticed? No one targeted it?”

“Yes, sir,” Ackerman said, his voice barely audible.

“Wow.” Husher shook his head sharply, to clear away the overwhelming stupid he’d just been forced to endure. “Why are competent Tactical officers so hard to come by? One more flub like that and you can kiss that chair goodbye, Ackerman.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Captain?” his sensor operator said.

“What?”

“The *Anthony* has fallen to a Gok missile cruiser backed up by three Ixan frigates. Also, Lieutenant Keyes just lost half a squadron of Falcons in the space of a minute.”

Deep breath. Take a deep breath, Warren. He did. He inhaled until his lungs felt ready to burst. *Think.*

“Coms, patch me through to Admiral Jacobs.”

“Aye, sir.” A few seconds of brittle silence ticked by. “She’s accepted our transmission request.”

“Put her on the screen.”

Jacobs was young for her post, but this war had aged her. Still, Husher detected no signs of immediate stress. He might have caught her in the middle of enjoying a glass of wine by the fire, rather than fighting a losing battle against an overwhelming enemy force.

“Captain Husher. What can I do for you?”

“I think we should retreat, Admiral.” *No sense beating around the bush.*

“I’m afraid I disagree. With its three wormholes, the Coreopsis System is of too much strategic importance to abandon.”

“You’re right, ma’am—this system is vital. But having ships to continue fighting is more vital. If we stay, they’ll wipe out everything we have here. I advocate choosing the lesser of two disasters.”

The admiral leaned back in her command chair. “Reinforcements are on the way. The *Crusader*, the *Stevenson*, the *Undaunted*, the *Providence*—I’ve received word that they’ve all been dispatched to join our fight.”

“I know. I got that message, too. But I also know they won’t get here in time.”

Jacobs’s mouth formed a thin line, and she didn’t answer.

“Look at your tactical display, Admiral. It shows the same thing mine does. This battle is over.”

Jacobs studied him coldly for a while longer. “The fleet will sustain heavy losses, retreating,” she said at last.

“Not necessarily. We’ve already taken out one of the three Ixan support ships. If you can assign someone to pressure one of the remaining pair, I’ll handle the other. That should afford you and the rest of the fleet the opportunity to escape into human space.”

“Very well, Captain Husher. I will take care of the other support ship.”

He gave the admiral a respectful nod. She’d never been one to sit back and let her subordinates take on all the risk. “Husher out.” Signaling to his Coms officer to terminate the transmission, he turned to the rest of his CIC crew. “Nav, whip up a course for the support ship nearest us and send it to Helm. I want our main engines brought up to one hundred percent once you have the course, Peters. Tactical, tell Lieutenant Keyes I want his Falcons to join us in pressuring the target. It should be very clear to the enemy that we’re committing everything we have to that ship’s destruction.”

His XO spoke up. “The other UHF ships have already begun to make for the wormhole, Captain.”

“Very good. Thank you, Commander Vaghn.” He felt the *Hornet* accelerating toward their new target. His Nav and Helm officers were old friends, and they worked well together. It took a

moment for the computerized magnets distributed throughout Husher's uniform to adjust to the ship's velocity, stabilizing his experience of simulated one G. "Are the enemy fleets responding to our new trajectory?"

Vaghn leaned closer to her console, squinting at it. He'd once asked her whether she needed vision correction surgery, but she claimed she only squinted like that because it helped her concentrate. Thankfully, the suit's sensors knew to interrupt the flux circuit to any magnets that came too close to electronics. "The Ixa are closing ranks," she said. "And it looks like the Gok are moving to back them up. The pressure on the other Fleet ships has lessened considerably."

"Excellent." *Of course, now we'll become the main target.*

As if on cue, Chief Warrant Officer Ackerman said, "Incoming missiles, sir. A lot of them."

"Acknowledged. Ready our point defense turrets."

"Some of the missiles will still get through. Should I tell Lieutenant Keyes to—"

"Lieutenant Keyes will follow his existing orders."

"But—"

"Our job is to buy the other Fleet ships time to escape, Chief." *That may not entail our survival.*

"Probable missile impacts in seven seconds," his sensor operator said.

"Commander Vaghn?" Husher said, raising his eyebrows at his XO as he strapped himself into his chair.

She knew what he wanted. Squinting at her console again, she tapped it once, which broadcasted her voice all over the *Hornet*: "All crew brace for impact."

Impact followed swiftly, followed by another, and one more. The upheaval was worse than before, but his CIC crew had learned their lessons, and this time no one vacated their seats.

"Damage report," Husher grunted.

"We lost several point defense turrets and one of our railguns, plus she's open to space in three places, Captain: Sections Five through Eleven on the Starboard side between Decks Two and Four, Sections—"

"Mobilize damage control teams and seal off the affected areas. Casualties?"

The sensor operator swiped at his console, shuffling files around. Then he gaped at it. "Uh... t-twenty-three crew unaccounted for."

"Good and gentle lord," Husher muttered.

"Admiral Jacobs is contacting us."

"Put her on."

Jacobs's face appeared on the CIC's main viewscreen, and now she did look stressed. "The rest of the fleet will get out safely, Captain. Now it's our turn."

"Yes, ma'am. I'll have my Falcons cover our escape attempt."

"Let's drop the word 'attempt.' I intend to live to give the Ixa hell for this."

"Sounds good to me, ma'am."

"Jacobs out."

He instructed Helm to bring the ship around and engage her engines in the opposite direction.

Despite the admiral's brave words, Husher's mood was bleak as the *Hornet* fled the Coreopsis System and he watched his Falcons fall one by one to the Ixa. Losing this system would demoralize the UHF like it hadn't been demoralized since ascending to the stars.

Hope for winning this war had just reached a new low.

Chapter 3

Low on Hope

Admiral Jacobs came down personally to receive them in the *Providence's* Flight Deck A, flanked by a small entourage of lower-ranking officers.

Warren Husher came to attention, snapping off a salute as sharply as he knew how. Beside him, his own smaller group of officers did the same.

"Admiral," he said. "You honor me."

"And you honor me, Captain. If I have anything to say about it, your bravery in the Coreopsis System will see you more decorated than you already are."

Husher bowed his head in thanks. If they'd been different people with different jobs, he would have heaped equal praise on her, and deservedly so—she'd performed just as bravely. But he wouldn't presume to compliment someone of higher rank. It just wasn't how things worked. *The loneliness of command, etc.*

"Unfortunately," the admiral went on, "there won't be time for medal-getting yet. You have more work to do."

"I assume that's why we're meeting here."

A nod from Jacobs. "Come."

As Husher and his officers followed her deeper inside the *Providence*, he noticed Lieutenant Keyes gazing around the ship with a level of scrutiny that was missing from his fellows.

Recently, the lieutenant had become the source of some worry. Two weeks before, he'd reported hearing voices. When his crewmates had started avoiding him as a result, he clammed up almost completely, and now whenever Husher needed Keyes's input, he had to drag the words out of him.

Is it the stress of war, or something else? Husher couldn't afford to have his CAG going crazy on him. Not now.

"The *Providence* is one of the Fleet's last supercarriers," he said, drawing up beside Keyes as they walked.

The lieutenant nodded, stoic, offering nothing else.

Husher cleared his throat. "There are plans to restore this type of ship to its former glory. And then some. The Ixa recognize their power—they target them whenever they see them. It's why we have so few left. So we'll have to start using them more intelligently, I figure."

"Yes, sir."

Two more admirals awaited them in the *Providence's* main conference room. Neither rose, but Admiral Dawson welcomed them. "Captain Husher," he said. "Officers of the UHS *Hornet*. It is good to see you alive and well after that bloody affair in Coreopsis."

You've gained weight. Husher saluted. "Thank you, sir."

"Sadly, we have no time to waste. Please, sit."

Husher did, and his officers joined him. Jacobs sat, too, though her own entourage had not joined the meeting.

“In that case, sir, I would request we get straight to the purpose of this meeting.” That drew a sharp look from Admiral Zacharias. Husher was not without self-awareness—he knew his frankness-bordering-on-brusqueness did not play well with much of Command. He also didn’t care.

“Our purpose is not a happy one,” Dawson said. “After the defeat in the Coreopsis System, our strategic analysts no longer think it’s possible for us to win the war.”

Husher had folded his hands in his lap, and now they tightened together. “You’ve decided to surrender.”

“We’ve been in communication with the rest of the admiralty, and we’ve decided to try to negotiate with the Ixa for a ceasefire. During it, we can repair and rebuild, readying ourselves for the next bout.”

“The Ixa will never agree to it. Why let us recover from the damage they’ve already inflicted? They’re smarter than that.”

“Oh, they’ll agree to it,” Admiral Zacharias cut in. “Because in return, we’re going to offer them back their Rik colony, unharmed. But if they refuse our ceasefire…”

“We nuke the colony from orbit,” Husher said. “I see.”

“Our models tell us this is the safest path forward—the one most likely to result in humanity’s survival,” Dawson said. “We’re assigning you to travel to Ixan space to negotiate the ceasefire, Captain.”

“Why me?”

“To be frank, you’re among the most experienced captains in the Fleet, and you’ve demonstrated considerable savvy.”

Oh God. The excessive praise made Husher want to fidget. *They don’t expect me to return alive, do they?*

“Another factor in choosing you concerns the heavy losses you just sustained,” Dawson went on. “With most of your Falcons gone, and much of your weaponry taken out, the *Hornet* won’t be battle-ready anytime soon. So a diplomatic mission seems to be the most efficient use for your ship.” At the mention of lost Falcons, Husher noticed Lieutenant Keyes twitch.

Tell me the real reason, why don’t you, Dawson? Husher’s love for his wife and son was well known in the Fleet. The admirals knew he would do anything to ensure their safety—including go along with what could easily turn out to be a suicide mission.

Little did they know, Husher didn’t consider a ceasefire the best way to ensure his family survived this war.

He would accept the mission, but he also wouldn’t stop looking for a better option.

Chapter 4

Condescended To

Keyes's alarm went off, but he was already awake. After days of the voice's absence, it had woken him again, shortly before oh two hundred hours. That had killed any hope of falling back to sleep. He'd been staring at his cabin's ceiling ever since.

Slowly, he dragged himself out of bed and began donning his uniform. He'd ironed it the night before, and polished his boots till they gleamed. As he dressed, his face looked grim in the nearby mirror.

Shit. I was supposed to spend time in the centrifuge last night. The thought struck him out of nowhere. No doubt the technicians had recorded his absence, which would be relayed to Captain Husher. And Keyes would catch flak for it. The magnets installed throughout UHF uniforms didn't completely negate the effects of perpetual freefall—to do that, they would also need to be inside the body's cells, which presented problems. The captain didn't react well to his crew neglecting to regularly build up their G-tolerance inside the ship's centrifuge.

Making his way to the *Hornet's* CIC, he found the corridors blessedly empty. Keyes had never been one to engage in easy camaraderie with his crewmates, but in the last couple of weeks, relations had grown even less warm. In short, they thought he was crazy. *And I'm beginning to think they may be right.*

Just inside the CIC, Ackerman stormed past, glaring at him. Keyes found that refreshing, and he stared back. He'd always had a high tolerance for situations others would have found awkward.

Anyway, anger was preferable to the way most everyone else avoided his gaze. He'd only mentioned hearing the voice once, and had shut up about it shortly after, but rumors spread quickly aboard the carrier. The crew remembered.

Ackerman's anger originated with Captain Husher's decision to make Keyes the primary Tactical officer, bumping the Chief Warrant Officer down to secondary.

Most of the pilots under Keyes's command had been lost in the Coreopsis system—many of them old friends, something he knew he hadn't fully processed yet. Keyes was a CAG whose Air Group had been taken from him, and Husher trusted him a lot more than he trusted Ackerman.

"Good timing, Lieutenant," Husher said as Keyes took his place at the Tactical station. "We're just reaching the wormhole. Going into the next system, it'll be good to have a Tactical officer who knows his head from his ass."

Keyes suppressed a wince, wondering whether Ackerman had heard that on his way out. Captain Husher wasn't known for mincing words.

In Keyes's peripheral vision, he noticed Commander Vaghn twitch in the XO's chair. Going through wormholes tended to make the crew jumpy, and the XO's emotions could often be read from her larger-than-life body language. A small percentage of the time, wormholes destroyed the ships that passed through them. A small percentage, but significant enough to make each

transition at least a little tense. *The price of interstellar travel.*

The captain's gaze swept across his CIC crew. "With Coreopsis lost, we'll have to go the long way around to get to Ixan space. I want to avoid contact with the enemy for as long as possible, to minimize our chances of getting blown apart before ever broaching the subject of this cursed ceasefire." Husher sniffed, his gaze settling on Keyes. "So we proceed with caution."

"We've arrived at the wormhole, Captain," the sensor operator said.

The Coms officer nodded. "The Tumbran in charge of this side has sent us a transmission request."

"Accept," Husher said.

The Tumbran appeared on the main viewscreen. Its gray chin-sack hung shorter than most of its species, but its bulging eyes made up for it. "Captain Husher," it said in a tone that sounded perplexed and somewhat affronted. "I have not yet received your papers."

"That's because I haven't sent them yet. You'll have them soon enough."

"If you'd transmitted them before you arrived, I might have had them processed by now."

"I doubt it. Anyway, passage through the wormhole isn't the only thing I'm here for."

When the alien blinked, its eyelids folded over its ivory orbs, momentarily concealing them from view. "Then perhaps you should repair to your office, Captain, so that we can speak over a private, encrypted channel."

"No. I want you to come to my ship and meet with me. I don't like the condescending way you Tumbra speak to me during transmissions. I've found you a lot more mannerly in person."

Slowly, the Tumbran raised spindly digits to its horizontally oblong head, touching it and then lowering them at the same speed. "Have I condescended to you, Captain?"

"Of course not. Just get over here, will you?"

"I will have my ship prepare me a shuttle."

Husher rose from the Captain's chair. "Keyes, you're with me."

Chapter 5

Piper

They waited in the Captain's office, drinking from tumblers of whiskey. Husher had skipped breakfast today, and the drink was already putting him in better spirits.

"Do you think the Tumbran will want any?" he asked, raising his glass a little.

"I don't know whether their bodies can metabolize it," Keyes answered, without a trace of mirth.

Husher set his glass on the desk with a thud. "Come on, Keyes. I know you're not entirely humorless."

The lieutenant returned his gaze impassively and said nothing.

Leaning back in his chair, Husher exhaled in a prolonged whoosh of air. "I don't like this ceasefire idea the admiralty has foisted on us. Foisted on all of humanity, if we're being honest. Playing dice with the species' future."

"With all due respect, Captain, they had to do something."

"Indeed. And I intend to follow through with it." *For now.* "Doesn't mean I have to like it. Anyway. Now that you're my primary Tactical officer, I decided you should be let in on the arrangement we have with the Tumbra."

That drew Keyes's interest. "Arrangement?"

"Yes." Husher raised his eyebrows, refusing to say more until Keyes inquired further. *I'll draw the man out, God damn it.*

"Do the Ixa have a similar arrangement?"

"Negative."

The lieutenant's eyebrows inched together, bunching the dark skin between them. "But the Tumbra are supposed to be neutral. They were given the responsibility of administrating the transport system because they're known to never favor or discriminate against any species."

Husher shrugged. "And yet..."

"We have an arrangement."

"Correct."

"What is it?"

"The Tumbra constantly transmit data to each other, across systems and through wormholes, via encrypted radio signals."

"That's well known."

"Included in that data are the whereabouts of every Ixan and Gok warship—at least, as of a few hours ago."

"Also common knowledge. The Tumbra know where every ship in the galaxy is."

"They share the locations of Gok and Ixan warships with us."

Keyes blinked, then nodded. "Okay. That's new."

"The Tumbra admire how humanity has conducted itself since stepping onto the galactic stage. They like our persistence, and they like our sense of honor. True, they agree with the

Wingers that we waited too long to involve ourselves in this war, but obviously the Tumbra can appreciate caution, too. You only have to look at a Tumbran to know it likes being cautious.”

“And the Ixa...”

“Well, the Ixa’s radically xenophobic ideology doesn’t poll very well among anyone who isn’t Ixan, does it? The Tumbra see themselves as stewards of the galactic balance of power, and they consider this intelligence sharing as the best way to maintain that balance.” Husher held up his index finger. “This is a closely guarded secret, known only to a handful of UHF officers. That was the one condition the Tumbra imposed—that we tell no one, not even the Wingers. As you say, the Tumbra are supposed to be neutral, and the revelation that they’re picking favorites would definitely cause a power imbalance.”

“Thank you for bringing me in on it.”

“Don’t thank me. This is a burden I’ve dumped on you. Let’s not pretend it’s anything else.”

“I’ll shoulder it.”

“I know that you will.”

A sharp knock sounded from the hatch. “Come in,” Husher barked.

The hatch opened to reveal the Tumbran flanked by a pair of marines.

“Close the door and dismissed,” Husher told his soldiers.

The Tumbran stood less than half the height of an average human. Currently, it had the air of a bothered cat. Bothered, perhaps, that it had recently been declawed.

“This other human knows of our agreement?” it said, cocking its head sideways at Keyes as it eyed Husher.

“He does now.”

The alien made a spitting sound, though luckily for it, no saliva was produced. “One would think, given that humans have come to rely so heavily on us, that you would tread a little more carefully in your dealings with us, Captain.”

“You know you love me.”

“Am I to be provided with a seat?”

“Oh. Shit. I forgot to send for one.”

Keyes rose to his feet and gestured at the chair he’d vacated. “Please.”

The Tumbran climbed up, studying the lieutenant warily as it did.

“You know what I want, I’m sure,” Husher said.

“I’d hoped that you might have some special justification for demanding my physical presence on your ship. I hope you don’t mind my saying that the *Hornet*’s structural integrity seems in question.”

“We were involved in a bit of a scrape. As for inviting you over, the truth is, I miss you when you’re not around!”

“You don’t even know my name.”

“You’ve never offered it. I assumed you enjoy having me at a disadvantage.”

“At the last update, the nearest Ixan strike force was seven systems away. There have, however, been reports of Gok raiding parties within two systems of our location. I advise

caution as you proceed, Captain.”

Husher raised his eyebrows at Keyes. “See? Told you.”

Even through Keyes’s characteristic impassiveness, Husher could see that he was mortified.

He turned back to the Tumbran. “Well, that wasn’t hard, was it?”

“Will that truly be all?”

“That’s it.”

The Tumbran dumped itself off of the seat and waddled toward the hatch. Before it got there, Keyes crossed the cabin in a couple of strides and opened the hatch for the alien. It looked at the lieutenant for a moment, and then made to leave.

Before it could, Keyes spoke. “What is your name?”

“Piper. What is yours?”

“Leonard Keyes.”

The alien left with no further comment.

When Keyes closed the hatch behind it, Husher stood to signal the meeting’s end, and the lieutenant kept his hand on the hatch’s handle.

“I want you to see the ship’s doctor, Keyes. You’re clearly exhausted, and probably on the verge of a breakdown, if we’re being honest. I want you to have a psychiatric evaluation.”

Keyes opened his mouth, though it took him a couple of seconds to speak. “I don’t need—”

“I want you to have a psychiatric evaluation. Would you like me to rephrase it as an order?”

It took another few moments for Keyes to realize Husher didn’t intend to give him an out.

“I’ll see the ship’s doctor.”

“Yes. You will.”

Chapter 6

Distress Signal

Keyes avoided the ship's doctor for as long as he could justify it, but in the end, an order was an order, and as a Fleet member he was bound to obey.

"Have you been hearing voices?" Doctor Padmore asked, peering at Keyes over his spectacles. With the cheap availability of vision correction surgery, glasses were rare these days, but Padmore was a fairly rare breed himself.

"Yes, actually. That's the entire reason I'm here."

"Mm-hmm." Padmore checked something off on his chart. "And how's your appetite?"

"Fine. I'm not here about my appetite. I'm here about the voice."

"I see." Another checkmark.

Keyes's com squawked from where he'd placed it on the table. "Keyes, it's Captain Husher. Where are you?"

"Uh...I'm undergoing the psychiatric evaluation."

"Oh. Right. Well, it'll have to wait. We just received a distress signal from a Sol Industries construction platform in this system. They're under attack by the Gok."

"You...need me in the CIC?"

"Negative. The platform was boarded—no warships in sight. I want you to go in there with Chief Ralston and provide backup to Sol's security forces. If we don't help them out soon, they'll be overwhelmed."

Keyes closed his eyes, struggling to make sense of his captain's words. "But...aren't I in Tactical, now?"

"Well, yes. But you're also the CAG. And you used to serve with the marines, right?"

"Yes..."

"Then I see no reason not to try you in a couple different places. See where you fit best."

"Yes, sir."

"Get going. Meet Ralston in the weapons locker."

Before long, Keyes was sitting aboard the combat shuttle, in a crash seat across from Chief Ralston, who was looking at Keyes like he'd just watched him turn into an Ixan.

"The old man sure has a funny way of going about things, doesn't he?" Ralston said in a thick Scottish accent. A few of the marines glanced at their commander and then looked away just as quickly. "A few days ago, you were CAG, then you were Tactical, and now you're aboard my shuttle, bumping down my second-in-command."

"Our captain has given an order and we are following it," Keyes said. "I can't see how the matter warrants any further discussion."

The marine commander held his gaze for a long time, but Keyes couldn't remember the last time he'd been the first to break eye contact with someone he was staring down. Ralston knew Keyes was right, and Keyes knew he was right, and so at last the chief's focus flitted elsewhere.

In truth, he agreed with Ralston, to an extent. Keyes didn't like it when the captain played

fast and loose with protocol either, or when he defied Command. But that didn't change the fact that Warren Husher was his captain, and that Keyes had immense respect for the man.

“What do you think the Gok will do to those platform workers?” one of the marines, Carson, asked Keyes. “If we don't get there in time, I mean.”

Keyes shook his head. “Nothing good. There are rumors of the Gok wiping out entire stations for no strategic reason at all. They seem to revel in bloodshed for bloodshed's sake.”

At that moment, the shuttle pilot's voice came out of the troop compartment's sole intercom. “I just received a transmission from the construction platform, Chief. The security forces say they're about to fall.”

Chapter 7

Civilized Warfare

Their shuttle entered the landing bay unopposed, which Keyes didn't like at all. If the Gok weren't busy fending off the *Hornet* marines, then what were they busy doing? *Maybe we have more time than we thought.*

The marine squads spread out through the cavernous landing bay, checking behind shuttles and mining ships for signs of the enemy. Sol Industries' construction platform orbited a resource-rich planet, and they often dispatched mining expeditions to a nearby asteroid belt as well. This station saw a lot of traffic.

Keyes commanded one squad and Chief Ralston led another. Ralston's usual second-in-command, Sergeant Nagura, took her squad up several flights of stairs leading to an airlock that let out onto the platform's surface, where ships and other space-based structures were constructed.

Captain Husher had transmitted the platform's schematics to every marine's heads-up display, and after a few minutes of studying it, Keyes had come up with the idea of sending one squad up top. That way, Nagura and her squad could use one of several entrances to join the battle whenever and wherever they were needed.

With the landing bay secured, Keyes and Ralston led their marines deeper into the station, through a much-narrower corridor.

"I don't like this silence," Carson said.

"And I don't like your noise," Ralston hissed. "Shut up, you reprobate. Act like a God-damned solider."

Keyes chuckled, glad his transponder wasn't transmitting. For some reason, hearing someone getting chewed out in a thick Scottish accent struck him as hilarious.

Mission objectives included saving as many civilians as possible, and so there wasn't time to carefully check around corners or through doorways. Instead, they rushed past each in as orderly a fashion as possible, always ready to engage an enemy that could be lying in wait at any turn.

It didn't take long. By Keyes's count, it was the fourth turn that brought them face-to-face with the Gok, who were big enough to hold heavy machine guns that humans would need tripods to support.

The aliens' tactics were sound—they'd spread out across a spacious cargo hold, and the hallway the marines found themselves pinned down in was a short one, leaving them with little time to react. Gunfire's thunder began, and two marines went down, one of them Carson.

Training took over. Keyes and Ralston were out front, and they both dropped to one knee in unison, offering the marines behind a clear firing solution over their heads.

To pick their targets, no communication was needed. Keyes was on the right, and he shot at the Gok farthest to the right, since the corridor blocked the marine behind him from targeting it. That marine chose the next target to the left.

The assault rifle vibrating in his hands, Keyes sent a steady stream of lead at his enemy.

Within seconds, four Gok went down, and the marines chose new targets.

“Move,” Ralston said a moment later, after two more Gok were neutralized.

The marines rushed into the cargo bay, and just like that the Gok lost their superior firing arc.

Keyes cradled his weapon against his chest and dropped his shoulder, executing a forward roll that brought him behind a metal crate. Popping over it, he sent a spray of bullets across a Gok’s torso and ducked to avoid the answering salvo.

When the fighting ended, he counted fifteen Gok down. The marines had lost one woman and two men, with three more injured. Two of the dead belonged to Keyes’s squad. That stung, even with adrenaline coursing through his veins, and he knew it would cost him sleep.

But the enemy had lost many more. Luckily for the marines, Gok raiding parties wore inferior armor compared to their military counterparts. Usually, that worked out for them. Usually, they didn’t have to confront trained UHF marines.

“Let’s keep moving,” Keyes said.

Ralston nodded. “Agreed.”

“Where do you think they’re keeping the civilians?” Keyes asked as they crossed the chamber to a corridor on the opposite end.

“If they’re keeping them anywhere, the station’s cafeteria would make the most sense.”

“That’s where we’ll find the largest concentration of Gok, then.”

He turned out to be right. The enemy made their last stand in the final intersection before the cafeteria. The corridor leading to it stretched longer than the one before the cargo bay, affording the marines more room to maneuver.

That came in handy right away, when one of the Gok lobbed something at the advancing marines.

“Grenade,” Ralston barked. “Fall back!”

As the others retreated, Keyes ran forward instead, kicking the explosive with all his might and sending it careening back at the Gok. Then he turned and pounded back toward his comrades. The grenade erupted behind him, and he hit the deck.

Heat washed over him, searing his calves, even through his suit. The corridor shook, and guttural cries rose up behind him, followed by a wave of smoke-induced coughing. Rising to his feet, Keyes felt battered but more or less okay.

“We surrender,” one of the aliens called in a gravelly voice.

“Prove it,” Ralston shouted back, having retracted his helmet’s faceplate. “Drop your weapons now, or we start shooting.”

A great clatter followed of shotguns and heavy machine guns hitting the floor. One of the Gok stepped forward through the smoke, its massive forest-green arms raised. The alien towered over the human marines, at least half again as tall.

“It’s not over,” it said, enunciating its words carefully. It seemed to know that humans often had trouble understanding Gok speech.

“Oh?” Ralston said. “Why’s that?”

“We have armed soldiers in the cafeteria, watching over this station’s workers. They are our

prisoners.”

Keyes lowered his faceplate, glaring at the beast. “Have you harmed them?”

“No. Only the guards.”

“Why did you attack this station?”

Forehead ridge drawing downward, the Gok’s tiny black eyes fixed on Keyes. “The planet below once belonged to the Gok. We do not appreciate you stripping it of its resources.”

“We don’t appreciate you taking our people prisoner.”

“We will release them to you. Unharmed.”

“In exchange for what?”

“Our freedom.”

Keyes exchanged glances with Ralston, and both men raised their faceplates for private, two-way radio communication. “Now’s the time to call in Sergeant Nagura,” the Scot said. “She can take the cafeteria while we stall for time.”

“No. We have a clear path to recovering the civilians unharmed. Your plan is likely to get at least some of them killed.”

“And your plan involves trusting Gok.” Ralston shook his head. “You’re the one with the captain’s ear, boy. Feel free to handle this any way you wish. But know that you’ll answer for it, too.”

I’m not much of a boy anymore. Though Keyes supposed Ralston was older. He turned back to the alien. “We’ll arrest your leaders. The rest of you can go.”

“I am one of our leaders.”

“Then we’ll arrest you, too.”

A long pause while the Gok studied Keyes. “Very well,” it said at last.

Some of the Gok’s prisoners were Sol Industries security forces, who’d surrendered after losing almost three-quarters of their number. Without incident, the remaining guards took the Gok leadership into custody. The aliens would be held here until a UHF ship could be dispatched to collect them.

The *Hornet* marines took charge of the Gok who would go free. After stripping them of their weapons, they escorted them to the combat shuttle they’d come on, which had forced its way into a landing bay on the end of the station opposite where the marines had entered.

Once the unarmed Gok had departed, Ralston gave a satisfied nod. “Good work, Keyes. You were right after all. Now we can radio up to Captain Husher to shoot down the Gok as they try to leave.”

Keyes looked at the chief, brow furrowed. “We’ll do no such thing.”

“What? What are you talking about?”

“They negotiated for their freedom.”

“But they’re Gok. Scum. We’d be doing the galaxy a favor by purging them.”

“They treated their prisoners decently, and they were true to their word. They abided by the rules of civilized warfare. And so will we.”

Ralston blinked and rubbed his forehead with one hand. “It’s on your head, boy.”

Chapter 8

Command Leader Pate

“The enemy fought harder than expected,” his Strategy auxiliary said. “I apologize for failing to anticipate their fervor in this matter.”

“I don’t believe you’re at fault,” Command Leader Pate muttered as he gazed at the viewscreen, where newly-liberated Rik rotated with slow majesty. “Something else is at play, here. Something not even I expected.”

The auxiliary’s relief was palpable. “What is it?”

“I don’t know yet. Rik is our most valuable colony we’ve ever lost to the humans. But even that doesn’t account for the desperation with which they and the Wingers tried to keep it from us. All will become clear with the fullness of time. For now, we have business to attend to.”

“Leader,” his Communications auxiliary said. “The planetary prime minister has contacted us to request a meeting with you. He wants to discuss the colony’s defense going forward, to ensure Rik is never retaken by the humans.”

Pate placed cool hands over both his eye depressions, gently massaging their rims. “Tell the prime minister I will happily meet with him—later. In the meantime, we have Scion Baxa’s will to carry out.” He favored the Communications auxiliary with his gaze. “Commandeer all planetary media channels. Immediately.”

“Yes, Leader, I just need to contact the Bureau of—”

“Without delay,” Pate barked. “I don’t wish to give the conniving half-breeds any chance to concoct an escape.” The words made him curl his lip in disgust, which was his usual reaction to contemplating the Ixan females who’d taken advantage of their ability to integrate the DNA of other species during conception.

“You should be live within five minutes, Leader.”

“Good.” Command Leader Pate motioned for an aide to come to him. The diminutive Ixan scurried over and began straightening Pate’s uniform. That done, the aide produced a powder, which he applied to Pate’s face using a soft brush. The product would conceal the whiteness where Pate’s scales stretched over his face’s bone protrusions. An unwelcome change that had befallen him years and years ago.

At last, the aide opened a mirror and held it before him. “Perfection,” Pate said.

“The Ixa of Rik await you, Leader,” his Communications auxiliary said.

Pate settled into his Command chair, shoulders thrown back, staring the hovering recorder drone right in its eye. “Residents of Rik. I have liberated you from the apes, and now I will carry out the divine mandate Scion Baxa has bestowed upon me. In exactly three hours from now, the death drones will be unleashed on your planet in their thousands. They will use your online networks to identify all of the half-breeds living among you, and to determine their locations. The drones will then exterminate them. You are advised to round up the half-breeds and corral them in wide, open spaces, to expedite the drones’ work. Anyone hiding half-breeds within their homes will suffer the destruction of those homes. That is all.”

The broadcast terminated, and Command Leader Pate rose from the Command chair, his gaze falling on his Strategy auxiliary. “You have the bridge. I retire to my quarters to reflect on Scion Baxa’s dictates.”

Chapter 9

Desperate Gambit

Slumped over in the Captain's chair with his cheek leaning against his palm, Husher watched as the magnified Tumbran monitor ship grew larger on the viewscreen. The view adjusted, causing the ship to leap away before starting to grow larger once more.

With all the excitement surrounding the Gok attacking that construction platform, he'd once again forgotten to transmit his papers in advance to the Tumbran at the next wormhole. Even back in the academy, he'd never anticipated having to deal with this much red tape in the middle of a war. He fully expected it to give him an ulcer, before everything was said and done.

"Captain," the sensor operator said, "there's a warship emerging from the wormhole."

"Ours or theirs?"

"Neither. It's a Winger Roostship. According to our records, it's captained by Flightmaster Korbyn."

"Send him our welcome. He'll have news from the front, I'm sure."

"Captain...Captain, another ship is coming through. It's the *Wakeful*."

"What? Put it on-screen." Ships never came through a wormhole that close together. The Tumbra would never have it.

The *Wakeful*, a missile cruiser, appeared on the CIC's main viewscreen. Husher only had time to register that it was almost as battered as his carrier before the sensor operator spoke again.

"Sir, the *Maddox* just emerged from the wormhole as well."

"Good Lord."

"We're getting a transmission request from Flightmaster Korbyn's Roostship, sir," the Coms officer said.

"Put him on."

The diminutive young alien looked harried, even for a Winger. His white-gray feathers stuck up every which way, and his muscled wings were spread in agitation. Husher knew of Korbyn—scuttlebutt often contained idle rumors about their ally's more notable officers, and Korbyn was said to be among the youngest Wingers in history to ever command a Roostship.

"Captain Husher, I presume?" the flightmaster said with a casualness he clearly didn't feel.

Right. Korbyn was also said to be incredibly cocky.

Husher decided to dispense with formalities. "Rik was taken, wasn't it?"

The Winger blinked. "Correct."

"Tell me what happened."

"You humans lost another supercarrier. The *Bulldog*."

"God damn it."

Korbyn clacked his beak. "Indeed. As always, it became the focal point for the Ixa's firepower. And when it went down, we knew we were done."

Husher drew a deep breath. The faces of his wife and son flashed in his mind's eye. "We need

to retake Rik at once.”

“I’m aware of the colony’s significance, Captain Husher.”

“You know of the admiralty’s plan? With the ceasefire?”

“Yes. It’s why we fought such a desperate battle to retain Rik. But the Ixa came in greater numbers, and when the *Bulldog* fell, we had no choice but to flee.”

“You have me, now. You have the *Hornet*. We’ll retake Rik.”

A pause followed as the Winger drummed its talons against its chair. “To be frank, Captain Husher, your ship barely looks spaceworthy, let alone battle-ready.”

“She’ll surprise you, Flightmaster. The *Hornet* still has some sting left in her. And I’ll join what’s left of my Air Group to your Talons, under the command of your CAG. I see our fighters as the key to winning this engagement.”

More silence as Korbyn contemplated Husher and his words. The Winger’s featureless, black eyes betrayed nothing. At last, he said, “All right, Captain. Against my better judgment, I will turn my ship around and join you in the effort to salvage this plan of your admiralty. I’m sure your human compatriots aboard the *Maddox* and *Wakeful* will join us.” Korbyn clacked his beak. “I’ll admit, the human spirit continues to impress. And you yourself are not without renown. I will join you in this, Captain Husher.”

“Thanks,” Husher said, and tapped his console to terminate the transmission—a feature he’d asked his Coms officer to install on his station, so that he could leverage it for dramatic effect. “I never have been one for pomposity,” he told his CIC crew. “Keyes, you’re back in a Falcon for this engagement. I hate to rely on Ackerman again to run Tactical, but I need your instinct flying for me.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Muster your wits, everybody. This one’s gonna be close.”

Chapter 10

Pate Scoffs

Pate had decided to let the prime minister wait while he refreshed himself with a nap. He considered it best to let politicians know where they truly stood, especially ones that had been elected democratically. That type tended to harbor foolish ideals that ran counter to Scion Baxa's will.

Sleep had just taken him when the intercom near his bunk started murmuring. "Command Leader, your presence is requested on the bridge." It was his Communications auxiliary.

He jerked upright, scowling at the wall. "For your sake, your reason for interrupting my meditations had best be a good one."

"The Wingers and humans have returned, Leader."

That silenced him for a moment, as he tried to piece together a scenario in which the news would make sense. "Did they bring reinforcements?"

"One ship. According to our records it's called the *Hornet*, a carrier that suffered extensive damage in the battle for the Coreopsis System."

"I'll be there in a minute."

He donned his uniform once again, as quickly as he could, and checked the mirror for any flaking scales. Then he marched across his spacious quarters to fling open the hatch.

On the bridge, the tactical display confirmed his auxiliary's words. The Winger Korbyn had split his forces, with the Winger and human carriers angling to confront Pate's destroyer and the three Ixan warships that held orbit over Rik's single supercontinent.

The earlier conflict with Korbyn had occurred around Rik's largest moon, which was where Pate had left his two support ships, guarded by another destroyer and two corvettes. The tactical display showed the human cruiser and frigate headed there.

With a sidelong glance at his Strategy auxiliary, Pate pointed at the display. "Both of these are doomed engagements for the Winger. He's distributed his forces exactly wrong."

"It certainly appears that way, Command Leader."

Pate shook his head. "For some reason, this colony must be central to the enemy's strategy. So much so that they're willing to make this suicide run in a hopeless attempt to recapture it. So we hold firm. I have a feeling we're about to win this war."

Chapter 11

The Cruiser and the Corvette

Keyes caught himself tapping his Falcon's console. He always got restless in the hour before a battle.

Thank God for the Falcons' and Talons' maneuverability. It had taken a lot of coordination to squeeze the fighters into the *Maddox's* and the *Wakeful's* shuttle bays, and they hadn't had long to do it.

The cruiser and the corvette only had four shuttle bays between them, but a few close calls later, not to mention a lot of swearing, and they'd managed it. The Roostship's Talons and the *Hornet's* remaining Falcons were packed in, sitting almost end-to-end.

Korbyn's CAG, Wingtip Fesky, briefed the pilots over a wide channel. Keyes had never met her before, though the name rang a bell. *I've probably heard her name at some point through the scuttlebutt.*

"I've appointed a controller for each shuttle bay," she said. "Do not take off unless your controller has cleared your row for departure. I repeat, *do not take off until your controller says so.* We aren't used to taking off in such close quarters, and so we will proceed with extreme caution. All it takes for this mission to go south is one collision inside a shuttle bay. Stay frosty. Fesky out."

The tapping had begun again. Keyes put his left hand over his right. *Think of anything. Think of trees. Breathing. Just stop this eternal fidgeting.*

"Can I expect you to follow my orders without question out there, human?" His heads-up display told him Fesky had switched to a two-way channel.

He tapped the side of his helmet to activate his transponder. "Yes, ma'am."

"As the *Hornet's* CAG, you must have grown used to giving orders. I get that. But we're going to need our Air Groups operating in perfect harmony. And for that, I need total compliance from you and your fliers."

"You'll get it, ma'am. I don't make a habit of questioning orders from my commanding officer."

A brief pause from the Winger. When she spoke again, a note of surprise had crept into her voice. "Okay. That's all, then. Good luck out there, Lieutenant Keyes."

"Thank you, ma'am. Same to you."

Keyes had been appointed controller for his shuttle bay—the largest aboard the *Maddox*. Ten minutes later, the time came, and he started clearing the rows of fighters for take off, one-by-one.

Without the launch catapults aboard the *Hornet* and the Roostship, the pilots wouldn't enter battle with nearly the energy they were used to. But Captain Husher's and Flightmaster Korbyn's plan depended on the element of surprise compensating for that. *And then some.*

The exodus from the shuttle bay went smoother than Keyes could have hoped, and soon it was his row's turn—the last row. "Mark!"

As one, seven Talons and one Falcon engaged their engines and flew from the frigate. Glancing at his tactical display, it wasn't hard to detect the Ixan destroyer's confusion. It had aimed its main weapon at the *Wakeful*, but the shot never came. Now it struggled to fend off the fighters swarming it.

"Looks like Wingtip Fesky's got their destroyer occupied," Keyes said over the squadron-wide channel. "Let's form up for an alpha strike on the nearest corvette."

"Should we deal with its point-defense turrets first?" one of the Wingers under his command said. "They'll tear us to shreds if we don't."

"Normally, you'd be right. But I had a little chat with the captain of the *Wakeful*, and he'll be sending a generous helping of Banshee missiles their way. The turrets will be plenty busy with those." On his tactical display, the first such missiles left the cruiser and made their way toward the Ixan corvette. "Form up."

Apparently satisfied, the Wingers obeyed without further comment, and together they screamed toward their target.

"Fire on my mark, and be ready to alter course along a vector I'll transmit to your computers, which will set us up to come around for a second pass."

In the end, a second pass proved unnecessary. The corvette exploded under their first concentrated barrage of kinetic impactors.

Keyes's course alteration accounted for the possibility of immediate success, and when his squadron's fighters all rotated around their short axes, they were well positioned to pressure the destroyer with Fesky and the two squadrons under her command.

They sped toward the onyx destroyer, and Keyes took a moment to tell his tactical display to zoom out, in order to see how the carriers were doing.

He grinned. As planned, the *Hornet* and the Roostship had altered their course well before reaching the four Ixan warships gathered on the other side of the planet. That charge had been a feint, to ensure they didn't abandon Rik's supercontinent to come to the defense of their support ships.

And now, it was far too late.

The destroyer soon came apart under fire from the Wingers and humans. The remaining corvette attempted to escape, then, along with the two support ships—but there was no escaping the Talons and Falcons. Kinetic impactors ended the Ixa's desperate flight before it began.

Even if they'd been able to outdistance their pursuers for a time, it wouldn't have mattered. Command Leader Pate and the remnants of his fleet were already fleeing for the nearest wormhole.

Chapter 12

Fesky's Warning

“Then it’s decided,” Flightmaster Korbyn said, gazing around at the Winger and human officers sitting at the round table in the Roostship’s main conference room. “The *Wakeful* will return to ensure word reaches our governments about the retaking of Rik and the horrendous slaughter of the Ixa who are the product of inter-species couplings. In the meantime, the *Maddox* and my own Roostship will provide escort to Captain Husher as he continues his mission to pressure Baxa for a ceasefire.” The Winger clacked his beak. “This meeting is ended. To the officers of the *Hornet*, the *Wakeful*, and the *Maddox*—thank you for coming aboard.”

The assembled officers stood, a few smoothing their uniforms over their stomachs before filing out of the conference room and heading for the shuttles waiting to return them to their ships. Keyes stood behind his chair, his hands on its back, waiting for others to leave and make room for his own exit.

In the corridor, Captain Husher was in the middle of regaling the captain of the *Wakeful* with ribald tales from shore leaves of his youth. Keyes had no facility for that sort of banter, and so he hung back.

Talons closed over his right elbow. “Human.”

Keyes didn’t frighten easily, and so he merely glanced at the Winger holding him. Then he looked down at its nametag. “Wingtip Fesky. It’s an honor to meet you in person.”

“Shut up and follow me.”

She dragged him into a claustrophobic supply closet. Glancing around at the poorly dusted shelves, he cleared his throat. “What’s our business here, ma’am?”

“This ceasefire fiasco will get us all killed—you and your crewmates in particular. It will get you killed quickest out of anyone.”

“Why didn’t you speak up at the meeting?”

“Flightmaster Korbyn ordered me not to. He appreciates my skills as a pilot but not my input on his decisions. I’m considered too vocal by many Wingers.”

For a long moment, Keyes struggled with whether he should divulge what he wanted to. Finally, he decided: “Captain Husher agrees with you.”

“He’s a smart man, then. Baxa will never agree to a ceasefire. And he won’t allow you to leave Ixan space alive.”

“Nevertheless...we have to follow the orders we were given. The United Human Fleet’s leadership knows best. If it wasn’t for the UHF, humanity would have likely been wiped out long ago.”

Fesky spread her wings, and one of them jostled a metal shelf. “Even for the good of your species, you won’t question orders? Even when your captain sees the sense of doing so?”

“The UHF exists for the good of humanity.”

“Very well, human. I’d hoped to find you a little wiser than this.”

“I’m sorry, ma’am. It’s been a pleasure fighting alongside you.”

“Whatever. Leave.”

Keyes saluted, and did so.

On the walk to the shuttle, and then on the ride back to the *Hornet*, Fesky’s words echoed inside Keyes’s head, troubling his thoughts. He’d always been loyal to the UHF, in everything he did. But no one was infallible. Could it be that the fate of humanity hinged on whether he could bring himself to be insubordinate? *No. Loyalty has never steered me wrong. It won’t now.*

But his uncertainty followed him to his quarters and then got into his bunk with him. It kept him awake long into the night.

And when the voice returned, muttering incomprehensibly, that didn’t help matters.

Keyes clutched his head. “Go away. I’m not crazy. I’m not.”

“You’re right,” the voice said, and Keyes blinked. *That’s the clearest it’s been.*

“Why won’t you leave me alone?”

“I’ve been trying to contact you. I’m not a voice in your head, Lieutenant Keyes. My name is Ochrim, and I’m an Ixan scientist.”

Keyes sat up in bed. “What do you want?”

“My work involves developing technology that harnesses dark energy and matter. That’s how I’m speaking to you right now—through a very tiny wormhole connecting your cabin to my lab. This is the first time I’ve been able to stabilize it long enough for sustained communication.”

“I’ll say it again: what do you want?”

“I want to talk to your captain.”

“About what?”

“About rescuing me.”

Chapter 13

Nearsighted

Ochrim feared that he wouldn't be able to stabilize another wormhole inside a meaningful timeframe, and so in order to talk to the Ixan scientist, Captain Husher had to enter Keyes's cramped personal quarters.

Keyes stood stiffly by the closed hatch, unsure how to feel about being alone in his cabin with the captain and a disembodied voice. This wasn't what he'd envisioned the day he enlisted with the UHF.

But the captain didn't seem fazed. "Convince me that I should trust you, Ixan," he said, glaring into empty space.

"Very well," Ochrim said. "I'm developing this technology for monsters whose endgame appears to involve the extermination of all other life. I find them abhorrent. Tell me—do you really think any self-respecting Baxa acolyte would use the word 'abhorrent' in connection with him, even to trick humans?"

A brief silence followed while Husher appeared to consider the scientist's words. "No. I don't."

"I consider humans to be far more honorable than Baxa and his ilk. So I'm offering to develop this technology for you instead."

"Being more honorable than Baxa is not a high bar to clear," Husher said.

"Fair point. But my meaning stands."

"I'm not convinced," Keyes said. "If you can create wormholes, why not just come to us through one? This smells like a trap to lure us into Ixan space with our guard down."

"That should be obvious," Ochrim said, sounding disappointed, "considering I've had such trouble stabilizing a wormhole that's barely visible to the naked eye."

"You could easily be pretending to have trouble."

"Well, I don't advocate entering our system with your guard down. I think you should be on very high alert indeed. If you want more proof, you could try touching my wormhole. By doing so, you'll get a tiny hole through your finger. Currently, my attempts to transport any matter through them have been unsuccessful. Thus far, they only admit light and sound."

"So you can see us, too," Husher said. "These things could be used to create the most advanced spying system the galaxy's ever seen."

"This technology has many potential applications—and all of them could be used by Baxa to do great harm."

"Tell me about these other applications," the captain said. "Sell me on the idea of coming to get you."

Ochrim did so, with a level of enthusiasm normally reserved for passion projects. *He may not be thrilled about developing this tech for Baxa, but the tech itself clearly excites him.*

"Obviously communication is one application, as we're demonstrating now. But the most important application for warfare will be the ability to manipulate the wormholes to alter what

types of matter they will and won't accept. This is all theoretical for now, of course, but the only known way to interact with dark matter is through a rare metal found on just a few planets. If we develop specialized transistors made from that metal, there's no reason we won't be able to manipulate the wormhole's axions and actually control—"

"All right, all right," Husher said. "I've heard enough words I don't know to be convinced we need this technology." The captain shook his head. "In light of what you're telling me, the UHF's ceasefire seems even more foolhardy. It would give the Ixa time to develop this technology and use it to dominate us." Husher looked at Keyes. "Consider Baxa with the ability to fire on us from thousands of light years away, secure in the knowledge that we can't fire back."

"There's a secret second wormhole that leads into our home system, known only to the Ixa" Ochrim said. "It lets out near my location, meaning you'd have just a few hours at most to retrieve me and get out of the system before the station personnel summons the warships nearby."

"Sir..." Keyes swallowed as his captain's eyes grew hard. *The captain knows what I'm about to say.* He said it anyway. "Sir, to abandon the ceasefire...it's insubordination."

"I won't abandon the ceasefire. Not on the surface, anyway. I'll still take the *Hornet* into their system through the commonly known wormhole and begin negotiations. That will make sure their attention is drawn away from Ochrim while you lead a strike force to nab him."

"But the negotiations will be nothing more than a ruse. I can't condone this, sir."

"I'm not asking you to condone it, Keyes. I'm *telling* you to *do* it. Now, the only question that remains is whose orders you will defy—the nearsighted admiralty's or your captain's."

Their eyes locked, and silence ruled the tiny cabin. Keyes didn't look away. But at last, he spoke through gritted teeth.

"I'm with you, Captain."

Chapter 14

Fesky's Choice

Flightmaster Korbyn sat rigid in the Captain's chair, his feathers standing at attention. For once, he didn't clack his beak.

Fesky shifted in her seat. *He's about to say something rash.*

"This is suicide, Husher," Korbyn said. "It reeks of a trap laid by Baxa himself. I was ready to support you in your press for a ceasefire, but not in this. You are a fool."

To his credit, on the viewscreen, Captain Husher kept his cool. *The way he sits makes his Captain's chair look like a recliner. But at least he's staying calm.*

"That's not what you said when I told you my plan to retake Rik," he said. "Or when it worked."

"You humans do have flashes of brilliance, I'll admit," Korbyn said. "But this proves what I've suspected all along—humanity's valor is overrated. The truly valiant would not lose their senses just because a scientist has invented some dangerous new toy."

"And a decent captain wouldn't criticize his species' closest ally in front of his crew. You have a lot to learn, fledgling. Bye, now." With that, Husher's likeness winked from the viewscreen.

Now, Korbyn's beak clacked. He avoided eye contact with his bridge crew.

Fesky stood. "Captain, you are wrong. The ceasefire was suicide, not this. We must help the *Hornet*."

Her captain leapt to his feet and stormed toward her. For a moment, Fesky wondered whether he intended to strike her, but she stood her ground.

"I've already ordered you never to air your opinions on this matter again," he squawked, drawing to a stop inches away from her. "Wingers fly as a flock, and a flock can't operate when one of its members continually tries to divide it. You should have been taught that since hatching, but apparently someone botched your education."

Fesky stared at the deck, trembling with rage.

"Do you understand me, Wingtip?"

"Yes, sir," she muttered.

"You're dismissed, then."

She marched from the bridge, talons bunched. "Get out of my way," she snapped at a young pinion who was on his way in. He leapt aside just in time.

As she strode through the Roostship's corridors, her anger only grew. *Maybe I should take wing in the skyway for a few laps.* Usually flying calmed her, but she suspected even that wouldn't work, this time.

Her com beeped, and she took it out. Its screen displayed a message from Lieutenant Keyes. The message consisted of two sets of coordinates, accompanied by five words: *Locations: secret wormhole. And Ochrim.*

Suddenly, she realized she couldn't stay aboard Korbyn's ship anymore. It wasn't just that by

leaving she could help make sure the Ixa never reached their fell goals. It was that she didn't belong here anymore. As Korbyn had said, Wingers instilled obedience in their young from hatching onward. But she couldn't obey any longer. She wouldn't.

Fesky made her way toward the flight deck where her Talon awaited her.

Chapter 15

Negotiations

The *Hornet* was four systems away from the Ixan home system when enemy warships surrounded it. By then, Keyes had been gone for a while—heading for the secret wormhole with the remaining Falcons, his marine strike team, and the *Maddox*.

Luckily, the Ixan in charge of the opposing battle group accepted Husher's transmission request instead of simply blowing up his ship.

"State your business," the Ixan said, its shrewd, deep-set eyes studying him.

This one's young. The Ixan barely had any white creases where its scaly skin stretched over bone protrusions. "I'm here to negotiate a ceasefire with Scion Baxa," Husher said.

"Scion Baxa isn't here."

"Yes. I was hoping you would allow me passage to your home system."

"Why would the Scion deign to speak with you, human?"

"Because he wants Rik, and it's mine to offer to him."

The Ixan cocked its head to one side. "I heard we retook Rik."

"You did. And I took it back from you."

That brought a long break in the conversation, which other captains might have found awkward. Husher used the time to scrape dirt from underneath his fingernails.

"Very well, human. You'll get your audience. Though I expect you'll get more than you're bargaining for, with Baxa."

"That's my hope."

The Ixan just laughed, and shut off the transmission.

It took the *Hornet* the better part of two days to travel the rest of the way to the Ixan home system. Husher rotated his CIC crew to maximize the amount of rest they received, but he was ready to switch in his best officers at a moment's notice.

But what will I do if the Ixa decide to attack? No matter what angle he viewed their situation from, he couldn't figure out a clever way for them to escape destruction. If the Ixa decided to deny him the chance to negotiate, they were doomed. Possibly they were doomed either way. He spent a lot of time sitting in his cabin, staring at his favorite photo of his wife holding Vincent, his son.

He entered the CIC just as they were transitioning through the wormhole into the Ixan home system. Along the way, the Ixan captain escorting them must have sent a message to his superiors via the Tumbra, because as soon as the *Hornet* exited the wormhole another warship moved to block any escape attempt Husher cared to make.

Looks like we're committed, now. To whatever the Ixa care to do to us.

On the bright side, unless Keyes had run into something unexpected, he would enter the opposite end of this system within the hour.

"Captain," his Coms officer said, "we're getting a transmission request from an Ixan destroyer that's approaching from the direction of their homeworld."

“Accept it.”

Command Leader Pate appeared on the CIC’s main viewscreen. *That’s not a good sign.*

“Captain Husher,” Pate said, his posture reminiscent of a nun with hemorrhoids.

What’s that fake shit someone’s smeared on his face? Whatever it was, it did a piss-poor job of covering the Ixan’s flaking scales. “Pate,” Husher said. “Nice to see you again so soon.”

“Yes,” Pate said, drawing out the word. “I’m told you’re here to negotiate for your species’ survival.”

“A ceasefire, actually.”

“It’s the same difference, isn’t it, Captain?”

“I don’t know. Maybe we should ask the crews of the Ixan warships my people blew up over Rik.” *God damn it. I’m a terrible negotiator.*

Pate laughed. “Scion Baxa is far more powerful than you can hope to understand. You should pray that he’s receptive to your ceasefire. But if you wish him to entertain your proposal, you will need to come over to my destroyer and negotiate in-person. Otherwise, how can we trust that you’re serious?”

Husher returned the Ixan’s snakelike gaze. *It’s not like I’m any safer aboard the Hornet, I suppose.* “Fine.”

The Ixan’s creepy smile stretched wider. “Excellent. I await you with bated breath.” The viewscreen went dark.

Chapter 16

Ingress

Living aboard the cramped combat shuttle with Chief Ralston and his marines made for an interesting couple of days. The marine commander became testier with each passing hour, and the already-stale rations didn't improve anyone's mood.

Ralston ridiculed him for the arrangement incessantly, which the chief knew Keyes had advised Captain Husher to order. Ralston would have preferred traveling aboard the *Maddox* in luxury. *He can ridicule me all he wants. It doesn't make sense to put all of our assets on one ship.*

Keyes had no desire to be proven right about that, but unfortunately, when they emerged from the wormhole, he was.

"Wait," Ralston said, eyeing the shuttle's tactical display. "Where's the *Maddox*?"

They waited for twenty minutes, which was probably more time than they could afford to lose. *All it will take is one stray scan for a warship to pick up on our presence and make a beeline to attack us.*

"The *Maddox* is gone," Keyes said at last. "They didn't make it through the wormhole. We need to move."

Only the combat shuttle full of marines and seven Falcons remained to complete the mission. After the *Maddox*'s disappearance, Ralston ceased his jabbering.

They made for the research station's coordinates that Ochrin had given them, deep inside the system's thick asteroid belt—the perfect place to hide classified research. Unless, that was, your chief scientist leaked its location to your enemy.

Keyes hated waiting. Especially when battle loomed large on the horizon. When he needed calm, he looked at the tactical display, which showed the Falcons in formation around them. *We can do this, even without the Maddox. We'll get in, nab Ochrin, and get out before the Ixa even know we're here.*

At last, the research station became visible to their sensors. "Will we bother ordering them to open their landing bay for us?" Ralston asked, his eyes on Keyes.

Keyes returned the Scot's gaze with eyebrows raised, momentarily taken aback at this sudden show of deference. "No," Keyes said. "Fire the shuttle's siege charges."

Ralston passed the orders on to the pilot, and soon the tactical display showed the charges sailing toward the station. A couple minutes later, the display washed green to indicate a successful breach.

"Take us in," Keyes radioed to the pilot, testing the waters to see whether Ralston would allow him to take command. He had no desire to do that, either, but he took the man's newfound manners as a sign that he was shaken by the *Maddox*'s demise. Keyes couldn't risk leaving the command to a man not capable of thinking straight.

The Scot didn't comment.

Switching to a wide channel to address his Falcon pilots, Keyes said, "Circle the station and

radio me if you detect any sign of Ixan warships approaching. I want to be kept updated on exactly how much time we have to yank this scientist and scram.”

“Yes, sir,” came the reply, several times over.

It was time. The shuttle brought them inside the research station, and immediate gunfire rained on it from all directions.

They were waiting for us. “Take out as many enemy combatants as you can with the shuttle’s weapons,” Keyes shouted to the pilot. “Open the airlock, right now. Take care not to impede us with your fire as we exit the shuttle.” He turned to the marines, most of who had already unstrapped from the crash seats and leapt to their feet. “The Ixa have us over a barrel. We need to engage them, right now. If they disable this shuttle, we’ll have no way out of the system.”

They crowded into the airlock—as many marines as it could accommodate, which amounted to a little over three-quarters of their platoon. The outer door had been built wide, to avoid providing the enemy with a convenient choke point to pummel, and Keyes gave silent thanks for that.

As soon as it opened, the marines rushed out to find whatever cover the landing bay had to offer. Keyes ran to a squat control panel, hunched behind it, and started returning the Ixa’s fire. The enemy was arrayed on the perimeter of the landing bay, in full pressure suits. *How much notice did they have of our arrival? Just how screwed are we?*

“Aim for their faceplates,” Keyes ordered over the platoon-wide. “Let a little space inside their helmets.”

An explosion roared behind him, quickly quenched by the void. Keyes huddled against the control panel. The vacuum of space wouldn’t carry a shock wave, but there was still shrapnel to worry about.

When it was over, he looked back. The combat shuttle had been destroyed, just as the remainder of his platoon was exiting. None of them had made it.

Chapter 17

Traitor

Commander Vaghn squinted at the CIC's main viewscreen from the Captain's chair, where she'd never been comfortable sitting. It wasn't just the weight of command that made her shift in her seat—the chair was also hard and unyielding. *Captain Husher always looks so at ease in it.* She didn't know how he pulled it off.

The viewscreen showed no changes. The Ixan fleet still had them surrounded, and negotiations continued aboard their destroyer. *Presumably, they continue.*

"Should we send a boarding party in after him?" Chief Ackerman said, his voice uneven.

Vaghn glanced at him, blinking. *Despite all the shit Warren Husher's given him, he still loves his captain.* In her opinion, that said more about Captain Husher than it did about the chief. You couldn't help but respect the captain, no matter how much he needed you.

"No," she said. "The captain ordered us to wait until we heard from him. So we wait."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Incoming transmission," the Coms officer said.

"Put it on the screen."

The tactical display flickered, and then Pate's face replaced it.

"Where's Captain Husher?" Vaghn said.

Though Pate sat his Command seat as stiffly as she did, he looked happier than she'd thought it was possible for an Ixan to get. "Your captain has decided not to return to the *Hornet*, Commander Vaghn."

She leaned forward. "Don't screw with me, Pate. Release him, or I'll hit you with everything I have."

"You and I both know 'everything you have' isn't very much. Not to mention the fact that I have you surrounded. At any rate, 'release' isn't the right word. Captain Husher is free to go—he simply doesn't wish to. Here, I'll let you talk to him."

Husher stepped into view, wearing the same roguish grin he so often did. *Is this one of his pranks?* She instantly discarded the thought. The idea of Husher teaming up with an Ixan to pull a fast one on his XO...it was absurd on the face of it.

"Captain," Vaghn said. "What's going on?"

"Command Leader Pate has already told you that, Commander. I'm not coming back."

"Why...why not?"

"I'd like to thank you and the crew for bringing me here. Without this stupid excuse for a mission, I would never have had the cover I needed to join my spiritual brethren."

"Your spiritual brethren? What?"

Husher's smile widened. "I've always felt a kinship with Scion Baxa, and when the opportunity arose a couple years ago to pass UHF secrets to him, I jumped at the chance. Now that I've all but won the war for the Ixa, it's time for me to get well clear of humanity, wouldn't you say?"

Vaghn slowly shook her head, her eyes never leaving Husher's face. *Is this real? Am I dreaming?*

"I suggest you leave this system," Husher went on. "Without delay. Of course, you could stay, if you really want to. Maybe Pate will let me give the order to obliterate you. Honestly, I'd enjoy nothing more than to begin the destruction of my weak, cowardly species. Starting with you."

"Cut the transmission," Vaghn said to the Coms officer. Who was now *her* Coms officer, apparently.

The viewscreen went black.

Silence reigned.

"He didn't mention the mission," Ackerman said.

"What?" She was having trouble reassembling her thoughts.

"The mission. The real mission—Keyes retrieving Ochrim."

She gave her head another shake, brisker this time. "You're right. He didn't." *But why not?* Was it because Husher hadn't actually betrayed humanity, or was it because he didn't want them warning Keyes that the Ixan fleet would soon be upon him?

And what about Husher's wife and son? Everyone knew how much he loved them, and his betrayal would no doubt follow them for the rest of their lives. It made no sense.

"Why are they letting us leave?" the Coms officer said.

"They want us to spread what happened here," Vaghn said. "They want the UHF to know of Husher's betrayal." *If betrayal is what it is.* That would be for the admiralty to sort out. And the media, no doubt.

"Pate just fired a warning shot across our bow," her sensor operator said. "It came close."

"Have the Ixa behind us moved away from the wormhole?"

"Yes. Apparently we're truly free to go."

The *Hornet* shuddered, then. "What was that?"

"A kinetic impactor." Another impact followed the sensor operator's words.

"All right," she said, her vision going blurry. *No tears. This is not the time.* "We have no choice. Let's go."

Chapter 18

Flight

Ochrim had told Keyes where in the station his lab was situated, and he'd even described routes from each landing bay. Which would have come in handy, if Keyes and his remaining marines hadn't gotten completely turned around in combat.

Running toward cover and away from fierce attacks by the station's defenders, ducking inside chambers to avoid explosions—it had destroyed the team's sense of direction, and now they wandered blind, stumbling from skirmish to skirmish.

The enemy's backup will arrive soon, in numbers we can't handle. Keyes pounded down a corridor with his comrades in loose formation around him, blinking away the grainy sensation stims always brought. He'd already administered two rounds, and each dose brought a shorter window of increased adrenal activity while taking a heavier toll on his body. *I can't hit them again. Can I?*

He rounded a corner and drew up short. This corridor ended in a single metal-plated door. In front of it, the largest Ixan Keyes had ever seen held another Ixan in a one-armed headlock, a pistol planted firmly against the prisoner's head. The other marines raised their weapons.

"Hold your fire," Keyes barked.

The giant Ixan wore a grin so wide it threatened to split its head in two. "Too stupid to invent your own technology, is it, human? So you come to steal ours. Well, you're too late. We would prefer Ochrim dead over working for you."

"Kaklin," Ochrim said, but the Ixan's massive bicep flexed, and the scientist made a choking sound.

Keyes raised his assault rifle. "Kill him, and you die, too. I guarantee it."

"Ah, to die fulfilling Scion Baxa's will...it would be a better death than I could have dared hope for. But what happens in this corridor doesn't matter. We saw you coming, human, and we called for backup immediately. They'll be here to put you to death any second. I keep Ochrim alive to give you false hope that perhaps you'll wrest him from my grasp unharmed. But you will not—you'll only fritter away your final moments."

Even with his breathing restricted, Ochrim's eyes were locked on Keyes. Alien facial expressions were notoriously difficult to read, but even so, something passed between the two of them, across the expanse that divided their species.

The scientist blinked, slowly, deliberately. As though of its own accord, Keyes's gun muzzle twitched up to point at the large Ixan's head at the same time Ochrim wrenched away violently. The pistol fired, scoring the wall, and Keyes's assault rifle roared in his hands.

The giant staggered backward, collapsing against the metal door. It did not move again.

"Do we need to move that thing out of the way?" Keyes asked Ochrim.

"No. I have all the data I need stored on a single drive. It's the only copy that exists, now. I destroyed everything else."

"Then let's go."

The remaining marines—barely enough to make a squad—formed up around Ochrim.

“Our shuttle was destroyed soon after we came in,” Keyes said. “Any ideas for how we’re getting out of this system?”

Ochrim nodded. “There should be transportation available in Landing Bay 3. I’ll show you the way. Hopefully you can sort out how to fly an Ixan craft.”

“Yeah. I’m sure that’ll be fine.” Keyes blinked, trying to match his facial expression to his words. *We’re screwed.*

“Kaklin told me a corvette will be the first Ixan warship to arrive.”

“Shouldn’t be a problem.” If they didn’t leave before the corvette’s arrival, it would eat them alive. Falcons included.

On their way out, they encountered just one station defender, who fired on them as soon as it saw Ochrim.

Suicide. The Ixan quickly fell to the marines’ gunfire.

Just outside Landing Bay 3, they got the scientist into a pressure suit as quickly as they could. Then they escorted him into the bay, where a single shuttle waited. It took Ochrim just a few seconds with its exterior control panel to grant them entry.

Running to the cockpit, Keyes immediately felt overwhelmed. The controls looked totally foreign to him. He didn’t know where to start. *And there’s no one else aboard with flying experience. I’m it.*

He tapped a round touchpad near the top of the console, and the cockpit’s lights dimmed. *Damn it.* Another few taps restored them to their former brightness.

“Sir, there’s an Ixan corvette approaching.” It was one of his Falcon pilots. “It’ll be here within minutes.”

“Acknowledged. Thanks for the update. We’ll be departing the station momentarily.”

Keyes began experimenting with a variety of controls. At last, he found the ignition, as well as what he felt fairly certain were the shuttle’s attitude controls. Then he achieved liftoff.

Now, how to get the landing bay doors to open... He glanced to the right, at what looked a lot like a panel with various weapon controls. *Screw it.* After a few seconds of fairly dangerous experimentation, he sent twin siege charges at the doors, which blew apart on impact.

He guided the shuttle through the jagged gap he’d created. By then, he’d found the craft’s tactical display, which showed the Ixan corvette nearly upon them.

There’s no way seven Falcons can take that on, barring a minor miracle. Even a full squadron would have struggled to defeat the corvette.

But he didn’t need his pilots to defeat it. Only stall it.

Which will mean consigning them to their deaths.

His hand shook as he raised it to his helmet. This was the last of his Air Group. *A CAG who loses every pilot should not be rewarded.* And yet he would be, if he escaped this system with Ochrim.

“Pilots, assume a wide battle spread formation. Be prepared to break formation if necessary to avoid enemy ordnance. Your mission is to buy us time to escape this system and to deliver

Ochrim's work into UHF hands.”

“Yes, sir,” came the immediate response, from all seven Falcons.

A lump formed in Keyes's throat. “Your efforts here will resurrect humanity's hope for winning this war. Those efforts will never be forgotten.”

He focused on improving his ability to fly the Ixan shuttle as quickly as possible, trying to detach himself from what was happening on the tactical display, which showed his Falcon pilots falling to the corvette one-by-one.

Soon, the shuttle accelerated at what Keyes felt confident was its maximum rate. Out of the corner of his eye, he watched another Falcon go down. And another.

Only two fighters remained, still trying to take out the corvette's point defense turrets so that they could focus on more vital targets. A spray of kinetic impactors blew up another fighter, and Keyes saw that its pilot had not ejected. None of the pilots had. They knew there would be no one to retrieve them.

The sole remaining Falcon sped toward the enemy in what Keyes recognized as a kamikaze dive. *No*. The Ixan warship's point defense turrets tore it to shreds long before impact, and the debris that had been a Falcon rained down harmlessly upon the corvette's hull.

Next, the corvette turned its attention to the shuttle. The tactical display showed it quickly closing the distance. It fired twice, and Keyes managed to avoid the streams of kinetic impactors, even though guns-D maneuvers were much harder in the bulky shuttle than in a Falcon.

The third round of impactors struck home, and the shuttle shook, the cockpit's lights turning red. “*Damn it*,” Keyes shouted, but another glance at the tactical display silenced him.

A homing missile had left the corvette and was rushing toward them.

Chapter 19

History

Frantically, Keyes scanned the tactical display for cover of any kind. The nearest asteroid was much too far, and the wormhole lay farther still. *That's it. We're done. The war is done.*

At that moment, a lone fighter emerged from the wormhole and sped toward him. A Talon. *Could that be—*

“Wingtip Fesky?”

“Lieutenant Keyes. Long time no talk. Thanks for those coordinates.”

“I have a bit of a situation here, ma'am—”

“I see it. Concentrate on accelerating toward the wormhole, and I'll accelerate toward you. Just as we're about to collide, I need you to adjust your attitude thirty degrees downward relative to the ecliptic plane. Can you do that?”

“Yes. Yes, ma'am.”

“Good.”

Keyes's fingers tensed as he laid them on what he'd identified as the shuttle's attitude controls. On the tactical display, Fesky's Talon grew larger.

“Wait for it,” she told him. “Wait for it...”

Her Talon took up most of the display. A collision seemed inevitable.

“Now!”

He slid his fingers forward. The shuttle's nose dipped, and Fesky's fighter screamed overhead, guns roaring. Her ordnance exploded the missile seconds before impact—so close that her fighter flew through the explosion before the vacuum could quench it.

“*Yes!*” he yelled, but didn't activate his transponder. He knew better than to break a pilot's flow state during battle.

Fesky wasn't done. She hurtled toward the Ixan corvette, deploying her fighter's entire missile payload in quick succession. That lessened the pressure from the warship's point defense turrets, allowing her to target its main engine with kinetic impactors.

Even as her missiles were picked off, Fesky didn't waver. Her last missile exploded, and Keyes held his breath as he watched her maintain course, focusing fire on the corvette engine.

The point defense turrets turned their fire on her, and she zigzagged slightly to lessen the number of impacts.

But he knew some had hit home. Her Talon couldn't survive that level of abuse for long. She

The corvette's main engine exploded, and the resulting fire was sucked away by the void almost instantly. Fesky maxed out her own engines, then, shooting past the enemy before rotating around her short axis, thrusting in quick, powerful bursts so that she winged around the warship and soon was shooting back in the opposite direction. Toward Keyes. Toward the wormhole.

“Holy *shit*,” Keyes screamed into his transponder. “Fesky, you are incredible. That was the

best flying I've ever—”

“Cool it, human. You're embarrassing yourself. Let's leave this system.”

“Roger that.” Other than the maneuver to avoid a collision with Fesky, he hadn't altered his beeline toward the wormhole.

Something on the tactical display caught his eye. “Fesky—Fesky, the corvette just fired three missiles at you.” He did a double take. “God. Make that seven. And it's firing more.”

“I see them, human.”

“Can you take them all out?”

“I can try.” She ceased her engine burn to point and shoot at the pursuing rockets while her Talon continued to careen toward the wormhole.

One missile went down. And a second...then three more exploded in quick succession.

She's doing it. She's going to make it.

Another missile exploded.

The seventh hit her Falcon in the center of its cockpit, right where the pilot sat, and the fighter blew apart.

Keyes's breath caught in his throat, and his vision went blurry. “Fesky,” he muttered. “Please, God, no...”

“Don't cry just yet, human,” the Winger said. “I ejected in your direction, and I still have my momentum. Think you can catch me?”

“I can try,” he said, and switched to a two-way channel with Ralston. “Chief, one of us needs to go for a little walk outside, to collect the Winger who just saved our asses. I would do it, but someone needs to pilot this ship.”

“All right, Lieutenant,” the Scot replied, and his voice contained a tremor it hadn't before. “I'm headed for the airlock now.”

Keyes didn't like how unsteady the man sounded, but he'd agreed, and that was enough for Keyes to take back every negative thing he'd ever thought about the man. “The shuttle's sensors won't sync with our heads-up displays, but I can guide us into Fesky's trajectory and tell you when she's coming. Make sure your tether is secured, and nab her if you can.”

In order to let Fesky catch up, he slowed the shuttle, gradually ramping up its speed again as she approached, so that she didn't simply zip past them.

Ten minutes later, Ralston had caught Fesky and she was sitting with Keyes in the cockpit, no worse for wear.

“Good to see you, Wingtip.”

“And you, Lieutenant.”

“Thanks for rescuing our sorry asses. Anywhere you'd like a lift to?”

“For now, outside of this system sounds great.” Fesky eyed the tactical display, which showed several more Ixan warships bearing down on their location. The corvette drifted in space, stranded without its main engine. “After that, I have no idea. My people certainly won't welcome me back. I defied Flightmaster Korbyn's orders to follow you here, and Wingers don't tolerate insubordination of any kind. No second chances, for that.”

“Well...I won't soon forget that you saved my life. Not to mention this mission. I plan to do everything in my power to repay you.”

“Don't make promises you can't keep, Lieutenant. We're not out of this system, yet.”

“Oh, we're getting out of this system. You're not the only one who knows their way around a flight console.”

He gunned the engine to resume their former acceleration, the wormhole growing larger on the display. It occurred to him that this was likely the first time in history an Ixan and a Winger shared a craft with humans. And as they sped homeward, with the seeds of a powerful new weapon aboard, for a moment Keyes felt sure he could feel history taking shape around them.

Perhaps the future was bright after all.

Epilogue 20 Years Later

Warren Husher sat with his shoulders slumped in a cramped, gunmetal-gray room. It didn't matter. "It's all the same place," he muttered, though there was no one there to hear. *Except, there is, isn't there?* "It's all the same place."

He missed his crew. For the first few years, he'd still thought of himself as Captain Warren Husher, to keep up his spirits. But he was no captain. Not anymore. "I'll never get back my command," he whispered to himself. "And my wife...my son..."

His voice trailed off into nothing. Memories of his family caused him the most pain. *How they must hate me.* He'd turned their names into dirt.

"I didn't do it," he mumbled. "My likeness did. A video..."

The memory of Commander Vaghn's shocked face hurt almost as much as the fact that he could no longer recall what his son looked like. Certainly not what Vin would look like now.

No one had known the Ixa possessed the technology to doctor audio and video in order to simulate a subject that faithfully. *They possess many technologies we knew nothing about.* "They played us," he whispered. "They played us. They're playing us. They—"

"Shut up, Warren," Baxa said.

Husher's head snapped up. Baxa sat on the other side of a table the same gray as the room. When had the Ixan entered? *Was that table always there?*

"You've grown pathetic," Baxa said. "You let your sanity drain away, didn't you, ape?"

"You took it."

"No. You lost it yourself, because you are weak. Let's test your memory. Do you remember what I told you humans now call your war? Hmm? Think, Warren."

Husher squeezed his eyes shut, leaning over in his chair until his forehead touched his right knee. "The—the—"

"Futile. They call it the First Galactic War. Do you know what your species will call the next one?"

Knocking his head against his knee repeatedly, Husher curled his dangling hands into fists. "The Second—"

"They won't call it anything, fool. Because they'll be dead. Ironically, humans think *I'm* dead. They think I died during your war. Ironic, because I will kill them in my war."

"No," Husher said, his head still down. His voice sounded nasal.

"Yes. All has been foretold. By me. Another update for you: I'm no longer Scion Baxa. The son has become the father. I am legion, in fact, and I have given unto my children a set of Prophecies. I will reshape you as a tool to implement them." Baxa stood. "Look at me, Warren."

Husher raised his head, and when their eyes met, his mind cleared. He straightened in his chair. "I...I'm me, again."

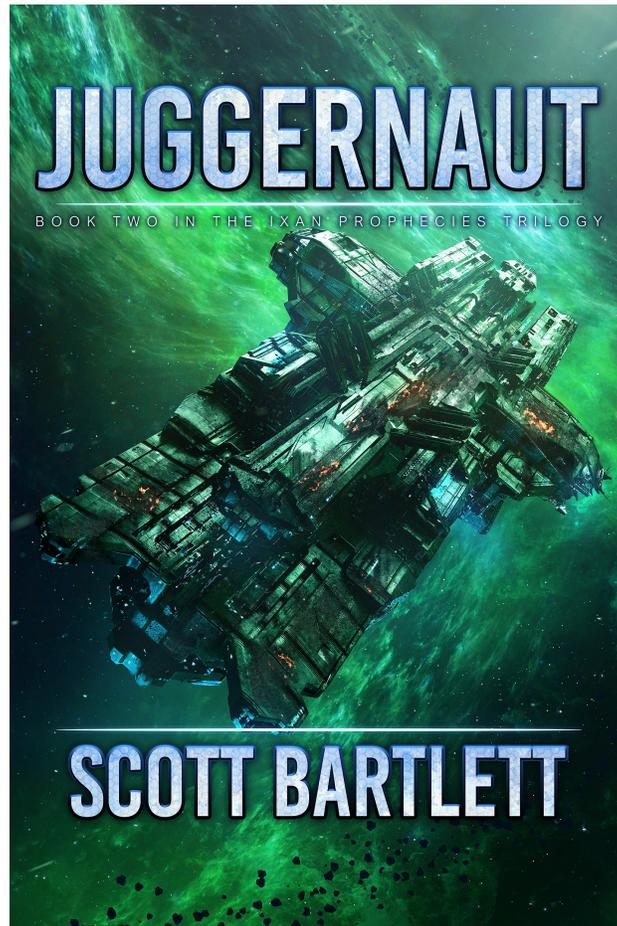
"For the moment. I've restored your sanity to you. The time has come to bargain for your freedom. I will have the Ixa release you, in exchange for one small favor."

Slowly, Husher shook his head. “How can you know I’ll keep up my end of the bargain?” He knew Baxa wouldn’t let him go without safeguards in place, and so it was better to learn what they would be, if he could. Not knowing would not mean they wouldn’t be there.

Baxa smiled. “Don’t worry. When the times comes, you will be compelled to obey me.”

Thank you for reading!

Book 2 of The Ixan Prophecies is available now. It’s titled *Juggernaut*, and you can [click here to get it.](#)



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Dedication

To my amazing readers.